PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 362

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

FOURTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FIFTIETH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 2000–01

COMPRISING PERIOD
29 January—9 February 2001

£70

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29 January 2001

THE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FOURTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FIFTIETH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 362**

FOURTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2000–01

House of Commons

Monday 29 January 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SOCIAL SECURITY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Widows' Benefits

1. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): What plans he has to amend the rights of those widowed at a young age to widows' and widowers' benefits; and if he will make a statement. [145957]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): We are introducing bereavement benefits in April that will be available to both men and women equally for the first time. There will be a new weekly benefit for widowed parents who satisfy the qualifying conditions, and a new lump sum bereavement payment of £2,000, which is double the existing widows' payment.

Mr. Dalyell: Against the background of a sad constituency case from Linlithgow on which my hon Friend has had time to reflect, should a mother who loses her husband when she is eight weeks pregnant with a second child be entitled to full maternity allowance? Is the anomaly that that case constitutes uncommon?

Angela Eagle: The case to which my hon. Friend refers is especially tragic. He has made me aware of it, and the person concerned has written to me. She fell into particular circumstances because of overlapping benefit rules, which have been a feature of the national insurance-based system since its inception. They enshrine the principle that flat-rate benefits, which are designed to help with income maintenance in specific contingencies, are not added together. It would be unfair and costly if the social security system allowed them to be added together, and I am sorry to tell my hon. Friend that the Government have no plans to do so.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): I am pleased to know that—not before time—the widow's payment will be increased from £1,000 to £2,000.

The Under-Secretary will recall the case of Corrina Smith of Margate, which I raised in an Adjournment debate last April. As the hon. Lady will remember, Mrs. Smith's husband died tragically in a chemical fire. Mrs. Smith applied for the widows' payment of £1,000 and was told that she could not have it because her application had been made after three months and was therefore out of time. Mrs. Smith did not receive the death certificate from the coroner until the three-month period had elapsed. Has the Department considered starting the clock at the time when the death certificate is issued rather than at the time of death so that people such as Mrs. Smith get the money that they so richly deserve?

Angela Eagle: We dealt with that matter in some detail in last year's Adjournment debate. People can apply for the benefit without a death certificate. The hon. Gentleman's constituent fell foul of backdating rules

introduced by the previous Government, for which he voted. There are no plans to change the current arrangements.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): In little over nine weeks, widows will be in a worse position because they will receive only a year's pension. When that announcement is made, the true victims of the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999 will be known. What provision has the Department made for offering guidance to the newly widowed so that they understand that they have only a year's pension, and not the pension for life that they had previously?

Will the Minister answer a question to which she failed to reply in Committee: how soon after bereavement will widows be expected to have their first work-focused interview?

Angela Eagle: The system is obviously intended to treat those who have been recently bereaved with care and respect. There will be no sudden rushes to force those who are bereaved—widows or widowers—quickly into work. However, we believe that it is important that those who have lost a spouse while still young are given a chance to retrain and to consider how they can get into the labour market when the time is appropriate.

Child Poverty

2. **Mr. Alan W. Williams** (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): What percentage of children live in households in the bottom *(a)* decile, *(b)* quarter and *(c)* half of household income; and if he will make a statement. [145959]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): In 1998–99, the proportion of children living in households in the bottom decile, quarter and half of income distribution before the deduction of housing costs were 13 per cent., 33 per cent. and 61 per cent.

Mr. Williams: I am grateful for that information. My hon. Friend knows that during the period of Conservative government between 1979 and 1997, the incidence of child poverty in Britain trebled. This Government have done a great deal to tackle that through the working families tax credit, child benefit, the minimum wage and the new deal. How will the new child tax credit help to solve the problem, especially for households with the lowest income?

Mr. Rooker: I apologise to my hon. Friend because it is too early for me to answer a question in detail about a credit that will be introduced in the next financial year. However, it will ensure that help through the tax system is targeted on families who are raising children.

My hon. Friend is right about child poverty: in 1996–97, approximately one in three children lived in low-income households, which was three times the rate in 1979. A substantial increase in child poverty and, as we know from our debates, pensioner poverty has therefore occurred. The gap opened up during the 18 years when the previous Administration were in office. However, we have taken considerable steps to reverse the trend since 1997.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Given that a New Policy Institute report shows that 500,000 more people are living in poverty, will the Minister confirm whether the Government continue to pledge that 1 million children will be removed from poverty by the general election?

Mr. Rooker: Yes, there is no doubt about that. I was careful that my original answer was specific as to dates. The 1998-99 figures are the latest that we have. We are now at the end of January 2001, so the figures that I gave are almost two years out of date. Substantial changes have taken place—the introduction of the working families tax credit and the national minimum wage, and extra significant increases in child benefit. Given the measures in our four Budgets as a whole, we are absolutely confident that 1 million children will be taken out of poverty, if poverty is measured as 60 per cent. of median earnings after housing costs.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): Will the Minister confirm that, through the child benefit system, his Department holds the names and addresses of every child in the country, but that when the Inland Revenue tried to send out child tax credit forms, it did not use that information, but instead issued millions of forms, including 1 million to families with no children? Is it not the case that the Revenue did not use his Department's records to get the child tax credit to families because the form would have had to be sent to non-tax paying mothers, who would have had to pass it to tax-paying fathers? That would have made it apparent that the Government are not giving the support to women and mothers, but are transferring it to men.

Mr. Rooker: I honestly think that that question should be directed at my right hon. Friend the Chancellor.

Departmental IT Systems

3. **Mr. Derek Wyatt** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): How much has been spent on new technology by his Department since May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [145960]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): The Department spent £1.3 billion on information technology between May 1997 and December last year. As a result of the spending review, more money has been allocated to replace the ageing IT system that we inherited. That investment is essential if we are to drive out fraud and combat error.

Mr. Wyatt: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Will he give serious thought to the housing benefit crisis in Swale borough council? We are 16 weeks behind, some people are being evicted from their houses, and the housing association has complained to the

ombudsman. There is a problem with both the hardware and software for dealing with the matter. Is a task force available at headquarters that could sort out the problem?

Mr. Darling: I am aware of the problems in my hon. Friend's local authority. I realise that there is a substantial backlog of claims and that the council is trying to recruit additional staff to deal with it. I hope that that will clear the backlog.

On my hon. Friend's central request, as I announced a short while ago, the Department is establishing specialist teams of people to go into councils where there have been difficulties. The problem is that, although some councils can administer housing benefit well, far too many cannot do so. We want to ensure that failing local authorities that are not dealing properly with housing benefit receive the skills and expertise—indeed, acquire the IT—that they need to administer the system. I hope in the near future to be able to announce the councils that will be the first to benefit from that additional assistance.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I welcome the Minister's statement that the Department will clamp down on fraud. How far is modern equipment being used across Departments? We have already heard a suggestion that it is not. For example, in a social security fraud in Northern Ireland, a social security worker who came before the courts had 28 or 29 ghost clients—he was ripping off money. Are we using modern equipment to cross-check all applicants?

Mr. Darling: When we get the new IT equipment that we need, we will be able to cross-check information far more effectively. The problem experienced by the DSS is that some of its IT equipment is getting on for 30 years old. I am not the world's leading IT expert, but even I know that green writing on black screens is somewhat out of date. Many of our staff go home to find their children using better IT than they are expected to use at work.

We are systematically replacing the entire IT system at the DSS. As part of that replacement programme, we will ensure that equipment is compatible with that held by the Inland Revenue and other Government agencies, precisely so as to make the necessary checks.

The matter does not involve only IT. One of the best ways to stop fraud and error entering the system is to ensure that the front-line staff are in place, and we have stabilised DSS staffing.

One reason why we will save £1 billion during this Parliament is that we will be getting claims right. When we took over, two in every five income support cases were wrong; we have halved that. If the Conservatives were to get in and cut civil service staffing in the way that they propose, the Benefits Agency would lose 5,000 staff in one year, which would once again open the floodgates to fraud and error.

Compensation Payments

5. **Mr. Dafydd Wigley** (Caernarfon): How much has been clawed back from social security benefit previously paid in each of the last three years after compensation payments have been made to social security recipients. [145962]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): The compensation recovery scheme recovers money paid to people who have received benefit because of an accident, injury or illness once they receive a compensation payment from the party responsible for causing that injury or illness. The money is not recovered direct from the benefit recipient. The scheme provides protection to the taxpayer, who would otherwise subsidise the negligence of those responsible for injuries or illnesses, whether they are employers, car drivers or other people. Over the past three financial years, the compensation recovery unit has recovered a total of £570 million.

Mr. Wigley: Is the Minister aware of the case of an ex-miner from Pontypridd—now sadly deceased—against whom a certificate for compensation recovery for £21,700 was issued in November 1999? On appeal, the claim was reduced to £8,450, and, after several more appeals, it was reduced to £6.38. In view of the unnecessary delay, uncertainty and worry that such cases cause ex-miners and their widows, and the fact that, by now, a large proportion of clawbacks are for less than £10, would not claimants' anguish and the bureaucratic costs to the taxpayer be reduced if compensation clawbacks against coal miners were ended?

Mr. Bayley: Several such cases have been drawn to my attention by my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands). Higher figures were initially sought by the compensation recovery unit because the date of the injury had not been established at the time. The compensation recovery scheme provides for the Department of Social Security to reclaim benefits for five years from the date of injury. As a result of the difficulties in the cases that my hon. Friend drew to my attention, we have introduced some changes, about which I notified the House on Friday, in answer to a parliamentary question that he tabled. Those changes will speed up the recovery process and avoid the difficulty of a higher initial claim being made, because we shall seek to establish the date at which the injury occurred before we issue a certificate for recovery.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): I thank my hon. Friend and the Secretary of State for the considerate way in which they have paid attention to the compensation recovery cases that my hon. Friends and I have brought over the past few weeks and months. May I tell him that his Department seriously underestimates the huge administrative burden, cost and complexity involved in dealing with such claims? There are now more than 130,000 claims, and 600 new ones were received in the first couple of weeks of this year. Given the complexity and the disproportionate cost of claiming, would not the best way to simplify the process be to exempt such cases?

Mr. Bayley: I thank my hon. Friend for his work and for the meetings on the matter that he has had with me and the Secretary of State. I feel confident that the changes that we have announced will greatly reduce red tape and speed up the process. Matters of compensation take time to resolve between those acting on behalf of the employer—the Coal Board, now represented by the Department of Trade and Industry—and the solicitors

acting on behalf of the person seeking compensation. Under the arrangements for the compensation recovery unit that involve my Department, we have just 28 days in which to seek recovery, and if we do not issue a certificate within that time, we lose the right to seek recovery. Progress is being made, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that.

We do not believe that it would be right to exempt miners from the compensation recovery scheme. If we were to do so, it would be unfair to the others who seek recovery, such as the rail workers in my constituency who have died from asbestos-related diseases, or nurses who seek compensation because they have put out their backs by lifting patients. It would not be right to apply different rules to different classes of people.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): Will my hon. Friend consider the compensation recovery scheme that may apply to the relatives of people who have died of new variant CJD? The relatives may be eligible for compensation. The compensation has been widely welcomed, but if it is given with the one hand and taken away with the other, there will be resentment.

Mr. Bayley: I endorse the aims of the proposed scheme that the Department of Health is negotiating to compensate the victims of new variant CJD and their families. I assure my hon. Friend that officials from my Department are working closely with those from the Department of Health to ensure that the proposed new scheme fits with the current compensation scheme.

Care Home Charges

6. **Mr. Paul Burstow** (Sutton and Cheam): What representations he has received on uprating income support capital limits in line with the Department of Health limits for care home charges. [145963]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): We received a letter and representations on this subject from Mr. Gordon Lishman, the Director-General of the National Council on Ageing, in November 2000.

Mr. Burstow: Does the Secretary of State understand that the fact that the care and benefit systems are out of sync in regard to capital limits causes confusion for many care home residents and extra costs as a result of the transition from a system that is sustained by local authority contributions to care to a system that is partly funded through income support? That does not put an extra penny piece in the pockets of those in care homes. Will the Secretary of State undertake to discuss the matter again with his colleagues at the Department of Health to see whether the confusion can be removed and the two systems can be made to work better together?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that part of the problem in the social security system is that there are far too many regimes for different benefits. Individuals can find themselves applying for several benefits and discover that the rules are different. We are trying to rationalise and simplify the system.

All new residential accommodation cases will be transferred to local authorities from next year, so the problem will not arise, because there will be only one regime. That will leave us with the problems faced by people who went into residential care between 1993 and now. I am considering those problems, because I want, as far as possible, to try to simplify the regimes for capital allowances.

The Government want to encourage people to save. We are already increasing—and will ultimately abolish—the capital limits for pensioners under the pension credit. However, I want to ensure that whatever we do is consistent with a social security system that says to people of working age that any means that they may have should be taken into account; otherwise the whole process will become extremely expensive. However, I am considering the particular case to which the hon. Gentleman referred as part of a general review of capital limits in the social security system.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): With regard to capital limits and income support, can the Secretary of State explain why the savings of disabled people on income support should be treated less favourably than the savings of pensioners on income support?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government decided to increase the capital limits next year and to abolish them for pensioners from 2003. He is also aware that capital limits are none the less imposed on other people throughout the social security system. As I told the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow), the Government are considering all the capital limits. However, the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) will be well aware that raising capital limits across the board could be very expensive, even for the Conservative party, which is making spending commitments as though there were no tomorrow.

Mr. Willetts: I invite the Secretary of State to confirm as a matter of record that, within the income support system, the rules for the savings of pensioners and the rules for the savings of disabled people have hitherto been the same. Will he confirm that, as from April 2001, he will have one rule for pensioners and will treat disabled people as second-class citizens?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that the capital limits have for some time been different for different categories of people. The Government decided to increase and then abolish the capital limits for pensioners. The logic of the hon. Gentleman's remarks is that we should reimpose the capital limits for pensioners. If he is suggesting that he would lift the capital limits for disabled people and, perhaps, other groups, let him say so. At the same time, let him tell us how he would propose to pay for that. So far, he has not come up with a single credible proposal for reallocating social security spending or meeting any of the commitments that either he or his colleagues have made.

Stakeholder Pensions

7. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): Which income group will benefit the most from stakeholder pensions. [145964]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): Stakeholder pensions will particularly benefit people who earn, on today's figures, between £10,000 and £20,000 a year—£200 to £400 a week—and who do not have access to an occupational scheme. They will also be of benefit more generally, including to some non-earners. The largest single income group that will benefit comprises up to 5 million people whose income is between the figures that I have given.

Mr. Wilkinson: Why did the Secretary of State say on 6 May last year in *The Times:*

"They"—

stakeholder pensions—

"have always been intended for moderate earners and higher-income earners"?

Surely that contradicts the Labour party manifesto—or is it just a recognition of the reality that the average family must now pay an extra £670 a year in tax and, with the minimum income guarantee, has an earnings-related benefit from the state on which to fall back?

Mr. Rooker: Irrespective of what was reported in *The Times*, we have never deviated from the stakeholder target group. Those who earn in the income ranges set out in the Green Paper have been mentioned in this House, outside and in Committee. That target group does not comprise the market for stakeholders. The market and the target group, as I have repeatedly said, are different. To confuse the two is disingenuous, and the hon. Gentleman knows that.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Did my right hon. Friend see the example of a personal pension introduced under the Conservative party by Skandia Life? A man discovered that, of the £25 premium that he was paying, £17.50 was taken in commission. When he stopped the premiums, the company continued to rob his fund of the £17.50 and told him that if he wanted to close the fund and take his money, it would deduct 22 per cent. of its value. That is the truth of personal pensions introduced by the Conservative party. The man was also told that if he had had a stakeholder pension, the charge would have been not £17.50 but 20p.

Mr. Rooker: The last part of my hon. Friend's question destroyed my answer. I was about to say that we have learned the lessons provided by the pension robbers who operated under the Conservative party. That is one reason why companies are queueing up to provide stakeholder pensions—almost 30 are now regulated to do so—under which costs to individuals are controlled and capped.

Some say that the public prints are confusing. Stakeholder pensions are so "confusing" that Tesco is planning to take contributions at its 650 supermarket checkouts, and the Trades Union Congress is to provide them. They will take off because they are safe and secure, and the pension robbers will not be able to get a look in.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Surely a Minister who is a member of a Government who extract £5 billion a year from pensions should not talk about pension robbery. Will he explain why, if stakeholder pensions are good for those earning more than £10,000 a year, those earning less than that will be entitled to the same rebate and not allowed to opt out for a stakeholder pension?

Mr. Rooker: That is incredibly confusing, and shows that the former pensions Minister has not followed the debate. Stakeholder pensions will be simple. Even the Pru says:

"The new stakeholder pension is simpler than any pension yet."

They will be widespread and safe, and available to everybody. As I have said, the target group comprises those on moderate earnings of between £10,000 and £20,000 a year who are not in occupational pension schemes and for whom, by and large, there is no other provision. Stakeholder pensions are available right up the income scale and, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, are not work-related.

We have repeatedly said that it is up to those who earn below £10,000 a year to decide what to do, but that, all things being equal, they will be better off remaining in the earnings-related pension scheme, which is to be modified next year to become the state second pension, than they would be in a funded scheme. Those without earnings, be they children, non-working spouses or others, are entitled to join a stakeholder scheme.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): Many people across income groups who have stakeholder pensions will be required to buy an annuity. Given the poor current returns on annuities, what is stopping the Government ending the compulsory requirement to purchase an annuity?

Mr. Rooker: As the hon. Lady knows—we have debated these matters before—the Government are considering the report of the retirement group's income working party, chaired by my former colleague Dr. Oonagh McDonald. In due course, we shall announce our decisions.

Child Poverty

11. **Mr. Chris Pond** (Gravesham): If he will make a statement on progress towards the Government target of eliminating child poverty. [145969]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): We are making progress towards our target of eradicating child poverty within a generation, and halving it within the next 10 years. As a result of measures introduced so far, 1 million children will be taken out of poverty. There are now 250,000 fewer children living in households where there is no one in work than there were in 1997.

Mr. Pond: I welcome my right hon. Friend's reply and the progress that has been made. Does he fully understand the extent of the challenge that he is facing in trying to reach the targets to which he referred? There have been references to the trebling of child poverty between 1979 and 1997. A quarter of poor children throughout the European Union were here in the United Kingdom by the mid-1990s. If we had a Government who were committed to abolishing the working families tax credit, the child tax

credit and the new deal for lone parents, how long does my right hon. Friend think it would be before we were back to 4 million of our children living in poverty?

Mr. Darling: Many of us remember that for the 18 years the Conservatives were in government, they paid scant attention to child poverty. Many of their policies contributed actively towards children living in poverty. My hon Friend is right to refer to the fact that between 1979 and 1997 child poverty trebled. At the same time, social security spending doubled, as the Conservatives spent more and more on social security because of high unemployment.

My hon. Friend knows that the Government are committed to the eradication of child poverty. We will halve it in the next 10 years. Measures have been announced already, such as increases in child benefit, an increase in the money that is given to children whose parents are on income support, the working families tax credit and the new deal for lone parents. Many lone parents have children living on unacceptably low income levels. Those are examples of measures that are helping to ensure that children have more money coming into the household. We are making sure that we tackle child poverty.

All the evidence so far suggests that the Conservative party, far from having discovered a new concern about child poverty, is committed to policies that would be likely to lead to an increase in child poverty. I am sure that most decent people would not want that.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The Secretary of State is abominably complacent. Given the evidence that 500,000 more people are living in poverty than when the Government took office, that 2 million families have missed out on the child tax credit on account of what a Treasury official told the *Daily Mail* was a "bureaucratic bungle", and that no fewer than 85 changes to the regulations affecting the administration of housing benefit have had the effect of limiting take-up and thereby damaging the living standards of children, why does the right hon. Gentleman not abandon his smug complacency and admit that, far from being the saviour of children, the Government have betrayed poor children on a monumental scale?

Mr. Darling: I sometimes wonder whether the hon. Gentleman, when he rehearses his questions in front of the mirror before he comes into the Chamber, thinks about what he is going to say.

Mr. Bercow: I never look at the mirror.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman should try doing so. It might be a revelation to him.

We are the first Government to have set ourselves the objective of eradicating child poverty within a generation. The hon. Gentleman accuses us of complacency, and criticises us, but he should examine the measures that the Government have introduced to combat child poverty and ask himself where the Conservative party stands. If he adopts that approach, he will understand the difference between us. A major contributor to reducing poverty is an increase in child benefit, which was opposed by the Conservative party, which froze the benefit when in office.

We have introduced the working families tax credit, which makes work pay, but the Conservative party opposes it. The child care tax credit, which will be introduced in April, will mean a £10 gain for parents who can claim the credit. Again, the Conservative party oppose it. Indeed, each and every measure that we have introduced, which are designed to make sure that children are lifted out of poverty, that their parents can get into work—or, when work is not possible, that we can put more money into people's pockets though other means of support—is opposed by the Conservative party. Because the Conservatives are committed to £16 billion worth of spending reductions, it is inconceivable that the axe would not fall on the very children about whom the hon. Gentleman pretends to be concerned.

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North): Does my right hon. Friend accept that workless households are a major contribution to child poverty, and that we need to look at all possible work incentives? In that vein, will he look at reintroducing free school meals with the working families tax credit, as that would be a major contribution to eliminating child poverty and a massive work incentive?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. One reason why many children were living in poverty is that their parents did not work. That is why we introduced the new deal for lone parents, which 200,000 lone parents have already joined. Almost half of them have gone into work or are in the process of working towards work through training and other enterprise. The best way to tackle poverty is to make sure that as many children as possible have parents who are in work. That is why we are making work pay and making work possible.

Of course, we shall continue to look at other measures to make sure that children are looked after and brought up properly in an environment where they are likely to learn. The difference between us and the Conservative party is that all the measures that were introduced to combat child poverty, especially the new deal for lone parents, would be scrapped by the Conservatives, were they to get in. There is one particularly cruel measure: the Conservatives plan to remove all forms of state help from lone parents, once their children are over the age of 11. That is the only way they could save £0.5 billion in their first year of office.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Has not the real problem with all the Government's anti-poverty programmes been identified by none other than the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson)? According to him,

> "There is a proliferation of programmes with insufficient collaboration between the different agencies involved . . . As a result we are spending vast sums of money . . . on the same people through different programmes, without improving their ability to participate in the economy and society."

Perhaps the Secretary of State thinks that those words are evidence of how curiously detached his former colleague has become. Does he agree with his right hon. Friend, or are his former colleague's words already forgotten?

Mr. Darling: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman did not take the opportunity to explain how removing

benefit from lone parents when their youngest child reaches the age of 11 can help in the drive to get rid of poverty. As for the measures that the Government have introduced to make work pay and make work possible, we have introduced a variety of them, and they are beginning to bear fruit. As a result of what we are doing, there will be a million fewer children in poverty than there were when the hon. Gentleman left office. The hon. Gentleman would have done better to come to the House with measures that would help to reduce poverty, rather than make silly points that do not add up to much at all.

Poverty

12. **Mr. Tony Baldry** (Banbury): If he will make a statement on the number of households living in poverty *(a)* in 1997 and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available. [145970]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): This Government are committed to eradicating pensioner poverty and, as I said a moment ago, child poverty. Our first "Opportunity for All" report outlined the extent of the poverty that we inherited in 1997. In the first two years, the number of households defined as living in poverty stabilised at about 18 per cent, but we expect the numbers to fall as the rises in the minimum income guarantee, the working families tax credit and the increase in benefits for the poorest children take effect. As I said a few moments ago, by the end of this Parliament about 1 million fewer children will be living in poverty.

Mr. Baldry: By the Secretary of State's own acknowledgement, the best that he can say is that the number of families living in poverty has "stabilised"—that was the word that he used in his answer. However, that hides the fact that, quite often, concentrations of families live in poverty in particular wards and areas. In Oxfordshire, for example, those areas include Blackbird Leys in Oxford and Bretch Hill in my constituency. There is a concern that measures are not sufficiently targeted on concentrations of poverty in areas outside the inner city. Will the Secretary of State discuss with colleagues from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and other Departments how more resources can be directed at concentrations of poverty in wards outside the city areas?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, which contrasts his position with that of some of his colleagues. I take issue with just one point: yes, the number of households defined as living in poverty had stabilised, but the most recent figures available cover the period up to March 1999. Most of the measures that the Government have introduced came into effect after April 1999, and we do not yet have the figures for that period. As I said, we expect the number of households living in poverty to fall gradually, which contrasts with the earlier figure that I gave, reflecting a trebling of child poverty in the 20 years up to now.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there are areas where there are concentrations of children living in poverty. Usually, they are characterised by high levels of unemployment, few employment opportunities, very low skills and schools where children do not attain the standards achieved by comparable groups elsewhere. That is why we introduced the new deal for communities and employment zones—some of the many schemes criticised by the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) a moment ago.

All the evidence suggests that the Government should concentrate the help that they are giving to deal with low income, to make sure that people get into work, to raise educational standards and to tackle health deficiencies and housing problems. All those must be dealt with at the same time, and I am glad that at least one Opposition Member realises that that is how we must tackle the problem.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): What is the best way to tackle poverty among households that include people of working age?

Mr. Darling: The best way is to make sure that those people can get into work. The problem that has caused so much poverty is that far too many people who could work were not able to work. Many hon. Members know that during the 1980s, large parts of the country—whole communities—were laid waste. They were given no help whatever to cope with the huge industrial changes taking place and, as a result, too many children were living in houses where no one was in work. That is why the Government introduced measures to make work pay—the working families tax credit, underpinned by the national minimum wage—and to make work possible—help with child care and the new deal. All those measures were bitterly opposed by the Conservative party. Every single one of those measures would go if the Conservatives ever got back, and that would mean more children and more households living in poverty. That is not just economic madness, but morally wrong.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): Is the Secretary of State aware that 22 allegedly illegal immigrant workers doing short-term work on flower and bulb farms in west Cornwall were arrested at the weekend? Although that raises concerns about the poverty and quality of life of the immigrant workers, it took place in an area with one of the highest unemployment rates in the country, not because the people there are workshy—far from it—but because of the complexities of a cumbersome benefits system, which discourages people from taking up short-term work. What will the Secretary of State do to address the problems that prevent unemployed people from taking advantage of short-term work?

Mr. Darling: I am not aware of the detail of the case. I saw press reports at the weekend, but I have no detailed information about it. From what I understand and from what the hon. Gentleman said, it seems that the problem there is unscrupulous, collusive employers taking advantage of people, getting them to work for them and presumably paying them in cash, rather than employing people in the proper and usual way. The hon. Gentleman is aware that the Government are taking additional powers through the Social Security Fraud Bill, currently in another place and shortly to come before the House. The Bill will tighten up the powers available to us to stop such exploitation. The other problem highlighted by the case is

the need for the Government to make sure that they do everything possible to stop people entering the country when they do not have sufficient authority to do so.

New Deal for Disabled People

13. **Liz Blackman** (Erewash): What representations he has had from employers' organisations about his Department's involvement with the new deal for disabled people. [145971]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): By the end of last year, the pilots of the new deal for disabled people had helped more than 6,000 people move into work. We are now working to extend the programme. We have consulted widely, including with employers, whose views will help us to target our measures more effectively to support those who currently claim incapacity benefits and who wish to move into work.

Liz Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that more help should be given to people who suffer from ill health and whose jobs are at risk? What do the Government intend to do about that?

Mr. Bayley: I agree with my hon. Friend. In fact, I feel passionately that the state should be able to help people who risk losing their jobs because of failing health. Under the new deal for disabled people, we have run a number of job rehabilitation pilots, from which we have learned a great deal. We hope shortly to advertise for people to run a further series of pilots focused on job retention; indeed, I hope that we shall do so next week. Through rehabilitation and job help, such pilots will enable people who have been absent from work for six weeks to retain their jobs. Each week, 17,000 people reach their sixth week of absence from work. Those people need help, as they run the grave risk of losing their jobs altogether. Such help has not been provided in the past, but the pilots will allow it to be given in future.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Is it not a fact that, although some Opposition Members may not look in the mirror—a comment that was made earlier—Ministers and other Labour Members often look in *The Guardian*? Did the Under-Secretary see in *The Guardian* last week a statement made by the head of public policy at the Royal National Institute for the Blind? With reference to the new deal for the disabled, he said that

"the system is very objectionable. It's treating disabled people like guinea pigs and will be seen by them to be highly discriminatory."

What is the hon. Gentleman's answer to that criticism?

Mr. Bayley: I know Steve Winyard well. He did not say that the new deal for disabled people discriminates against people; he asked questions about the evaluation strategy for the new job-broker scheme. We have been discussing the scheme with voluntary bodies and we want to make the evaluation as user-friendly as possible. We are absolutely determined to ensure that it is thorough and robust, so that it will prove the effectiveness of work to help people on incapacity benefit to retain jobs and to get back into work. Such help can then be provided to people on incapacity benefit not on a pilot basis, but on a full-time, regular basis. We need such measures because the number of people on incapacity benefit trebled from 600,000 to 1.8 million when the hon. Gentleman's party was in power. Those people were simply dumped. The Conservative party left them high and dry, which is why we are piloting the new deal for disabled people. We want to give those 1.8 million people some hope of getting back into work.

Pensioners (Expenditure)

15. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): What representations he has received about the amount his Department spends on pensioners. [145973]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): The extra £4.5 billion that the Government are spending over and above the amount that the Conservatives planned to spend has been widely welcomed.

Mr. Chapman: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is unsurprising that few representations have been made to the Department of Social Security about spending on pensioners, because the Government have done more for our pensioners in four years than the previous Government did in 18 years? Does he agree also that we remain committed to allowing pensioners to share in the growing prosperity of the country as it develops?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. Most people welcome the increase in the basic pension of £5 for single pensioners and £8 for pensioner couples, which will happen in April. That comes together with the increase in the minimum income guarantee, which means that 2 million of the poorest pensioners in the country will be at least £15 a week better off in real terms. Those increases have been widely welcomed. I am sure, however, that the same people who welcome them will be equally apprehensive about the Opposition's proposals to scrap the winter fuel payment and to reduce the entitlement for 2.5 million pensioners, who will lose out as a result of the proposal.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): How much money each year will the Government claw back from people who reach retirement age and will no longer qualify for the married couples allowance?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman knows that we made changes to the married couples' allowance because we wanted to focus more help on families with children. We want to ensure that the Government's help goes to people on the basis of need rather than status. That is why we made those changes.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): Having spoken to some pensioners in my constituency over the weekend, may I tell my right hon. Friend how much they applaud the Government's efforts in relieving them of pensioner poverty? Given the time of year, they made particular mention of the winter fuel payment. Can my right hon. Friend outline what he believes the introduction of the pension credit will do for those who fall just above that minimum income guarantee line?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Government intend to introduce the pension credit

from 2003. It will guarantee that no pensioner need live on less than £100 a week and will ensure that, for every pound that they save, people qualifying for the pension credit will receive a cash top-up. For example, a pensioner saving £20 a week will get £12 a week on top of that as a reward for saving.

The Government's objective is to ensure that it pays to save. The problem with the social security system that we inherited was that there was a positive disincentive against saving. From 2003, for the first time in the history of the social security system in this country, for every pound pensioners save they will get a credit for their thrift. That reform is long overdue. Not only does it help combat pensioner poverty but it ensures that thrifty pensioners are rewarded and not penalised, as they were for far too long.

Poverty

18. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): What assessment he has made of the effect of measures taken by his Department since May 1997 in tackling poverty in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* the north-west. [145976]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): Full details of our policies and the indicators that we use to monitor them can be found in the "Opportunity for All" reports. Some of our indicators can be broken down to look at the regions. These show, for example, that the north-west has benefited from the increased educational achievement for 11-year-olds. Now 73 per cent. of 11-year-olds reach the required standard in maths, rather than the 63 per cent. who did in 1997. We are also seeing a reduction in the proportion of children living in workless households in the region. It is down from 22 per cent. in 1997 to 18 per cent. last year.

Mr. Pike: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. I have been involved in politics in Burnley for 38 years, and the Government's record in social security and taxation matters has done more to tackle poverty in my type of constituency than that of any previous Government. Will he make sure that, at the election, the people of this country know exactly what we have done to tackle poverty and what we intend to do when we are re-elected at that election?

Mr. Bayley: We seek to tell the public what our strategy is in the "Opportunity for All" reports and what our performance has been in the indicators. As each year passes, the poverty figures improve. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State pointed out, under the Conservatives the number of children living in poverty trebled. That policy trend cannot simply be switched off overnight. It is like a supertanker—it has to be slowed down, which we have done, and then turned. We are now seeing the benefits of fewer children in poverty in Burnley and in the rest of the country.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): I wonder whether my hon. Friend has seen a letter in *The Herald* today from a volunteer in a citizens advice bureau in Aberdeen. It makes very interesting reading with regard to the figures of pensioners living in poverty. The gentleman worked out that, from this April, a pensioner couple on the minimum pension guarantee has the equivalent disposable income of someone in work on £16,000 a year. That figure is arrived at because those in work and on that kind of income do not qualify for housing benefit or council tax rebates, but must pay national insurance contributions, must pay into a pension fund and pay for all the other things that a working person has to pay for but a pensioner does not. Does that not illustrate clearly how the Government are tackling the basis of pensioner poverty?

Mr. Bayley: I regret that I have not seen the letter in *The Herald*, but I shall look for it. It clearly illustrates the point that my hon. Friend made. Opposition Members crow that all that we have achieved for pensioners is a levelling-off of the number in poverty, according to the latest "Opportunity for All" report. However, they omit to mention that the figures in the report relate to 1999, before the introduction of the minimum income guarantee.

We introduced the minimum income guarantee to tackle the problem of pensioner poverty and, as a result of its introduction, we are doing so. I am pleased that some people in the citizens advice bureau in Aberdeen realise that it has made a big difference to the standard of living and the feeling of security of the poorest pensioners.

20. **Mr. Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): If he will make a statement on the number of households living in poverty *(a)* in 1997 and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available. [145979]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): Our first "Opportunity for All" report outlined the extent of poverty that we inherited in 1997. Our second report, published in September 2000, shows the latest information available.

Mr. Loughton: We heard the same rather flimsy excuse from the Secretary of State in response to question 12 a short time ago. If the incidence of poverty is not declining at a time when we are constantly being told that the economy is booming, what hope will we be able to hold out when the economy starts on a downturn? The hon. Gentleman's answer is in strict contrast to the studies carried out by the Joseph Rowntree Trust, which show a great increase in poverty.

Is the hon. Gentleman aware that many of my pensioner constituents in Worthing are among the 500,000 extra people who are now, according to the trust, living in poverty? Is he also aware that many of them are missing out on the benefits to which they are entitled because the Government have enormously complicated the way in which benefits are administered through the Benefits Agency and local authorities? When will the Government do something serious to make the system more transparent and accessible to the most vulnerable, especially pensioners?

Mr. Bayley: If the hon. Gentleman was doing as much to help pensioners in poverty as some Labour Members, he would know that the number of pensioners living in poverty has substantially decreased as a result of the introduction of the minimum income guarantee. If he did his homework, he would know that the figures in the "Opportunity for All" report—which show a static

position—are two years old, as are the figures in the Joseph Rowntree Trust's report. Had he read the "Opportunity for All" report, he would know that. I suggest that he read it, so that he may come better informed to Question Time next month.

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): My hon. Friend knows my constituency well. I have been doing my homework: I was with representatives of Age Concern on Friday. They told me that about 700 pensioner households in the Scarborough area are still, for whatever reason, classified as being in poverty, on the measures that they use. The main problem is that households do not claim payments to which they are entitled. Will the Minister offer me and the field-workers from Age Concern some advice on how to persuade those 700 households that they are entitled to this help, and that it would not constitute a handout?

Mr. Bayley: The Government have run the largest ever take-up campaign for pensioners. Record numbers of pensioners have applied for the minimum income guarantee and are getting it as a result. I hope that that has made a difference in my hon. Friend's constituency.

I join my hon. Friend in wanting to ensure that the message gets across that the minimum income guarantee is not a discretionary payment but an entitlement for pensioners on low incomes, and we are determined that such pensioners should receive it. I should be more than happy to visit my hon. Friend's constituency to talk to the representatives of Age Concern about how we can ensure that the campaign is a success.

Winter Fuel Allowance

22. **Mr. Denis MacShane** (Rotherham): How many pensioners in the United Kingdom have benefited from *(a)* the winter fuel allowance and *(b)* the free television licence. [145981]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): Around 11 million winter fuel payments have already been made to those entitled to them—the vast majority were made before Christmas. We are still receiving and processing claims for this winter's payments, particularly from men aged between 60 and 64. Winter fuel payments are made to people living in England, Scotland and Wales. Northern Ireland has mirroring provisions. We estimate that some 3.7 million pensioner households in Great Britain qualify for a free television licence. All those provisions would be lost under the Tories' proposals, as would the 10,000 winter fuel payments made in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Mr. MacShane: On this freezing January day, is not it right to remind the country that the extra help that we give to pensioners will be taken from them if the Conservative party ever gets anywhere near power? Specifically on television licences, is my right hon. Friend aware of the concern about the activities of a BBC Gestapo unit that goes around removing the free licence of people who live in sheltered accommodation because of some small change in their living arrangements? Will he make clear to the BBC my concern, which I am sure is shared by other hon. Members, that that practice should stop, that pensioners aged over 65 who have the right to a free licence should keep it and that the view of many hon. Members is that the BBC licence fee will be increasingly hard to justify if the removal of the free licence for over-65s continues?

Mr. Rooker: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Indeed, the discrepancy over the licence rules for sheltered housing was raised with my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) and me when I was applauded by pensioners in Chorley on Friday for the winter fuel payment, the free television licence and the forthcoming massive increase in the basic state retirement pension, which is already appearing in the new pension books being sent out to pensioners. The matter concerns all Members of Parliament and, indeed, the BBC. One way or another, it will have to be resolved in due course.

Earthquake (India)

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): On Friday 26 January, a major earthquake measuring 6.9 on the Richter scale occurred in western India. The epicentre was 50 km north-east of the town of Bhuj in Gujarat state. It affected an area as large as Wales and was felt in Pakistan, Nepal and southern India.

The latest estimates are that more than 20,000 people are presumed dead, thousands more are missing and some 50,000 are reported injured. Initial reports suggest that 500,000 have been left homeless. As serious aftershocks continue, hundreds of thousands of people are living outside their homes. Aftershocks are also hampering the search and rescue and relief effort. Provision of water is a particular problem in Bhuj. Aerial assessments carried out by the Government of India, in which staff from my Department participated, described the situation in many areas as "utter devastation". According to the Indian authorities, 95 per cent. of buildings in Bhuj are no longer habitable and many villages are completely flattened.

Infrastructure such as roads, bridges, railways, communication systems and electricity lines have been severely affected and an oil slick is affecting operations at the oil terminal at Kandla port. Communication with Bhuj is gradually being restored using satellite. Indian police are leading the search and rescue effort, aided by 5,000 Indian military personnel. Priorities are water, shelter, blankets and food. The Indian authorities are mobilising significant resources to address those needs. That is being supported by international relief assistance, which has started to arrive.

I am sure that the whole House would wish to join me in expressing our deep sympathy and concern to the people of Gujarat and their relatives and friends in Britain and elsewhere. The Queen and the Prime Minister have sent messages of sympathy to the Government of India.

The Department for International Development's emergency response centre has been working round the clock since the earthquake struck. We dispatched a UK search and rescue team of 69 people comprising 25 UK fire service volunteers from Lancashire, Lincolnshire, Greater Manchester, Chester and Leicestershire and specialist non-governmental organisation personnel. The Ministry of Defence provided a plane at a cost to my Department—I thought that the House may want to know this—of £98,000. Officials from my Department led the team. They arrived in Bhuj at 8 am UK time on 28 January and started work within 15 minutes. At present, they are targeting some of the worst-affected buildings. They are working in close co-operation with the Indian authorities and have so far managed to rescue four people alive.

Also in a joint operation with my Department, 75 search and rescue personnel from the Russian Ministry of Emergencies arrived in Bhachau on 28 January and have rescued eight persons to date. They also have with them an airmobile hospital. A second Russian aircraft, part-funded by my Department, is awaiting clearance from the Indian authorities to bring in 3,280 blankets and 45 family tents.

A United Nations disaster assessment co-ordination team, including one United Kingdom member, has also been dispatched, and will commence operations as soon as possible. Two disaster assessment experts from my Department have helped to organise the non-governmental organisations' relief co-ordination meeting, and have helped with aerial reconnaissance. The focus of the effort is now moving from search and rescue to the organisation of relief. All existing systems have broken down. People lack housing, blankets, clothes, food and water. We must ensure that those who survived the earthquake are cared for until normal systems can be restored.

My Department has spent £2 million on the provision of immediate relief, and a further £1 million will be allocated today. As the House knows, what is important is not general pledges of money but disbursing the money now, and providing services on the ground in Gujarat now. My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has today agreed to make available £9 million from the reserve, so that we can allocate a total of £10 million to support the emergency relief effort without reducing our spending in other parts of India. We will also work in Brussels and elsewhere to ensure that other development agencies make appropriate funding available.

The Indian Government are well organised and are providing food, army personnel, heavy lifting equipment, mobile operating theatres and medical supplies, but the scale of the emergency is such that some of the resources needed cannot be supplied in the region. We are therefore also arranging to fly out three aircraft carrying 1,200 tents and other shelter items from the Department's emergency stockpile in Staffordshire. A fourth aircraft will be dispatched today from Ostend via Brindisi, carrying 10 sets of trauma equipment and plastic sheeting.

This is a very serious disaster. Organisation by the Indian Government is good, but international help is needed to ensure that all who survived the earthquake, but have lost everything, are provided with health care and other basic essentials until they can rebuild their homes and livelihoods.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): I thank the Secretary of State for coming to make the statement, and for letting me have a copy earlier.

Let me underline the deep shock and sadness of Conservative Members, and express our sympathy for all who have suffered in this major disaster. The tragedy is brought much closer to home for all of us by the certain knowledge that all over the United Kingdom there will be British citizens who have lost family and loved ones in India—perhaps even in Pakistan—and who are waiting desperately for news of missing relatives. I pay tribute to the Department's rapid response in releasing resources and supporting the dispatch of the British specialist search and rescue teams that are now doing such impressive work in Gujarat, and I pay tribute to the Secretary of State's hard-working officials.

I emphasise that Conservative Members will support any reasonable steps taken by the Government to deal with either the short-term crisis or the longer-term need for restoration work. I know it is early days, but can the Secretary of State say anything at all about the part that Britain might play in the longer-term regeneration that will be necessary? Will the Department support the Indian Government's request to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank for substantial help?

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[Mr. Gary Streeter]

The Secretary of State mentioned the need for shelter, blankets, clothes, food and water. Can she say a little about her assessment of the scale of those requirements—especially in the more remote areas, some of which have not yet received any help at all? Can she also say something about her Department's assessment of the risks of disease? What support can we give to help with medical supplies?

Does the Secretary of State agree that as we enjoy a very close and special relationship with this Commonwealth country, it is right and proper for Britain to be at the forefront of the humanitarian aid effort? I welcome the co-operation between her Department and the Ministry of Defence in making aircraft available.

Can the right hon. Lady say a little more about how the £3 million of aid that we have made available will be disbursed? May I repeat the concerns that I mentioned during discussion on El Salvador about the pumping of our aid through United Nations agencies? I suspect that the right hon. Lady has not done that this time, but does she agree that, more often than not, NGOs and charities based on the ground are the right vehicles for British taxpayers' funds?

Does the Secretary of State agree that although earthquakes are inevitable, death on this scale is not? Does she agree that much more needs to be done the world over in terms of earthquake preparedness? Given that India is by far the largest recipient of British aid, does she ensure that disaster management forms part of the on-going dialogue between our two countries? During her recent trip to India, did she have discussions with Indian Ministers about disaster management? If so, can she say a little about that?

I again thank the Secretary of State and her Department for their rapid response—which is made on behalf of all of us—to a very serious disaster.

Clare Short: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I agree with him very much that the British people can feel proud that we—with some of the fine officials in my Department—are among the fastest in the world in responding to this type of emergency. We can be proud, too, of the fact that British fire fighters and others working in search and rescue operations will drop everything at a moment's notice and fly around the world to try to help people in distress. I think that we are all proud to live in a country that can make such an effort.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman—we are very aware of this—that the families of very many British citizens originated in that part of India. As telephone and other systems have broken down, people here have been unable to receive news of their family in India and are deeply anxious. They are of course devastated and we feel very deeply for them.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the part that we will play in the longer term. As we tend to move faster than others and can get on site very quickly, we will probably make a lot of the early, up-front provision. We can then ensure that organisations such as the European Community make resources available. It will be some months before the big reconstruction effort can begin. People have lost their houses and absolutely everything else, and they will have to be provided with health care and food before the reconstruction effort can start.

It is the reconstruction effort that the IMF and the World Bank will have to help with. I met World Bank authorities recently when I was in India, and they are hoping and planning to increase their support and lending to India. We have also been talking about assisting the bank to be able to deploy more resources in India. I think that we can continue those conversations to ensure that Gujarat receives help for the reconstruction effort.

The hon. Gentleman is right that, in some villages, everything has been destroyed. An aerial reconnaissance has been conducted, but no help has yet been provided to people in some smaller communities which have lost everything. The relief effort has to spread very rapidly. We should remember, however, that very considerable territory—an area the size of Wales—has been devastated and that some of the villages are remote.

There is always a risk of disease after a major disruption, when water, sanitation and health systems are affected. That is why the big relief effort is now focused on ensuring that those who survive do not become ill and perhaps—after surviving the earthquake—die because of a lack of support.

The hon. Gentleman is wrong to suggest that all United Nations agencies are inefficient. UNICEF, for example, is an extremely efficient agency that is particularly good at water supply, which is an issue in this case. We shall use whatever agencies are already present and able to operate in the locality. That is what we always do. It is no good giving grants to non-governmental organisations that are still in the United Kingdom and not in the country concerned. We have to see who is already in the country and provide to them.

The Red Cross was the fastest to the scene and we provided it with the first grant. Blankets are needed, as it is quite cold in that part of India and people are sleeping outside their houses. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we shall provide to those agencies that are efficient, already at the scene and can get material through to people. However, only the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs can do the co-ordinating job. It can get in there, assess the situation and make calls around the world to ensure that the effort is co-ordinated and resources are not unnecessarily duplicated.

I agree very much with the hon. Gentleman's final point—we are working on the matter throughout the world system—that earthquakes and other disasters are acts of nature or of God, and that perhaps there will be more of them because of greater global warming, atmospheric turbulence and increasing world population, which forces people on to more marginal land. However, people's chances of surviving a disaster depend on local disaster preparedness. Systems in countries around the world have to be strengthened so that people are always there, ready to move instantly. When people are under rubble, it is no good waiting for people and materials to be flown in from elsewhere in the world. We need to have local people who can move very rapidly to the rescue.

As I said, the Indian Government's efforts are very good and organised. However, it is a phenomenal disaster.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): May I express support for the fact that my right hon. Friend did say that the Indian Government and the Indian authorities were well organised? I went last night to a big meeting in the

constituency of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary which was hosted by the police for our Asian communities, and gentle sadness was expressed that the attitude of much of the British press had been somewhat patronising towards the organisation of the Indian authorities. As a member of the Budget Committee of the European Union, I have seen the effects of an earthquake days after it happened. Anyone who has seen that knows that the effects are stunning and appalling. People cannot be well organised, so I am glad that she paid tribute to the Indian authorities.

My right hon. Friend also referred to the oil slick. We have great expertise in such matters, so is British expertise being sent to do something about the slick, which is a real problem?

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is right to say that there is always a tendency for the media to look for someone to blame; they say, "If only there were not all this chaos and disorganisation, it would all be okay." This was a natural disaster of monumental proportions. People were going to be hurt and there was nothing anyone could do to stop that. However, we can respond quickly to people's needs. The Indian Government's lead has been excellent and we have been fast in assisting, which makes a lot of difference. In other countries where disasters have occurred and where there has been bad local organisation, there has been much more disruption, death and ill-health because of the follow-on chaos. In this case, not every village has been reached, but the organisation is good. That is a blessing and the Indian Government are to be congratulated.

The oil slick to which my hon. Friend refers has been caused by a fracture in a tank, as a result of the earthquake. I do not know whether we have offered help, but I shall find out and get back to him.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): My party wishes to join all hon. Members in sending sincere condolences to the Hindu communities affected by the earthquake, both here and in India. We commend the speedy action by organisations such as the UK search and rescue team and the £10 million of assistance pledged by the British Government. We commend also the action taken by the Gujarat communities in the United Kingdom which, amazingly quickly, have established appeals and information centres for Gujarati people who live in this country.

With regard to the point made by the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), are any specific measures being taken to combat cholera which no doubt will spread if the water supply is not secured? Does the Minister agree that it is buildings, not earthquakes, that kill people? Can we have an assurance that any reconstruction that takes place with money from this country will involve the building of earthquake-resistant buildings? Can the Government help the relatives from this country to get information about their relatives in India or to go out there to join other family members?

Clare Short: The Red Cross issued an early appeal and, if people want to give, the Red Cross is efficient, on the ground and getting help through. People should be proud that their tax money is contributing, as the £10 million is taxpayers' money. Every British citizen is making a contribution—as they would want—and everyone should be aware of that. That sum is greater than the voluntary donations, welcome though those are.

Many measures have been taken to deal with health problems and possible cholera. The major hospital in Bhuj was flattened, but there is a military hospital and mobile hospitals. A lot of effort is being made to provide health care and prevent the spread of disease. On whether buildings and not earthquakes kill people, we have no evidence of the really dreadful building that was seen following the earthquake in Turkey, although we will find out more as the information comes in. However, many villages with traditional low-rise buildings have been flattened, too. It is a question not of bad building, but of a dreadful earthquake.

On reconstruction, the Indian Government will wish to learn lessons about what kind of buildings should be built. It will take big support from the IMF and the World Bank; we must remember that an area the size of Wales will have to be rebuilt. The UK aid budget will not be enough and major resources will be required. Gujarat is not one of the poorest areas of India and local resources can be mobilised.

The Foreign Office is providing all the help and information to relatives that it can. Satellite communications have been established and telephone calls are getting through. However, I would not advise people to go out to look. The area is in chaos, and it would not be helpful. I understand how worried relatives must be, but if lots of people start arriving, it will add to the strain on airports and make matters worse.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): I represent a large Gujarati community, and I add my expressions of sympathy to those of my right hon. Friend, especially to those directly affected, whether they are living in Gujarat, in Bolton or anywhere else. The local community has mobilised very quickly, and the first shipment of clothing and blankets is due to leave Bolton this afternoon. Will my right hon. Friend do everything in her power to help those communities to get goods and finance through to Gujarat as quickly as possible?

Clare Short: Many people in the UK have families in Bhuj, where 95 per cent. of the buildings have been destroyed, so there must be terrible worry in our communities, and we all feel deeply about that, but it is much better to offer money than goods, because of the shipping costs and the organisational effort. I appeal to those who want to help to give money, which is much more flexible. We will then be able to purchase vast supplies of what is needed. The bulk of clothing and other goods makes all the arrangements more difficult. I hope that all hon. Members will encourage their communities to provide money rather than goods.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I appreciate the report that the Secretary of State has given us. On behalf of my colleagues, I express our sympathy, too. As minister of a church that has been closely associated with work in Gujarat for about 150 years, I know something of what the people there are going through. I know that the House will also feel sympathy with and empathy for the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), because I understand that his family background is in Gujarat.

[Rev. Martin Smyth]

In the light of press reports that there are some in the Gujarat authorities who want to go ahead with clearing away the rubble, I urge the Secretary of State at least to encourage them to let the searchers continue, in the light of experience elsewhere, where some miraculous escapes have taken place. We understand why they want to get on with clearing up, but it is equally important to consider searching for those who may still be alive. We will pledge our support at any level to the Department, as it continues to co-operate with others in the search and rescue and rebuilding operations.

Clare Short: Yes, indeed, we learned in Turkey that it is extraordinary how long people can survive under the rubble. India has provided a lot of military personnel, but outside teams have the expertise and the listening equipment. Some villages have not yet been reached. We must be careful to save all the lives that we can. Obviously, time is running on, and we all worry about that, but I completely agree that we must save every life that can be saved.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): There are 10,000 families of Gujarati origin in my constituency, and approximately 3,000 specifically from Bhuj. As can be imagined, the whole community, especially in Wembley and Kenton, has been traumatised by recent events.

I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement, and in particular for the increase to £10 million in the money that is to be made available. Will she ensure that there is co-ordination of local community relief efforts in this country, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) said, are already under way? I understand her point that it is much better to contribute money, because that can buy the necessary goods that are immediately available on the ground, but communities have already mobilised and collected blankets and foodstuffs to send, and there will be an understandable frustration if all the efforts that relatives here have made appear to be thwarted and not to be productive.

My right hon. Friend said that Gujarat was one of the wealthier states in India. That is true: it has a £29 billion development programme of inward investment. Will she consider not only the immediate relief but how Britain can be involved in the long-term programme of building that will be necessary in the state?

My right hon. Friend spoke about remote villages and the need for the relief effort to reach them. Many families in my constituency who have been contacted by their relatives have been told that nothing is happening in the remoter villages. I urge my right hon. Friend to expand the efforts to reach the British citizens' relatives who are trapped and without relief. I also urge her to liaise with her Cabinet colleagues about any counselling that is available to relatives in this country who are traumatised by events in India.

I thank my right hon. Friend for her remarks about the Indian Government, who have made every effort to provide telecommunications for people to contact their relatives. I believe that 2,000 lines have been made available, and I want to record the praise of my community for the Indian Government and also for Sewa International, the Indian charity that is doing much to co-ordinate work on the ground.

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I am sure that we all feel for his constituents. I stress that I am grateful to the Treasury for the £10 million. We are nearly at year's end, and all our money in India is programmed. We were therefore planning to redeploy money that would otherwise be spent elsewhere on other poor people in that country. However, the Treasury came forward with extra money, and I am very pleased about that.

I understand my hon. Friend's comments about people who have collected blankets and foodstuffs. However, I ask anyone who has done that to consider selling them and giving money instead. I am sorry, but it is not right to use resources inefficiently simply to make people feel better when it is desperately urgent to get money to buy food and other necessities. Some people have lost everything; they have simply walked out of their houses. They have no clothes and it is cold. We cannot make ourselves less efficient in those circumstances, and we will not be able to send bulk supplies. I therefore encourage people to give money to the Red Cross or other agencies that are working in India. I am sorry to disappoint people, but the point is important; this is about saving people's lives.

My hon. Friend is right about the massive rebuilding effort. As I told the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), it will take a great deal of resources. We shall therefore look to international agencies to which we contribute, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, to provide large, long-term loans with a low rate of interest to accomplish the enormous rebuilding effort. We work with both banks in India. Apart from our existing commitments to those institutions we will do any partnering that we can to help them bring their programmes forward.

I agree with my hon. Friend about the remote villages. The effort to reach out is happening now. Everything happened so fast, and it is true that some villages have not been reached. We must do everything in our power to get to those people.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I think that everyone would commend the Chief Secretary on providing the £10 million so speedily. As the Secretary of State says, a massive rebuilding effort will be required, backed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. After the Turkish earthquake, the Minister for Housing and Planning led a construction mission to Turkey. The United Kingdom construction industry is carrying out much rebuilding in the earthquake zone in Turkey. Could the right hon. Lady liaise with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to establish whether there is again scope for the UK construction industry to contribute in the Indian earthquake zone?

Clare Short: Yes, indeed. I hope that everyone will welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) to the Front Bench to speak on international development. He said that a Minister from DETR had telephoned earlier on the very matter that the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) raised. We must be ready to go, but we must not go too early and get in

the way. Let us get the relief effort organised first. When people can turn their minds to reconstruction, that will be the right time to move.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I recognise that most of the tragedy has occurred in India, and, as secretary of the all-party Pakistan group, I extend sincere sympathy to all who are affected. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is an opportunity not only for the Commonwealth to respond positively, but for Pakistan, India's nearest neighbour, which is also affected, to work with India, despite those countries' differences, to tackle the tragedy?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is my understanding that, because buildings tumbled, there has been some loss of life in Pakistan and Nepal—but on nothing like the same scale. My hon. Friend is right: if any help can be offered to Gujarat from Pakistan, I am sure that Pakistan would want to consider that. My hon. Friend's suggestion will have been heard and I am sure Pakistan will do what it can to help.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on her Department's initial response and, with other right hon. and hon. Members, echo her remarks about the performance thus far of the Government of India. Clearly, this matter is a priority for the UK because of our historic trading and family relations with India. However, as half our aid is disbursed through the European Union, will she tell us how the matter can be made to have the same priority for the EU that it so clearly has for us?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman is right: a third of our development budget goes through the EU. We are in touch with Brussels and I think—I speak from memory—that about 3 million euros have been pledged. That is not in proportion to the need, so we shall hold further talks both about the size of the pledge and about speed. Often, in such disasters, Governments make pledges, but it takes months and months before anything arrives and it is then discovered that the money was already in their budget for India in any case. We must make sure that the money is new money and that it is rapidly disbursed—we shall be working on that.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My right hon. Friend referred to 3 million euros. That is an extremely small amount—incredibly small. Is my right hon. Friend aware of how much individual EU nation states are allocating, bilaterally? Is that information in her departmental briefing? What co-ordination will there be with states outside the EU structure to ensure that there is no overlap?

Clare Short: I agree with my hon. Friend. As I said, I spoke from memory; the figure was mentioned in a meeting and I think that it was 3 million euros. It is not enough in proportion to the need.

At present, a Swiss search and rescue team is in the area—because of the geography of Switzerland, the Swiss are extremely good at such work. The Russians are there; they too are good at that work, because of the size of their country. They have never previously operated internationally, but we have linked up with them and they are going to undertake more of that work.

I do not yet have information about pledges from EU member states. We shall find out, and I shall let my hon. Friend and the House know about that. During the next few months, we shall need a great deal of resources for emergency relief. All development agencies throughout the world will need to contribute because so many people are affected. We shall encourage everyone to do so. I shall keep the House informed.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I congratulate the right hon. Lady and her Department on the fast action that they have taken. She touched briefly on one aspect of co-operation with the Ministry of Defence. Is she satisfied that arrangements for co-operation and co-ordination between her Department and the MOD are working well? In particular, were there other major MOD assets in the area—such as naval units—that might have been able to help? Have any steps been taken in that direction?

Clare Short: Yes, I am pleased to be able to say that, since the discussions on the Mozambique disaster, arrangements are better and the price is better. I am grateful to the House for securing the outcome that I think everyone, on all sides, wanted to achieve.

I am not aware of any request for naval assets. The Indian armed forces are large and efficient. A large number of them are in theatre. They have not requested our armed forces. I will find out whether we have ships in the vicinity—if we did, I suspect that I would know. The Indian Government are controlling the emergency; they are appealing for certain kinds of help—for example, there are many military bodies, but they do not have search and rescue or listening equipment. We are complementing their capacity to bring many people into play. I will check on that matter.

Points of Order

4.4 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I gave you notice that, on 18 January, during the Opposition day debate on teacher supply and standards in education, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment moved a motion in the Prime Minister's name stating:

"there are more people training to be teachers now than at any time in the last eight years."—[*Official Report*, 18 January 2001; Vol. 361, c. 537.]

Yet in a written reply from the Minister for School Standards to my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) on 24 January, figures supplied by the Department for Education and Employment showed that in four of the past eight years, more people were training to be teachers than currently. The statement made in the Prime Minister's motion was thus wrong, Mr. Speaker, so I seek your guidance as to how we may ensure that the true position is put before the House, that that statement is corrected and that Members of the House are not misled by misinformation from Ministers.

Mr. Speaker: I believe that the hon. Lady is referring to an amendment in the name of the Prime Minister. During the debate, it was open to the hon. Lady, or any other hon. Member, to put the record straight as to the accuracy of the amendment.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You will be aware that, last Friday, the Home Secretary responded to several questions, including one that I asked on the date and time of a telephone conversation between the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien). The Home Secretary confirmed that he was not prepared

"to pre-empt the outcome of a review".—[*Official Report*, 25 January 2001; Vol. 361, c. 709W.]

That review is being conducted by Sir Anthony Hammond. Will you confirm that, on the rules for reference in debate to matters awaiting judicial decision, "Erskine May" states that such a restriction

"does not apply to *ad hoc* inquiries established by Ministers even when presided over by a judge, nor does it apply to matters referred to a departmental inquiry."?

Will you therefore confirm that there is no constraint whatever on Ministers on how they might reply to debates or parliamentary questions on the Hinduja passport application? In addition, is it in order for the Home Secretary to refuse to answer questions relating to the matter in the House on Friday, but on Sunday to answer questions relating to such conversations asked by Mr. Jonathan Dimbleby?

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman gave me notice of that point of order. I have already made it clear that the inquiry set up by the Prime Minister does not render the matter sub judice. I have also made it clear that the substance of ministerial replies is not my responsibility. The hon. Gentleman will have to find other ways in which to raise his concerns.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. I apologise for not giving you notice, but my point of order relates to the previous matter. In 1996, the House passed a motion describing the accountability of Ministers to the House. It now appears on page 63 of "Erskine May", which states:

"ministers should be as open as possible with Parliament, refusing to provide information only when disclosure would not be in the public interest, which should be decided in accordance with relevant statute, and the government's Code of Practice on Access to Government Information".

I have a copy of the code of practice on access to information, and it does indeed lay down certain conditions for confidentiality, but none relating to an inquiry set up by the Government.

Mr. Speaker, you are the guardian of our rights in this respect. Only you can make the Government comply with a motion, passed by the House in 1996, that does not give them the right to use their own inquiry as an excuse to block the scrutiny powers of hon. Members. I therefore appeal to you to enforce the letter of that motion, which we passed only a few years ago.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington) *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let me—

Mr. Campbell-Savours: On that very matter—

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let me answer that very matter.

I have ruled that the matter is not sub judice. It is up to hon. Members to keep persevering and asking questions of Ministers.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I am not allowed to say that those points of order were bogus, because that is your function, Mr. Speaker, and I cannot challenge what you wish to say. However, they were bogus. Perhaps hon. Members should recall what happened during 17 years of Tory Government, when Ministers repeatedly told us from the Dispatch Box that they could not answer parliamentary questions. Indeed, I was repeatedly blocked in the Table Office on the basis that ministerial inquiries were under way, following instructions from those in the private office, who spoke to the Clerks in the Table Office. Those points of order are totally spurious and totally bogus, and we will not be fooled.

Mr. Speaker: I am always reluctant to say that an hon. Member has raised—*[Interruption.]* Order. The hon. Gentleman asked me a question, but he is continuing to talk. I am always reluctant to say that hon. Members have raised bogus points of order, but what we heard from the hon. Gentleman was, indeed, a bogus point of order.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): My point of order is, as always, entirely genuine, Mr. Speaker. Given the growing concern about the unlawful activities of many animal rights protesters in this country, have you received any indication that a Home Office Minister wishes shortly to make a statement about the new and additional means by which the Government intend that people who are suspected of harassment, intimidation or violence can be identified and prosecuted without delay?

Mr. Speaker: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should wait for the debate.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I apologise for not giving you advance

notice of my point, but it relates to the points of order on the Hammond inquiry. It is becoming daily more clear that the reason for the resignation of the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was the insistence of a civil servant—the Prime Minister's chief press spokesman—that he must resign. If the Hammond inquiry finds that that is so, what recourse will Members have to hold an unelected civil servant to account when issues of such gravity as the resignation of a Cabinet Minister are precipitated by that civil servant?

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman puts a hypothetical question to me, and I am not in the business of answering hypothetical questions.

Orders of the Day

Criminal Justice and Police Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

Mr. Speaker: I must announce to the House that, from 7 pm to 9.30 pm, there will be a time limit on Back-Bench speeches.

4.12 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill has a simple aim: it is to aid the police and the courts in further reducing crime and the fear of crime. Crime is still too high, but we have sought to make considerable progress in reducing it. Last October's British crime survey showed that crime had fallen by 10 per cent. between 1997 and 1999, and it is worth bearing it in mind that that survey seeks to measure all crime committed against property belonging to individuals or against the person. It included a recording of a 4 per cent. reduction in violent crime overall. As we know from the recorded crime figures that were issued recently, recorded crime dropped by 7 per cent. between March 1997 and September 2000. Burglary and vehicle crime are now at their lowest levels for a decade.

No one is remotely complacent about overall levels of crime and disorder, not least against the background of the fact that crime doubled during the 1980s and early 1990s. Along with that, the proportion of people convicted of crimes fell by a third.

Mr. John Major (Huntingdon): I think that everyone is pleased to hear about the reductions in crime from 1997, but they may be equally interested to hear about the reductions in crime from 1992 onwards. They were also substantial, but, in a curious way, the figures on that have slipped out of the Home Secretary's brief for this debate.

Mr. Straw: As I recall it, the reduction in recorded crime began in 1993 and not in 1992, but I am willing to concede that point. Interestingly enough, the reduction in crime as measured by the British crime survey, which measures overall levels of crime, did not start until 1995. If the right hon. Gentleman wants, I would be very happy to trade statistics with him about what happened during his period of office and what has happened under my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. Let us take the first three and a half years of each of the last Administrations. During the first three and a half years of the Thatcher Administration, recorded crime rose by 20 per cent.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Those figures were inherited.

Mr. Straw: Certainly the inheritance of the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) was a terrible one.

During the first three and a half years of the Major Administration, crime rose by getting on for 40 per cent., whereas during the first three and a half years of my right

[Mr. Straw]

hon. Friend's Administration crime fell by 7 per cent. That is the best record of any incoming Administration for 50 years.

Mr. Major: I do not want remotely to make the Home Secretary unhappy, but he will concede that the trend had begun and continued. It is precisely because of the basis that the right hon. Gentleman inherited that he saw that continuing trend. After some years of the present Administration, crime does not seem to be falling at the same rate.

Mr. Straw: According to the most accurate measure—the British crime survey—the trend did not start until 1995. Indeed, the same statisticians who put those figures together warned me when I took office that all the demographic and economic factors were suggesting that crime would start to rise. I am pleased to say that it has not done so.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I know of the right hon. Lady's anxiety to start ranting, but will she hang on for one second? Despite the fall that occurred in the last two years of the Major Administration, all the evidence which has been published was that crime was likely to rise if we did not do something about it. I am pleased to say that we have done something about it.

Miss Widdecombe: Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm the following facts: over the last four years of the previous Conservative Administration, recorded crime fell by 16 per cent., and on the same measurement, the latest fall in crime is only 0.2 per cent? Could he listen? Since he is so fond of the British crime survey, will he please confirm that the fall measured by the most recent survey is less than that measured by the previous survey? Whereas we left steeper falls, he has presided over at best a slowing up and at worst a reverse.

Mr. Straw: I will move on to the contents of the Bill, although I accept my responsibility for putting it in context.

Miss Widdecombe: Answer the question.

Mr. Straw: I am answering the question. The right hon. Lady asks a question, usually at great length, and before one has the chance even to take a breath, she always twitters, "Answer the question." She sometimes may not like the answers, but I always do my best to answer the questions put to me—especially if I can follow them.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The Home Secretary is playing for time.

Mr. Straw: I am not playing for time in the least.

The figures are clear; I just gave them to the right hon. Member for Huntingdon. They show that, from about 1993, recorded crime fell. Crime was measured by the BCS from 1995. As we are talking about the records of Governments, it must be said that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) was a member of a Government who left two indelible marks. Even allowing for a tail-end fall, crime doubled under the previous Administration and the number of people convicted of those crimes fell by a third. That is why such public confidence in the Conservatives' efforts to make this country safe as existed in 1979 will not be restored for a very long time and why the public continue to have confidence in us.

We are about a major programme of reform and investment in the criminal justice system in order to ensure that the progress that we have made—as I say, crime is still far too high—continues at a greater pace.

We are investing 20 per cent. in cash terms over the next three years—a real increase of 12 per cent.—in policing. It will be the greatest increase for 15 years. However, with that investment, we need reform. The goal behind the Bill is to strengthen and to modernise law enforcement. The Bill contains a wide range of measures that will provide the police and others in the criminal justice system with improved powers to enable them better to enforce the law and to protect the public.

Part I deals with one of the most unpleasant aspects of modern life—the antisocial behaviour of a yobbish minority, which can all too often impinge on the quality of life of the law-abiding majority.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will allow me to make a little more progress.

The Bill gives the police new powers to issue penalty notices for a number of offences which are antisocial and which in some cases make life decidedly unpleasant for others. These offences, which are set out in the Bill, include being drunk and disorderly, and wasting the emergency services' time by making fraudulent 999 calls. Part I also targets the misuse of alcohol, especially by young people, in our society. The Bill includes a series of measures that will make it easier for local authorities to ban drinking in designated areas where it causes public nuisance or annoyance. These measures will give the police the necessary enforcement powers.

There are examples of innovative local authorities—not least Coventry and Liverpool—that have made use of existing byelaw powers to ban on-street drinking. However, as I discovered when I received representations about 18 months ago from an individual police officer who is responsible for drafting byelaws, the current process for obtaining clearance is rather convoluted.

We have therefore sought to establish a clear framework of powers that devolves decisions to local authorities. They will not have to go backwards and forwards to the Home Office to check whether the drafting is in order. If they wish in this context to designate an area within their town or city centre and to make use of on-street alcohol bans, they will be able to do so without going through the bureaucracy of coming back to the Home Office. I think that that will be widely welcomed.

Mr. Baldry: What is the point of the Government's bringing forward fresh legislation to deal with antisocial

behaviour when their last flagship Bill providing for antisocial behaviour orders led to legislation that is not working? Should not the long title of this Bill read, "We are approaching a general election and we should be seen to be doing something about crime"?

Mr. Straw: That is an absurd remark. The use of antisocial behaviour orders is working in my constituency, as it is in Hyndburn and Preston. More than 150 orders have been issued in large cities and in smaller shire districts. The hon. Gentleman asked a more serious question when we last debated ASBOs. Some local authorities said, "We cannot use them because they involve the criminal process." The Lord Chief Justice—I took the trouble to write to the hon. Gentleman about the decision—has made it clear in an important judgment of the divisional court that the process for obtaining antisocial behaviour orders is, as Parliament intended, a civil process, and one which is there to be used.

Mr. Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth): At a conference that I chaired and at which my hon. Friend the Minister of State spoke the other week, the enthusiasm of people within the system—the police, local authorities and others—for getting on with the job and using the tools provided in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 was palpable. People were keen to understand why antisocial behaviour orders had not been sufficiently used, and recognised that they now need to be used properly.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that intervention and for the work that he did in ensuring that the 1998 Act reached the statute book.

Other measures—

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will allow me to make progress, as many hon. Members wish to speak. There will be other opportunities later in the debate and in Committee.

Other powers will permit the police immediately to close disorderly or excessively noisy pubs and clubs, and to prevent unlicensed premises from reopening following police action to arrest offenders.

There are new provisions to deal with under-age drinking, which require those selling alcohol to check the age of young people who may be, or appear to be, under 18. The police and local authorities will also be permitted to use young people to test-purchase to check that the law is being obeyed.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I want to ask the Home Secretary about test purchases. Many of my constituents feel that under-age drinking is fuelling much of the yob behaviour in my constituency. Just how soon will the police and trading standards officers have those new powers to authorise test purchases?

Mr. Straw: As soon as the Bill goes on the statute book, which I very much hope will be within a matter of months. I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. There is little doubt in my mind that much—although not all—of the serious antisocial behaviour that takes place in our town and city centres, and in many residential areas as well, is almost literally fuelled by serious under-age drinking.

I am sure that I speak for the whole House—except those brought up in teetotal families, of which mine was not one—in saying that, to a degree, under-age drinking has been around as long as the licensing laws, but the problem has got very much worse in terms of the quantity of drink, and particularly the quantity of spirits, drunk by youngsters these days. The way in which plainly under-age youngsters are being targeted by the alcohol industry is a growing problem.

Mr. Malins *rose—*

Mr. Straw: Will the hon. Gentleman allow me to make progress?

Mr. Malins: The right hon. Gentleman never gives way to me.

Mr. Straw: That is simply not true, but if the hon. Gentleman carries on saying that, I shall certainly not give way to him. I promise to give way to him in a moment.

Measures aimed at ensuring responsible behaviour by those selling alcohol will extend to all those working in pubs, rather than simply the licensee. I shall give way to the hon. Member for Woking (Mr. Malins).

Mr. Malins: I am most grateful to the Home Secretary, and take back everything that I said about him: he is very generous.

Most of the offences in the preamble to the Bill tend to be committed by under-18s. The real problem is with under-18s behaving in that way, wasting police time with phone calls and so on. But am I not right in thinking that the Bill does not apply to under-18s; that the penalties are only for over-18s; and that a great section of our youngsters are excluded from its provisions?

Mr. Straw: At the moment—

Mr. Malins: At the moment.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman has caught an infection from his right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald. He asks a question, wants an explanation and then offers me the answer before I have got it out. As drafted, the Bill's provisions on fixed-penalty notices—not other matters—apply to those who are over 18. We are happy to hear opinions from hon. Members on both sides of the House on that matter.

A balanced judgment was taken as to whether we should have fixed-penalty notices for 16 and 17-year-olds. However, the reforms to the youth justice system introduced under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 are already on the statute book and working well, as I can testify. Until now, the opinion that we have received is that, on balance—I am not suggesting that this is a unanimous view—it is better to stick with those provisions, which are working well, rather than extend fixed-penalty notices down. However, I am open to argument and am happy to listen to the views of the hon. Member for Woking.

[Mr. Straw]

We have already heard about the Crime and Disorder Act, which established a wide range of measures and reforms primarily for dealing with low-level criminality, including ASBOs. Those orders are intended for use against those who are severely disruptive to their communities, and who do not heed repeated warnings unless they are backed by the threat of criminal charges. As I said, ASBOs have been very successful, with 150 granted already and many more applications in the pipeline. Conservative Members who disagree should look at the areas in which ASBOs have been successful. I should be interested to learn whether at the election—whenever that takes place—they will abolish that key tool, which helps to deal with a matter that they never dealt with in power.

By definition, those targeted by ASBOs will also be likely to resort to intimidation if there is a prospect of members of the public giving evidence against them in court proceedings or providing information for use in those proceedings. The Bill therefore extends to witnesses in other court proceedings, such as civil proceedings, the existing protection afforded by statute law to witnesses in criminal proceedings. It will make it a criminal offence to intimidate those giving evidence in civil proceedings, including a hearing on an ASBO.

As I have explained, the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 set in motion radical reform of the youth justice system, featuring youth offending teams and a series of new orders that have been rolled out over the past two years. These measures are working extremely well overall: to date, some 7,814 orders under the Crime and Disorder Act and directly in respect of juveniles have been issued. That includes more than 200 parenting orders, about which there was scepticism when they were introduced, but which have worked well.

In addition to those orders, which have been successful, the 1998 Act introduced local child curfew schemes. At the time when that Act was debated, there was a view that those schemes would be more effective if extended to those under the age of 16, instead of to those under the age of 10, as the Act provides. Clause 43 of the Bill does just that, allowing curfews to be imposed on children up to the age of 15. It also enables police, as well as local authorities, to impose curfew schemes. We believe that these changes will increase the flexibility and use of curfew schemes, thereby helping to curb antisocial behaviour by children and young people.

A similar scheme in Scotland, the Hamilton child safety initiative in respect of children up to the age of 16, has operated successfully. Under the scheme, the police removed children from the "street environment" in what were perceived to be potentially harmful situations. Following the introduction of the scheme, 87 per cent. of parents of children returned home by police approved of the initiative. Crime and disorder complaints fell by 23 per cent. and crime associated with juveniles, including theft and vandalism, fell by 49 per cent. We have studied the experience in Hamilton to see how the scheme for England and Wales can be improved.

In the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 we took powers in respect of truants, and proposed a similar, although not the same, power for what have come to be called truancy sweeps, allowing the police and the local education service to pick up kids who have been truanting and take them back to school or other appropriate accommodation. Again, there was scepticism when we proposed the powers, but they have been used in many parts of the country, including my constituency, and have proved extremely effective, both in getting kids back to school and in ensuring that fewer of those kids commit crime when they should be at school.

The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), and I have received many representations urging us to make two serious acts of criminality—kerb crawling and hit and run—arrestable offences. Kerb crawling is a crime already. The practice of kerb crawling can seriously disrupt and disfigure communities, but the police lack the power to arrest offenders and therefore lack the power to take DNA samples from them. In respect of hit-and-run drivers, the police do not have a general power to arrest them, which can often lead to drivers who have committed quite serious offences fleeing successfully from the scene of crime and not being susceptible to immediate apprehension.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. The inclusion of the measure to make kerb crawling an arrestable offence has been warmly welcomed by the police and by local residents in my constituency. Both groups have said that it is an excellent example of the Government responding to the needs of people in an area where kerb crawling is a big problem. The only concern that has been raised relates to the strength of the penalties, particularly for persistent kerb crawlers. Will my right hon. Friend comment on the range of penalties that will be available to the courts?

Mr. Straw: I am glad to hear that the change has been welcomed by my hon. Friend's constituents. On penalties, I do not have the answer immediately to hand, but I am happy to examine the adequacy of the penalties.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I wanted to catch the Home Secretary before he left the subject of child curfews and other general responses. Given that, by my calculation, we had 19 crime or police Bills during 18 years of Tory rule, and this is the seventh such Bill under almost four years of Labour rule, I do not take the simplistic view of the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) that a bit of legislation suddenly produces a reduction in crime. The situation is much more complex than that.

Fixed-penalty notices, child curfews and the proposals for extending the right to hold DNA samples are extremely controversial, and arguably not likely to be effective. Instead of setting out countrywide powers, as the Bill proposes, would it not have been better for the Government to pilot some of the proposals to see whether they work, and to present Parliament with measures that are not just ideas that sound good but ideas that might do good?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman raised three different issues. First, curfews do not need to be piloted because it is for individual local authorities to decide whether to use them. They are based on a discretionary power, so one would have assumed that they would appeal to the

Liberals. We thought about piloting curfews—my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) will remember this—but we decided that it is almost logically impossible to pilot a scheme that depends on a local initiative.

Secondly, there is an argument for the piloting of fixed-penalty notices. After undertaking a consultation process, we came down on one side of that argument and decided not to introduce such pilots. However, we are not saying that the arguments favour only one view: we remain open minded.

Thirdly, the hon. Gentleman mentioned DNA. When suspects' rights are being dealt with, a single system must apply throughout the country. I do not see any basis for pilots. It would be different if the technology was not quite right, but it clearly works no matter where it is used.

The provisions that I have outlined so far deal primarily with relatively low-level crime. None the less, they deal with activities that can disfigure communities. Such behaviour can be profoundly disruptive and distressing and can lead to more serious offending if it is not checked.

The Bill's other provisions are aimed at more serious and organised crime. For example, it gives the courts power to confiscate the passports of convicted drug traffickers, which will restrict them from travelling overseas to continue their illegal trade after they have been released from custody—if such was the sentence that they received.

Part VII contains an important provision on the granting of bail. Like other hon. Members, I have received many representations from police officers who are concerned about bail. Sometimes, they have spent weeks bringing prolific offenders to court only for them to be granted bail and return to the streets to reoffend. It is not only magistrates' right, but their duty, to grant bail where they think it appropriate. Equally, however, it is their duty not to do so where all the evidence favours a remand in custody. The Bill seeks to encourage a responsible approach to the granting of bail by amending the Bail Act 1976 to require courts to give reasons for granting bail where the prosecutor makes representations against doing so.

Parts II and III include measures to strengthen the powers of law enforcement agencies. Part II deals with the disclosure of confidential information for the purposes of criminal investigations and procedures. It tidies up disclosure provisions in the 74 measures set out in schedule 1, which are diverse enough to include the National Savings Bank Act 1971 and the Diseases of Fish Act 1983. Part II also provides a statutory power for the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise to disclose information to other law enforcement agencies. That will allow a reciprocal flow of information between those bodies, the police and the National Criminal Intelligence Service.

Part III will further bolster the powers of law enforcement agencies by modernising powers of seizure. The Bill gives the police and other law enforcement agencies powers to seize material and remove it for sifting elsewhere. The new measures address two separate issues. They deal with the problems identified in the Bramley judgment, which brought into focus the difficulties faced by the police and other investigators when the material that they are entitled to seize is mixed with a collection of material to which that entitlement does not apply. Sometimes, those investigating a crime may not know to which part their entitlement applies, especially when the material is stored electronically. In the Bramley judgment, the divisional court recognised the defect in the law, but said that it could be overcome only by making changes in primary legislation. The Bill removes those difficulties by giving police and other law enforcement agencies power to remove material from premises for examination where constraints of time or technology make it not reasonably possible to carry out the process on the premises.

In part IV, significant changes are made to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. One of the most important types of evidence used by the police in a wide range of criminal cases today comes from DNA samples. We have extended, in practice, this scope and use of DNA by substantial investment in the forensic science service and in the availability of scenes-of-crime officers. The police, in turn, are using DNA testing not only for very serious crimes but as a way of identifying prolific offenders such as burglars and car criminals.

In almost every criminal case, the first and overwhelming question before the police and the courts is the identity of the person who committed the offence. Who was it? Before the turn of the last century, when the first fingerprint standard was agreed by New Scotland Yard, identity could be established only through the testimony of witnesses or through the accused's confession. Over the past 100 years, science and technology has come to the aid of justice, moving in fingerprinting from visual comparisons of images on paper to digital capture and searching, with the ability to make more than 1 million fingerprint comparisons every second. However, the use of DNA profiling—first developed in 1985 and, happily, in this country—offered the most important forensic advance of the late 20th century.

DNA profiling is a very powerful tool—an objective form of evidence. Its values lies as much, if not more, in its ability to exclude the innocent as in its ability to convict the guilty. When the police investigate a case, if they do not proceed with a prosecution or the suspect is acquitted, they routinely retain all the records of the investigation, including the notes of interviews with suspects and other interviews. That has always been the case. The police would not dream of throwing away their memory on the offchance that the offender may or may not commit a further offence. Yet the law requires that the most objective and powerful forms of evidence—fingerprints and DNA—have to be destroyed if a conviction does not follow from the taking of the sample in question.

This has already led to serious miscarriages of justice. In two recent cases, R *v.* B and R *v.* Weir, compelling DNA evidence that linked one suspect to a rape and the other to a murder could not be used, and neither suspect could be convicted, because it turned out that at the time when the matches were made, the defendants had either been acquitted of another crime, or a decision had been made not to proceed with the offences for which the DNA profiles were originally taken. Under the existing provisions, the profiles should have been destroyed.

Those who believe that we should leave the law as it is, following the decision of the Law Lords in the case of R *v.* B, should, I suggest, look at the narrative of Lord Steyn in that case. Their lordships sought to bring the law as near as possible to common sense without actually

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[Mr. Straw]

murdering the text of the statute, but they could not go the whole way. Lord Steyn pointed out that there were added injustices in the R *v.* B case. First, it was unjust to the victim and the community that compelling evidence against this man could not be used to convict him when everyone knew it existed. Secondly, the man was able to escape that conviction altogether only because of another trick—another offence—that he had played on the police. It turned out subsequently that, at the time of his arrest on this charge, he had already been convicted of affray. Had the DNA technology been available and in use when he was arrested on that affray charge and subsequently convicted, it would have been perfectly lawful to take a DNA sample from him and for that to remain on the record for ever. However, the sample was not taken.

As the law stands, to deal with such situations, when someone is convicted of an offence and a sample that could have been taken is not taken and he is arrested in respect of another offence, the police have powers to take a sample at that stage and retain it for ever. That should have happened in this case. If it had, there would subsequently have been a conviction for rape. However, the police did not know—and could not have known—of the original conviction because the defendant gave a false name, which put them off the trail for some time.

I accept that the use of DNA and fingerprinting must be carefully controlled, precisely because they are powerful tools. However, anyone who has visited a forensic service science laboratory, as I have, and seen the huge care that is taken, will know that it is virtually impossible for any scientist to know whether a sample is to be used to identify a suspect or a victim, and will appreciate the substantial safeguards that are in place. Furthermore, an important role is played by defence counsel in challenging the integrity of the lifting of samples at a scene of crime—by definition, a less controlled environment—and such issues sometimes have to be challenged by the courts.

Taking all those arguments together, I believe that the current state of the law is wholly unsatisfactory. We cannot continue to have cases such as that in which a man commits an act of violence—an affray—then a burglary, and then—as compelling evidence suggests—a rape. Such people cannot be allowed to continue to play games with the technicalities of the law, while rape victims go in fear of further crimes being committed by the person against whom compelling evidence exists to show that they committed a rape. The other case in question was a murder case—the most serious crime in the criminal calendar.

I say to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) that the Bill is far from controversial. I notice that the briefing submitted by Liberty is very sotto voce and without a great deal of conviction on the issue. The public are ready for this change, as are the police and the victims' organisations.

We propose that, when a DNA sample is taken lawfully from a suspect—not under conditions of false imprisonment—it should remain available to the police, whatever happens at a later date in terms of a conviction or otherwise. We also propose separate changes in respect of the volunteering of DNA samples. The Law Society's briefing on this proposal was rather muddled. In many cases—in which innocent people have been eliminated from inquiries and guilty people identified—the police have gone to all the men in a village and asked them to volunteer a DNA sample. At present, the police have to destroy those samples even if the volunteers say, "For God's sake, please keep the sample. I have nothing to fear."

In one such case, the present law caused immense problems. A serial rapist was operating and the police could not catch him as a result of their first investigation, so they had to destroy all the samples that they had collected. The man struck again, and the police had to go back to the volunteers to obtain further samples. They did not catch him that time either, so those samples also had to be destroyed, and further ones subsequently collected. In my judgment, and that of the police, that is ridiculous. Yes, the volunteers should have an absolute right to say, "You can use this sample only for this inquiry. You must destroy it afterwards." That should be the end of the matter. However, if the volunteers want to say, "Keep it," as I think most of them would, the law should allow that to happen, as we propose.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion) *rose—*

Mr. Simon Hughes *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I have already given way, and I want to make progress.

I have not yet dealt with one important aspect of the Bill, which is the issue of animal rights, which has caused considerable concern among right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House. I have already set out my views, but I shall briefly reiterate them. Peaceful protest is, of course, acceptable. However, seeking to disrupt, frighten and harass other individuals and their lawful businesses by the means that so-called animal rights people adopt is totally unacceptable in the kind of society that we want.

Some people have hesitations about this matter, so I want to place on record my personal thanks and admiration for the very difficult work undertaken by those who conduct research on animals. None of the people who conduct such research like doing it. They all wish that alternatives were available, and as soon as they are—and have attained an acceptable standard—those people will be the first to move away from those procedures and to start using procedures that do not involve animals.

The experiments are conducted in this country under legislation passed by the previous Administration, with which we have continued, in a regime that is tougher than any other in the western world that I know of. The consequences of being able to conduct such research are that a range of drugs and other procedures are now available that have ensured that many of us—including, I might say, myself—are able to lead a decent life, and that many people's lives have been extended. Many would simply have died were such drug therapy not available—no doubt many of those who masquerade as animal rights protesters among them.

Protecting such research is not an incidental, but of profound importance. For that reason, thanks to representations from the right hon. Members for Huntingdon and for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell), I quickly agreed that

Cambridgeshire constabulary, which is a small force, should receive an extra £1 million for this year to recognise the additional, and what all of us believe to be otherwise unnecessary, costs of having to police those terrible protests.

Furthermore, I told the House that we would conduct urgent consultations about changing the law. Those changes are not in the Bill for reasons that the House will understand. We are urgently consulting on two matters. One is a change to section 14 of the Public Order Act 1986, which would make it an offence for people—even an individual—to protest outside people's houses. I have been on loads of protests, but I have never considered that any part of peaceful protest requires people to protest outside other people's private houses. When I was on demonstrations, we wanted to protest in the main street. Protesting outside people's houses is an outrageous piece of harassment. We have to deal with that.

The second change is to make the test in the malicious communications offences objective, not one that essentially allows people who send malicious communications to escape because the defence is subjective.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Straw: If I may, I shall give way to the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): I thank the Home Secretary: when he spoke about those who work in animal research institutions, he spoke for the whole House. I also thank him for redeeming the promise to introduce legislation, which will be extremely important to constituents of mine and of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) whose properties have been fire-bombed. They have been harassed and intimidated in a quite disgraceful way. Will the Home Secretary be kind enough to make every effort to introduce the proposals in Committee so that they can be considered in depth rather than on Report, when there will be less opportunity?

Mr. Straw: The answer is, yes, I promise to do my best to do so, although the right hon. Gentleman is perhaps more familiar with the legislative process than I, and we are already consulting. We are very open about the consultation and want it to continue.

I do not happen to know people in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency or that of the right hon. Member for Huntingdon who have been involved, but I do happen to know those who were involved in similar animal experimentation in Oxfordshire. The distress caused to decent, law-abiding people is just unbelievable. Most Members of the House are willing to put up with a bit of protest against them. Certainly those in posts such as mine know that that is par for the course, but it is not par for the course for decent people who are not in public life and just want to go about their business.

Mr. Major: I hope to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to speak about this matter at greater length, but it might be appropriate to put on record my unambiguous thanks to the Home Secretary for obtaining the money from the Treasury, which is not lightly done. No Chief Secretary lightly coughs up money; if he does so, he should not be Chief Secretary.

I also thank the Home Secretary for his willingness to accept representations about changing the law and to introduce such changes. I have more representations to make to him—some this afternoon, some later—but I say on behalf of my constituents that that willingness has been well received. The right hon. Gentleman has been supportive of the work that goes on both in helping to meet the extra policing costs caused by the demonstrations and in his determination to change the law—through the Bill, I hope.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend—I mean the right hon. Gentleman. He is a personal friend, but that is another matter.

I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): May I say how warmly my right hon. Friend's remarks will be welcomed in my constituency? My constituents include not only people who work at Huntingdon Life Sciences, but many scientists who work with animals on medical research. During the last week I have received more than 50 letters and e-mails from scientists, some of whom have been so intimidated and harassed that they have been afraid to put their addresses on the letters. I am very pleased about my right hon. Friend's determination to tackle this difficult situation.

Mr. Straw: This is easy enough to say, but I hope that those people will withstand the intimidation as best they can.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: I hope the hon. Gentleman will excuse me if I do not. I have been speaking for more than 40 minutes, and I want to finish my speech.

The Bill provides for a number of improvements in the training organisation of the police service, and includes other important measures. It draws together proposals to modernise a wide range of powers for the police, the courts and other law enforcement agencies. It also seeks to make changes relating to the funding and organisation of the National Criminal Intelligence Service and the National Crime Squad. Overall, it seeks to enable those services to perform more effectively, and to tackle criminal behaviour better in the 21st century.

I believe that the Bill will substantially improve the tools available to those in the front line of the battle against crime and disorder, and I commend it to the House.

4.57 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Let me make it clear—as my predecessors and I have done on other occasions during this Parliament—that, unlike the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary when they were in opposition, we always seek to give a fair wind to law and order measures if they are sensible. Although we have some reservations about parts of the Bill, therefore, we shall not divide the House at this stage. That does not mean, however, that we are content with the detail of all the measures proposed.

[Miss Ann Widdecombe]

Last March, on Second Reading of the Bill that became the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000, the Home Secretary himself stated:

"As I have said before, no Bill that I have taken through the House has been perfect in all its particulars."—[*Official Report*, 28 March 2000; Vol. 347, c. 227.]

Indeed, had it not been for the Opposition's attention to detail, that Bill would have gone through Parliament without the important amendments that were made to it—amendments that, for instance, introduced tougher sentences for child pornography offences, and made those who deal drugs to children subject to disqualification from working with them. Those are just two examples of the numerous Opposition amendments that the Government eventually accepted. I hope that the Home Secretary will view all the amendments tabled by the Opposition to this Bill in the constructive spirit in which they will be proposed, because the Bill is by no means perfect as it stands.

Mr. Straw: Never perfect.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): That should be the title of his autobiography.

Miss Widdecombe: It has been suggested that that might be the title of the Home Secretary's autobiography. I would not normally repeat sedentary interventions, but I could not resist that one.

We have three main areas of concern. The first relates to what the Bill does not do. That is especially important, because this will certainly be our last opportunity to enact criminal justice legislation in the current Parliament.

The Bill is devoid of measures to tackle the wave of violent crime that is sweeping the country under this Government. It contains little to improve the rights and position of victims in the criminal justice system. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members think violent crime is funny: perhaps their constituents will note that.

The Bill contains nothing to improve the morale of the police, which is at rock bottom. The Home Secretary—no doubt at the Prime Minister's request—has included what he describes as headline-grabbing measures, but the approach, mirroring that of the Prime Minister, is more spin than substance.

We know from recent events that Ministers cannot remember everything, but the Home Secretary clearly takes pride in his own powers of recall. He will therefore doubtless remember his flagship consultation on the reform of the law against violent crime, a document issued as long ago as February 1998. The Home Secretary cannot claim to have undersold those proposals, describing them at the time as

"the Government's proposals for reforming out-moded and unclear Victorian legislation."

I used the word "flagship" because that is the word that the Home Secretary himself used in his foreword to the consultation paper. Indeed, he was so keen to associate himself with those proposals that they were presented next to a photograph of him, with his own signature at the bottom.

The introduction to the document stated that the law in this sphere was

"in urgent need of reform";

and that:

"It is . . . particularly important that the law governing such behaviour should be robust, clear and well understood . . . That is what the draft Bill contained in this consultation paper does. It is intended to help not only practitioners of the law but anyone who finds themselves involved in court cases, whether as a defendant, victim or witness."

Given the importance attached to those proposals three years ago, the fact that consultation on them closed in May 1998 and the fact that a draft Bill emerged during the consultation, can the right hon. Gentleman tell the House what has happened to them? He himself has said that offences of violence are

"the offences that most worry people".

At a time when violent crime is soaring—to the amusement of Labour Members—and the Government have themselves said that they have measures available to strengthen the law in this area, it does seem odd that, instead of those proposals on violent crime, we end up with a rather pick-and-mix Bill of which the centrepieces are the proposals from the right hon. Gentleman to salvage his failed child curfew schemes and the Prime Minister's now infamous £100 cashpoint fines for drunks.

That brings me to the first major issue in the Bill—fixed-penalty notices, which are there to spare the Prime Minister's blushes after the disastrous reception that his £100 cashpoint fines idea received in July 2000. The House will know that I am not opposed in principle to fixed-penalty notices—

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Lady has paid one herself.

Miss Widdecombe: Yes—unlike the right hon. Gentleman, who gets others to do his speeding for him.

We shall want detailed consideration in Committee of the way in which it is proposed that those fines will operate. In particular—this is our second major concern about the Bill—we must ensure that the system does not add to the bureaucratic burdens on police, and also that it is properly targeted.

Clause 8 appears to require the constable issuing a fixed-penalty notice to take the offender to a police station and provide a full witness statement with that notice, which will obviously have implications for police time. In that respect at least, the proposals are not similar to tickets for minor parking or speeding offences. I know that the Police Superintendents Association and the Police Federation have concerns about that particular point. The Justices' Clerks Society has also highlighted difficulties, not least with identification and the giving of false details to police.

Those are some of the procedural issues that have been raised already about the Bill's contents. How is a police officer going to know whether someone to whom he has given a fixed-penalty notice has had perhaps 10 or a dozen notices issued for the same offence in other parts of the country? Will there be a central record of such notices? What recourse will victims of criminal damage have if offenders are given fixed-penalty notices rather than being prosecuted? Will they still be able to obtain compensation through the courts?

The fixed-penalty provisions will now apply only to adults rather than to the over-16s, as originally envisaged. I note that the Home Office consultation paper said:

"A significant amount of disorderly behaviour in public places is committed by people under the age of 18."

I am therefore somewhat surprised that the Government have targeted their fixed-penalty fines—which will apply only to over-18s—at offences such as hoax 999 calls, trespassing on the railway, throwing stones at trains and spray-painting graffiti, when it is certainly the general impression that most of those offences are committed by juveniles rather than by adults.

As far as the proposals for alcohol-free zones are concerned, they appear, at first glance, to be little more than an extension of what is available to councils at the moment in the terms of byelaws. I would be grateful for clarification on that point. What is new about this? What is the power that is not already available to councils? We have concerns about the proposed procedures for imposing those bans, which are not specified in the Bill. Would an elected mayor, an individual executive member or even a council official with delegated authority be able to impose such a ban, perhaps by using the "behind closed doors" provisions of the Government's legislation, which encourages more secrecy in local decision making? Surely decisions such as that are best left to an open and accountable forum.

Perhaps the most crucial element in deciding whether or not the measure is effective will be the number of police officers putting it into effect. Given that the chairman of the Police Federation says that there is

a sense of disorder and anarchy on our streets,

that police numbers have fallen by more than 2,500 under the Government, and that violent crime is rising so alarmingly, will the police have the manpower or the time to enforce these bans effectively, in addition to issuing fixed-penalty notices and enforcing child curfew orders, especially if local authorities begin making them in large numbers?

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): Does the right hon. Lady accept that the experience in my constituency is not that police officers are not present when disorder occurs, but that they do not have the relevant powers to deal with some of these issues? It is primarily not a matter of police numbers but of what officers can do when they come across problems.

Miss Widdecombe: I must disagree with the hon. Lady, although I appreciate what is behind her point. If the police are dealing with one thing, they cannot be dealing with others. I went out recently with police in central London on a Friday night patrol, and the issue was not that they did not have the powers. It was that there were simply so many things that they might have investigated that they had to prioritise because there were too few officers. If extra powers are given to the police, will they be used if there are not enough officers, or if any extra numbers are deploying their time not on the streets, but in bureaucracy at the station? That is a valid point.

Mr. Michael: Does the right hon. Lady acknowledge that the police spend a great deal of time re-dealing with the same issue time and time again because they are not able to nip things in the bud? That is why the targeted powers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) has pointed out, strengthen the position of the police, rather than waste their resources.

Miss Widdecombe: Theoretically, giving the police extra powers is usually helpful; in fact, it is nearly always helpful. However, the issue is whether there are enough officers and whether they have the time to be able to use their powers effectively. A clear example is the child curfew power; there has not been a single such order in the 28 months that they have been available. Yes, extra activity may be available to the police, but will it be possible, given the numbers we have at the moment?

Mr. Michael: But does the right hon. Lady—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I must tell the right hon. Gentleman that the right hon. Lady has not yet given way to him.

Miss Widdecombe: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman, but he must take into account the fact that 10 out of 12 offences committed in this field are already arrestable.

Mr. Michael: Does the right hon. Lady acknowledge that many members of the public who approach police officers on these issues are told that there is nothing that the police can do because they do not have a power that they can use in practice? That is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is right to introduce the power.

Miss Widdecombe: What the police say is that there are not enough of them to do the job. If 10 of the 12 offences are already arrestable, it cannot be that the police do not have powers of arrest. It is simply the case that there are not enough of them.

It would be helpful if the Government clarified how it is intended that the new police powers to close licensed premises are to work. The industry is concerned that the Home Office estimate of the annual cost of the proposals to business varies from £1.1 million to £60 million. The Home Secretary looks confused; his memory has failed him for once. He should look at his own regulatory impact assessment.

Mr. Heald: Page 68.

Miss Widdecombe: I thank my hon. Friend. I admit that I did not remember the precise page on which the figures are to be found.

That wide range of costs suggests that the Government have not yet worked out exactly how the powers are to be implemented in practice. The trade is also concerned that new duties are being imposed on licensees in relation to underage drinking, but no new offence of attempting to purchase alcohol when under 18 is being created. It is an offence to purchase it, but not to attempt to purchase it. Why have the Government chosen not to go down that route? There may be good reasons, but we need to hear them.

I wholly understand why test purchasing is desirable, but I hope that we can have an assurance that it will not be used unfairly, and that any child taking part in such an operation will be fairly easily identifiable as under 18.

[Miss Widdecombe]

Clause 43 contains the Home Secretary's latest desperate attempt to salvage his failed child curfews. He is in a hole and he just keeps digging. I remind the House of what was said on page 23 of the Labour party manifesto:

"Child protection orders will deal with young children suffering neglect by parents because they are left out on their own far too late at night."

The Home Secretary himself said that the powers would

"protect children under 10 from being drawn into crime"

and

"serve the dual purpose of protecting the community and young children."

In fact, as I have just said, in the 28 months since those powers came into force, not one order has been made; not one child, left out on its own far too late at night, has been rescued; not one community has been protected, contrary to the Home Secretary's promise.

When my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) suggested three years ago upping the age limit, in Committee on the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, the then Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), vigorously opposed it, yet now the Home Secretary himself is proposing it.

The problems that were identified three years ago with the orders applying to the under-10s, which have perhaps contributed to the failure of the policy to date, apply equally to the proposals in the Bill. How are the police to sort out, in a group of 15 and 16-year-olds, exactly who is 15 and who is 16? I am sure that the Home Secretary will admit that some 15-year-olds these days can look as if they are in their early 20s.

The Home Office has admitted that such a problem exists, as shown by the following quotation:

"There is always a difficulty for the police in determining age . . . Simply raising the limit would not remove the problem, but would change its focus."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee B*, 12 May 1998; c. 297.]

Those are the words of the then Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth. Perhaps the Home Secretary or the current Minister of State could address the problem that he so ably outlined.

As the Home Secretary's statement implies, the efficacy of the policy depends on the number of police officers available to enforce it. Labour's most senior councillor, the chairman of the Local Government Association, Sir Jeremy Beecham, in an article entitled "Yob Crackdown Doomed to Fail: New Curfew Plans based on powers never used in the North", published in the Newcastle *Journal* last month, said:

"The move . . . is unlikely to be used . . . curfews are not the most important thing that could be done."

Perhaps the final word should go to the Prime Minister, who described these powers, when first proposed in 1996 by the now Home Secretary, as "eminently sensible"—another eloquent comment on his judgment.

I acknowledge that clauses 80 and 81, relating to DNA and fingerprints, provide that those who give their samples voluntarily—for example, in a mass screening exercise in high-profile murder cases, as the Home Secretary said, or in cases involving serious sex offences or offences against children—will have to provide consent in writing for the retention and further use of those samples.

I hope that the Home Secretary will be able to assure us once more that the clauses genuinely provide for informed consent, and that those who are tested will be told when they make their decision the exact way in which their samples will be used. That is especially important when dealing with those who may be vulnerable or lacking in mental capacity. Such people are screened in mass screenings.

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Lady makes an important point, and I am happy to give the assurance that she seeks. The use of the powers depends on people coming forward voluntarily, and it is therefore important to maintain public confidence in the system. That must include giving clear information about people's rights when they initially volunteer.

Miss Widdecombe: We shall test that in Committee, but I am grateful for that assurance in principle. Before the Home Secretary intervened, I said that such an assurance was especially important when dealing with those who may be vulnerable or lacking in mental capacity. I hope that the provisions will not be drafted in such a way as to discourage people from coming forward voluntarily to take part in large-scale testing or to eliminate themselves from inquiries.

There is anxiety about the civil liberties implications of the proposal in clause 81 to allow the police to retain DNA samples without consent, even when a person has been found not guilty or when a prosecution has not taken place. Many people and organisations have expressed profound anxieties about that. The Home Secretary tried hard in his opening speech to dispel some of the doubts. Many of his comments are reassuring if the provision is used in the restricted way that he outlined. However, it will require further consideration in Committee, and I flag that up to the right hon. Gentleman now.

The Home Secretary and I—and, I suspect, most hon. Members—agree that the advances in DNA technology over recent years, and the DNA database that was set up under the previous Administration, have provided the police with an important tool in the fight against crime. We should therefore be extra careful before writing into law any measures that might adversely affect public confidence in the use of DNA by the police. I hope that the Home Secretary acknowledges that, and that we shall have a constructive debate on the matter in Committee.

There are also civil liberties concerns about the proposals on Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise records. It has been pointed out that a court order is required for the release of much confidential information which most people would regard as privileged. We want assurances from the Home Secretary that disclosure will take place only when it is manifestly required in connection with a serious investigation.

Will the Home Secretary also tackle the anxieties of the Confederation of British Industry? It fears that disclosure to overseas anti-trust authorities of information held by the Office of Fair Trading could lead to criminal anti-trust proceedings in other countries where competition laws are enforced in the criminal courts on a different basis.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Does the right hon. Lady object to the transfer of

information between the Department of Social Security and other Departments about social security fraud? How is the problem that she outlines different from that?

Miss Widdecombe: I have not objected in principle to the provision. I do not object in principle to the transfer of information between Departments. Indeed, I applaud it. I have often wished that rather more of it could be done and that it was more effective. I am raising a specific issue, to which the CBI drew attention, about the way in which information is transferred to other countries, where people might be vulnerable to prosecution because the law is different from ours. There might be a perfectly good answer that might reassure us. Even without one, however, the benefits may outweigh the disadvantages. However, we would be wholly lacking in our duty if we did not consider a major concern raised by the CBI. I did not say, "Will the right hon. Gentleman abandon his proposals?" I asked him to address the concerns expressed by the CBI. I should have thought that the answer to that was yes.

The Bill also provides the opportunity, by way of amendment, to tackle violence and intimidation against scientists and staff at facilities such as the Huntingdon Life Sciences laboratory and other research centres throughout the country. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman—as are Members on both sides of the House—for the announcement that he made in that respect. However, will he also comment on the report in *The Times* today, which states:

"Measures drawn up by . . . the Home Secretary . . . will address only four of the main 20 tactics used to intimidate researchers"?

Is he considering further the representations made to him by the Research Defence Society for even stronger action to prevent the harassment and violence to which workers at those facilities have been subjected? Perhaps the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), will be able to clarify the situation when he winds up the debate.

Today is the second anniversary of the introduction of the Home Secretary's special early release scheme—the home detention curfew programme—that has seen more than 30,000 convicted criminals released from prison before they served even half their sentence. That fact is far more indicative of the right hon. Gentleman's attitude towards crime and the criminals who commit it than any of his protestations about being "tough on crime", either today or previously.

The right hon. Gentleman says that he wants to tackle disorderly conduct on our streets—but he has let out of prison thousands of offenders convicted of violent disorder, affray, aggravated bodily harm and grievous bodily harm before they served even half the sentence imposed by the courts. The right hon. Gentleman says that he wants to crack down on drug dealers and traffickers by handing out travel restriction orders—but his promises ring hollow when we know that, under his scheme, he has released 4,000 drug dealers and traffickers early. He says that he supports the police, yet under his policy more than 200 criminals convicted and sent to prison for assaulting police officers have been let out early.

That the Bill contains no provisions to ameliorate the worst excesses of that scheme—or, indeed, to abolish it altogether—is yet another indictment of the approach taken by the right hon. Gentleman. We shall introduce such provisions in Committee, on Report and, if necessary, in another place.

The Opposition will give the right hon. Gentleman the chance to admit his mistakes and to amend his Bill. However, we know—and, I suspect, the Home Secretary is even now beginning to realise—that the country will not be so ready to give him a second chance on polling day. The people of this country—having seen the effect of the right hon. Gentleman's policies—will make the ultimate amendment.

5.23 pm

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Apart from that final peroration and rant, it is disconcerting to follow so bewilderingly reasonable a speech from the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe).

The right hon. Lady ran amok only once or twice—once when she referred to the wave of violent crime sweeping the country. On that point, it is appropriate to quote from a letter that I received last Friday from the chief constable of Greater Manchester, which dealt with the crime statistics for our area. He stated:

"Violent crime rates have been exacerbated by a change in the counting rules, by the inclusion of incidents of common assault."

We have experienced not so much a wave of violent crime as a wave of statistical reform. However, I do not blame the right hon. Lady for trying to profit from that. When I was shadow Home Secretary, I used what little ammunition I had at the time—she has even less.

That is further demonstrated by the fact that, in her interesting and, in essence, responsible speech, the right hon. Lady failed to refer to the criminalisation of drug use. We were waiting to hear more from her about her proposals on that matter, because the country took such a keen interest in them when she put them to the Conservative party conference last autumn.

I pay tribute to the police force in general and, in particular, to Greater Manchester police, especially the local police who work in my constituency and are so valued by my constituents. I also pay tribute to the concerned constituents of Gorton and elsewhere who do not simply express an interest in such issues and attend meetings about them, but are willing to have a go against criminals and to provide evidence and act as witnesses when there is such fear of intimidation. I am glad that the Bill will help to reduce the fear of intimidation among those who come forward as witnesses, although some fear will, of course, always exist.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary used the phrase "low-level crime" in his speech, but he was careful to say that, although much of the crime that affects our constituents may be described as such, it nevertheless has a serious effect on their quality of life, and on their sense of being safe in their homes, on the streets, in their neighbourhoods and when going about their lawful occasions.

Statistics can be looked at in many ways. The chief constable of Greater Manchester has been good enough to write to me about the statistics in our area and in the police division that covers my constituency. It is interesting that some of those statistics go against the common perceptions about crime. For example, under this Government, there has been a substantial reduction in the burglary of dwellings in Manchester's C division. There has also been a considerable reduction in vehicle crime. Most of our constituents would not believe that that was so from their experience.

[Mr. Gerald Kaufman]

Given that I have been a victim of burglary and vehicle crime during the past few months, I might contribute my own anecdotal evidence, but the fact is that the police are dealing with such crimes more effectively. The number of offences is falling because being caught is the best deterrent. Of course, we want the number of crimes to fall even further. That will happen, we hope, because despite the statistics offered by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, the Government have, in fact, given a great deal more money to the Greater Manchester police and the number of police in that force has increased.

I am sure that the chief constable and the men and women who work with him would say that the increase is not enough and that not enough people are being recruited to the force. However, Greater Manchester police has received a 15.6 per cent. increase in finance, and the number of police officers is steadily increasing. The chief constable has told me that the projected force strength for 31 March 2002 is 7,242—an increase of 389 officers since 31 March 2000.

Problems are being tackled, but those efforts do not always succeed by any means, and any hon. Member who is complacent about crime and the resources given to the police to tackle it would be ill serving his or her constituents. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the efforts of the police and the efforts of the Government in backing the police are showing results. We want more. My constituents will judge my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the Government not only by the legislation that they introduce and the will that they show, but by results and by what happens on their streets and in their neighbourhoods. I know that my right hon. Friend would not wish any other criteria to be used.

Of the many provisions in the Bill, I shall refer to only a handful. It should not need to be said, but I shall make it clear that the overwhelming majority of our fellow citizens not only do not commit crime, but would never dream of committing crime. We are talking about a small number of people whose effect on society is out of all proportion to their number.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald referred to this point, and I very much welcome the provisions that will allow the police to designate those areas where drinking in public places disrupts the community. I often go for a quiet drink in my constituency, but not on a pub crawl; and I never have 14 drinks at one time. Most of the people who drink in pubs simply want a quiet night out and a drink with friends, but there is no doubt that behaviour takes place inside and, more often, outside pubs that disrupts local community life. I very much welcome the measures in the Bill that will enable the police to take a firmer grip of that problem.

The measures will give the police the power to close licensed premises. I hope that they will not have to use the power too often, but I have strongly in mind one pub in my constituency—I could, but will not name it—where the people who live nearby would clamour for such a closure to take place if need be.

I also welcome the Bill's provisions for the protection of witnesses. Some very tough people in my constituency are ready to come forward. For example, Irene Thorp—who lives in Craig road, Gorton—is not very tall, but she is a giant in her courage and readiness to combat criminals even though she herself has been violently assaulted. She and other groups of concerned citizens in different parts of my constituency would be assisted if people were able to come forward with greater confidence that they would not be intimidated and that their houses would not be attacked. Therefore, I am very pleased with the measures that will enhance the protection of witnesses.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): Before my right hon. Friend moves on from the issue of alcohol-related crimes, does he agree that many of them take place not where the alcohol is purchased, but at the sites of others businesses, such as the local kebab shop or taxi rank? The introduction of on-the-spot penalties is important to deal with such crimes.

Mr. Kaufman: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend, with one proviso. One stretch in my constituency—it is near where I live—has so many kebab shops that, if there were an outbreak of violence there, we would not be able to contain it however strong the curry. None the less, I agree with my hon. Friend's point.

I welcome another provision that my constituents have asked me for again and again in the meetings about crime that we hold all over the constituency. In that regard, I thank the priest of the Sacred Heart church who makes his church hall available. Numerous requests have been made for the extension of curfews to cover teenagers. The readiness of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to extend curfew provisions to people below the age of 16 will be greatly welcomed. I say again that we want not only the powers but for them to be exercised. I therefore very much welcome the ability of the police, on their own judgment, to impose curfews, if they believe that to be appropriate.

There is one provision among all the others that I welcome and which the police in my area will greatly welcome: clause 128, which requires reasons to be given for granting, as well as for declining to grant, bail. I recently had a meeting with the chief constable of Greater Manchester and Superintendent Brinnand, who is responsible for much of my constituency. The police are frustrated when they take effective and efficient action and get culprits to court, but the courts are excessively lenient not only in sentencing but in the way in which bail is handled. That deeply exasperates the police and therefore those whom they exist to serve. I shall give three examples of the way in which the police in my constituency do their job, but with the best will in the world, the courts are not backing them up as they ought.

I am sorry to say that in certain parts of my constituency large gangs of youths commit numerous violent street robberies and other antisocial offences. In one area, the problem was so serious that the police mounted an expensive operation specifically targeted at a gang of street robbers. Earlier this very month, the police observed four members of the gang assault a lone male and attempt to rob him. The offence was extremely violent and was observed in its entirety by several police officers—bearing out what my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) said. There was no question, therefore, of poor identification.

All four were charged with assault with intent to rob and remanded in custody until a court hearing was available. Two of the four were bailed by the court and robberies have since continued in the area. Both of those bailed were 21 years of age, with previous convictions for violence, and both are being investigated concerning further robbery offences in the area.

I give another example. A youth, whom one might almost call a child, since he is only 14 years old, is one of the two still in custody for the offence about which I have just talked. He has been arrested for more than 50 offences since 1997, when he committed his first robbery at the age of 11. Most of the offences are street robberies and others violent crimes. Most of them have been committed while he has been on bail. On numerous occasions, he has been remanded in custody or in the care of social services only to be released on bail to commit further offences.

Finally, I refer to another individual, whose name I have. I will not name him; I do not in any way want to violate police activity or any sub judice rule. The man is a prominent member of a gang that has been involved in numerous shooting incidents, including several murders. He was arrested and charged with numerous offences, including conspiracy to supply firearms and drugs, rape and kidnapping. Three female witnesses are under protection such is the danger from him and the gang. He is still being investigated for several murders and shootings. He was remanded in custody by the police but granted bail by a judge in chambers at the end of 2000. He was set stringent bail conditions, none of which he complied with.

Such were the fears of the police that a large police operation was set up to recapture him. He was eventually arrested at a cost of £30,000 of police money. The man remains in custody. He was one of 14 members of his gang who have been arrested and charged with firearms and drug offences since last year. Despite the best efforts of the police, the serious nature of the charges and continuing problems in the area in which the gang was operating, 11 of the 14 gang members, including the man to whom I am referring, were given bail by the courts. Ten remain at large.

Miss Widdecombe: The right hon. Gentleman is rehearsing the inadequacies of the bail system. I agree with him. There is no disagreement on that. Does he accept, however, that the Bill will only compel a judge to give reasons? It will not restrict the availability of bail. If the right hon. Gentleman is serious about wanting to tackle the inappropriate use of bail, would it not be better to do what we want to do, which is to provide that one breach of bail conditions is enough, and that there must never be more than one chance?

Mr. Kaufman: I would not like to be as categorical as the right hon. Lady on this issue. Sometimes, when I listen to her, I think to myself, "I wish that I were as confident of anything as she is of everything."

The key feature is that the courts should use their judgment. Magistrates and judges know the facts. There are cases where the accused have a right to bail, but I do not want what might be called the profligate use of bail in circumstances such as those that I have described. I do not think that there is any serious difference between the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and myself. She will serve in Committee, and thank heavens, I will not. It will be for her to propose amendments and for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to deal with them.

I thank my right hon. Friend for all his work and for the close attention that he pays to the situation in my constituency and to legislation as a whole. I say on behalf of my constituents that we look to ever-increasing results. We do not want only some crime statistics to be improved; we want them all to be better. We want villains like those to whom I have referred not to be let out on bail. We want them to be sent to prison with long sentences so that they are not a danger to the community. As the Bill is moving towards that situation and has many good provisions, I welcome it. As always, in my sycophantic way, I congratulate my right hon. Friend.

5.43 pm

Mr. John Major (Huntingdon): There is a great deal in the Bill with which I can agree and to which I offer a fair wind. I would have happily said much of what the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) said. Indeed, in some instances I did so some years ago. I am delighted that we share a view. He mentioned in passing that he was a shadow Home Secretary. He was too modest to say that he was a first-class shadow Home Secretary. I always admired his work. I trust that one day he will be able to resume that eminent role, and that day may not be too far away.

I shall concentrate on what is in the Bill and on what I hope the Home Secretary may be inclined to add to the Bill in Committee. For years, Huntingdon Life Sciences in my constituency has been conducting Government-licensed experiments on animals to help research into cures for human ailments. The vast majority of local and political opinion on both sides of the political fence has been outspoken in favour of the research—not least, perhaps, because the Thalidomide Trust is based in my constituency. If experiments to the same depth as are now undertaken on animals had previously been conducted, the thalidomide tragedy might well have been avoided.

At Huntingdon, and at other places, experiments are taking place in an effort to try to find cures for cancer, AIDS, heart disease, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, asthma and other life-threatening ailments. I strongly support that valuable and necessary research. Others, however, do not: animal rights activists have opposed all of it. Some of them are animal lovers who wish to demonstrate peaceful opposition to something that they find distasteful. I believe that they are wrong, but they are entitled to their views. We have a long tradition of tolerance of peaceful protest, even concerning views with which we personally tend to disagree.

However, the animal rights movement is not composed wholly of such peaceful protesters—far from it. It is led and guided by what I can only call an anarchist minority using the tactics of urban terrorism. It is worth illustrating briefly some of the things that have happened in Huntingdon. Activists have fire-bombed cars outside my constituents' homes; they have attacked cars by throwing concrete blocks at them; and they have assaulted employees physically by spraying cleaning fluid in their eyes. There have been threatening phone calls by day and night and abusive letters—having seen some of them, hate

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mail would be a more apt description—as well as direct, terrifying threats to kill or maim employees of Huntingdon Life Sciences.

Those threats are made against ordinary people carrying out their work, licensed, as necessary, by successive Governments. That is by no means all that the animal rights activists have done. They have used other unpleasant tactics: they have ordered services or purchases in the names of employees working on experimentation; published false advertisements in their names; and even, distastefully, ordered a hearse to collect the body of a loved one from someone's house.

It is easy for us to understand how distressing that thuggish behaviour can be. I stress that it is by good fortune alone that no one has yet been killed by those anarchists. One day, however, if those people continue to act as they have been doing, somebody will be killed. They have held demonstrations, sometimes large ones, outside private homes, including mine—but, unlike my constituents, I am pretty well protected. There have been large demonstrations in Cambridgeshire, not least in the city of Cambridge, as the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) will know. They are carefully planned and generally controlled by their leaders, not at the demonstrations themselves but some way away on mobile phones. Although far from the action, the leaders are intent on creating maximum disruption.

I accept peaceful protest, but such actions go far beyond peaceful demonstrations. The activists use similar tactics against secondary targets, especially if they think that they will be weak-kneed enough to give in to their threats. None of that behaviour is acceptable, and we need changes in the law—in the Bill, I hope—to protect innocent employees, companies, directors and shareholders alike. I had an opportunity to thank the Home Secretary for his actions on that front a few moments ago. I also express my thanks to the noble Lord Sainsbury for his action in helping to bring about the financial rescue of Huntingdon Life Sciences from the difficulties that it had run into, predominantly as a result of those demonstrations. Lord Sainsbury did an excellent job and I am most grateful to him.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): It is not only at Huntingdon that the effects have been felt; staff in many other places are fearful. Many research companies are internationally owned, and it is important that it be clear that we are taking active steps to deal with such things, because investment decisions are being made about the future location of that research.

Mr. Major: The right hon. Gentleman is right, and I intend to turn to that point later. We are of one mind on this issue.

I understand that the Home Secretary has some proposals in mind. I strongly welcome his willingness to take action, although I have not yet had the opportunity to study his proposals in detail. It is essential that we soon amend existing legislation to prevent violent activists from maintaining personal information that enables them to target individual employees, directors and shareholders. Such targeting is unpleasant and often frightening for people going about their ordinary business. They are not used to the targeting that people in public life sadly become accustomed to these days. They are people going about their ordinary life, for whom the experience is extremely frightening and unpleasant. They are going about their lawful business, which has been licensed by Parliament. They must have protection from such harassment.

I shall briefly touch on some of the changes that are necessary. We must look at ways to make it possible for all directors and shareholders potentially at risk—not every director and shareholder, but those who could arguably be at risk from the activists—to register their interest in a company such as Huntingdon Life Sciences in a fashion that protects their private addresses from public scrutiny. Of course, the registrar should have their private addresses, but we should consider the various options for preventing that information becoming generally available to people who will misuse it.

That will not be easy, and the change will need to be carefully managed, but there are a number of ways in which it could be achieved, and I hope that the Home Secretary will incorporate one or other of them in the Bill. I look forward to discussing that with him on another occasion. I regard the change as extremely important, for I have seen the anguish caused by what has happened.

I come to the point made by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith). After Huntingdon Life Sciences obtained new financial backers from abroad, and the protesters were frustrated in their bid to close down the company and its work, one of the leading activists appeared on the media claiming that his movement would soon identify the new financial backers and target them.

I cannot recall the exact words that that activist used, but I recall the flavour of them, and I recall the gist of what he said. It was, I thought, a threat: "We have friends even in America, and we will get them." As I heard the interview, that seemed, given the activists' record, to be a threat of promised violence which ought of itself to be an offence, not something to be uttered with impunity time after time in various parts of the media.

We need also to borrow from trade union legislation and make it an offence—the Home Secretary touched on this—to protest against individuals in their homes and, in addition, to prevent secondary activity, such as protests against financial institutions or pension fund investors, and the staff who work for financial institutions or pension investors.

The present laws are shown by the new problem to be inadequate on a number of fronts. The harassment legislation certainly needs amendment, not least to make it more appropriate for the police to use it to prohibit the incitement of harassment and intimidation. At present, it is ineffective for that purpose. I have had some experience of trying to frame ways of dealing with such problems, and I understand only too clearly the difficulties that the Home Secretary and his Ministers will have in framing legislation to cover these points. It will not be easy, but it is possible and we must reconsider existing legislation.

The Malicious Communications Act 1988, for example, illustrates the problem. The Home Secretary touched on that earlier. Section 1(2) of that Act states:

"A person is not guilty of an offence . . . if he shows—(a) that the threat was used to reinforce a demand which he believed he had reasonable grounds for making; and (b) that he believed that the use of the threat was a proper means of reinforcing the demand."

That dates from some way back, and I can imagine the sort of late amendment that was rushed through to make sure that the Bill met its timetable. Every Minister has had experience of that, but let us consider what the provision says. It says that a threat is not an offence if there were reasons to make it to reinforce a demand. What nonsense is that?

Threats against individuals are not justifiable in any circumstances. In any event, without wishing to be flippant, I should have thought that the precise wording of that subsection was so woolly that it would make it possible for any taxpayer to indict the Inland Revenue under it. Unless the Home Secretary amends it, people may take that advice and do so.

We clearly need to examine existing legislation to deal with emerging problems. Many other changes need to be made, but discussion of those may not be appropriate for a Second Reading debate in which many hon. Members want to speak. I am grateful to the Home Secretary for agreeing to see me so that I may put some detailed suggestions to him. I look forward to that meeting.

I shall touch on one other point, in conclusion. It would be immensely helpful to the industry, to which the Minister and his team have recently given such support, if in his winding-up speech this evening, the Minister of State could confirm the following points unambiguously: first, that the present UK legislation governing the introduction of new medicines demands that they be tested on animals before human trials can occur; secondly, that animal tests are also demanded by regulatory authorities to ensure the safe manufacture, transport and use of agrochemicals and other chemicals; thirdly, to confirm that, in the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 enforced by the Home Office inspectorate, as the Home Secretary said earlier, the UK has the strictest regulations governing the conduct of animal research that can be found in any country in the world; and fourthly, that the current legislation demands that in safety testing, researchers must assure the Home Office that no non-animal alternative tests are available before authority is given for any testing on animals.

I ask for those points to be unambiguously made by the Minister of State, because each and every one of them is perverted by those who oppose the research, and much public opinion accepts the rebuttal of those points. It would be immensely helpful to have them clearly and unambiguously stated by a responsible Minister.

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I never thought that I would be able to say that I agree 100 per cent. with his speech, but will he go a little further? Much of what he said has been about the threat to animal experimenters. Will he go on to say that we need to make sure that the changes to the legislation cover attacks on all scientists? Much of what the right hon. Gentleman says applies to people in GM research, the nuclear industry and many other fields of scientific endeavour.

Mr. Major: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right, and I am happy to endorse that. He must forgive me if, having seen what has happened in my constituency over the past three years, I focused on the problems there, so that my constituents are aware that the Government take the problems seriously—as, indeed, the Government do—and intend to take action. However, the hon. Gentleman is right and I endorse everything that he said.

The companies carrying out scientific research on animals are not operating casually outside the law. They operate within a tightly regulated and strictly controlled environment. They are doing work that they have been required to do by successive Governments. Their work is necessary to protect public health, to advance medical research, and to safeguard and improve the well-being of every citizen. They are carrying out work on behalf of the public and in the interests of the public, and they deserve the legislative protection of this House.

5.58 pm

Mr. Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth): I am sure the whole House will join me in congratulating the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) on an outstanding and thoughtful speech. It is a privilege to follow both him and my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), whose contributions have shown the importance of the debate. It may not catch the headlines that other debates in the House sometimes catch, but if the media regard this as a less than all-important debate, I am certain that our constituents will not agree.

I remember my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton from the time when I was a young magistrate. As the then shadow Home Secretary, he listened to us and understood the obstacles that were placed in the way of our doing what the public and the criminal justice system needed. I dare say that if my right hon. Friend had been Home Secretary 15 years ago, instead of shadow Home Secretary, we might not have had to endure some of the pain that we have gone through in the criminal justice system in recent years.

I am rather sad that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) was not more constructive. She said that she did not oppose the Bill, but all her language—including body language—spoke of arrogance and opposition. As shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary demonstrated that one can look serious on crime and disorder only by being serious on them. I am afraid that the Opposition have not yet learned that lesson.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): Did my right hon. Friend share my concern about the lukewarm reception given by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) to the extension of curfew schemes? He will have received the same Local Government Association briefing as has been submitted to me. Is he pleased that the LGA has welcomed the introduction of curfews for the under-16s? The measure begins to address an age group that is more likely to be involved in public disturbances than the under-10s. I know that he has experience of the joint problem-solving groups so will he acknowledge their important role in implementing the provisions?

Mr. Michael: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. I shall deal with curfews in a moment, as they are an

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important aspect of the Bill. However, I should like first to set out the context of a Bill that is about crime reduction and a wide range of criminal justice issues. At first glance, one might think it is a minor Bill but it is not, as it complements and advances the programme of reform that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has consistently pursued for a number of years.

The Bill takes us forward to the next stage in four different ways: it helps to continue the creation of a comprehensive approach to cutting crime; it helps to fill the gaps in the mechanisms, including sentences, that are used to deal with crime and the causes of crime; it makes progress on nipping problems in the bud, especially in respect of young offenders; and it focuses on cutting crime. The latter does not necessarily follow from crime measures, as it must be ensured that legislation, intentions and policy perspectives are carried through in practice. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will agree that it is vital to keep our eyes on those outcomes at every stage of the process.

The Bill contains a programme of sustainable crime reduction which falls well within the pattern of crime and disorder audits and strategies that are currently maturing. I mentioned in an intervention my delight the other week when I heard some 120 people from the police, local authorities and so on having a debate about continuing to push down crime. Three or four years ago, none of them would even have dreamed of having such a debate. That is a tribute not only to the decisions taken at that time, but to the way in which the ministerial team and the various professions that are involved are pushing the process forward, week after week and year after year.

The Bill deals with many important issues. The need to provide full reasons in respect of bail is far more important than the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald seemed to think. Currently, those responsible for decisions on bail must give reasons for refusing it, with the awareness that their decision might be tested. Surely it is an effective counter-balance for them to have to give reasons why bail should be granted. Such a measure will bring back into balance an arrangement that has been unbalanced for many years. It has previously been far too easy to test the intention of the court to refuse bail and to push for larger numbers to be given bail because that is the safe decision. A balance will now be in place.

Witness protection is crucial and the Bill is an important step forward in that respect. I am concerned that the antisocial behaviour orders involve something of a drift with regard to the bringing of matters to court by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, and with regard to the court itself, which can demand the test of the criminal law. As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary knows and as the Bill intends, it is the civil test that must be applied. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister of State will take this opportunity to remind the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts that it is the civil test that must apply. That practice is necessary specifically to ensure that people do not face the onerous burden of having to risk danger by coming to give evidence, as it will enable the court quickly to place the order, the breach of which becomes the criminal punishment.

The Bill also deals with drugs and violent crime, on which it is excellent to see progress. Having heard my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton mention the Greater Manchester police, I should like to speak about my constituency. I am certain that the police there will welcome the detail of the Bill with enthusiasm. I am especially pleased about the commitment shown by the police service, which is currently led by Tony Burden, who is president of the Association of Chief Police Officers.

Cardiff county local authority has also shown great commitment. In particular, I pay tribute to Gordon Houlston, who has taken a lead role. Safer Cardiff is bringing together a partnership approach, and I mention Barbara Natesagara in that regard. Unusually—although it should not be unusual—a great contribution has been made by Professor John Shepherd, nurses, other care staff and voluntary organisations in identifying people who experience violent crime and in trying thereby to avoid repeat offending. The health service's involvement in that partnership is a crucial step forward and should be encouraged.

As the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald suggested, the issues with which the Bill tries to deal seem intractable. However, examples of progress, such as the reduction in violent crime in Cardiff and the other steps forward to which my hon. Friends have referred, show that circumstances are improving and that effective action can be taken.

The Bill contains some important steps to speed up youth justice. I pay tribute to the continued pressure exerted by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the ministerial team for delivery on reduction of the time that it takes to get youngsters to court. That commitment is being carried through into practice. Goodness knows it is a difficult one to fulfil, as anyone who has tried to do so will confirm. I pay particular tribute to Gillian Beranksi and her team in south Wales. When I met them the other week, I was delighted to see not only that they are getting on with the job, but that they are so enthusiastic. It has been good to see CPS lawyers working with the courts and the police to deliver and improve quality of justice, as well as deliver faster justice.

The enthusiasm of magistrates was also encouraging. I suppose that I was a bit ground down by the time that I entered the House. Indeed, it sometimes seemed that we could never speed things up. I can tell my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary that magistrates feel liberated at being part of a system that is working and delivering. We should applaud that progress. Such development will occur in all parts of the country. All the partners need the tools, but the message is that they are up for it.

We were wary of curfews from the beginning. I remember the advice that I offered the Opposition in the Standing Committee that debated the Bill that became the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. My advice then was that the curfew should be first established for under-11s, after which we could go on to consider the question of ages. Concerns were expressed about massive numbers. It was suggested that we would be overwhelmed and that youngsters would be so constrained by curfews that the measure would be an onerous burden. Of course, none of that happened. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald recognised that, but she was not as generous as she might have been.

I am very pleased that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is making two changes on curfew orders. First, the Bill gives the police the same powers as local authorities. Secondly, it increases to 16 the age at which they can apply. Those changes are crucial for a reason that has not been mentioned: they will end the culture of prevarication and excuses. Too often we hear that people are frustrated and angry about the continued harassment that they experience in their streets and the bad behaviour of groups of young people late at night. Such groups are often small, but they grow quickly if they are not nipped in the bud. Too often people come to me or to their respective Members of Parliament and say that nothing is being done. They say that they have talked to the police but are told that no action can be taken. Now, the instrument is in place and it can be used for young people of up to the age of 16.

Mr. Heald: We broadly agree about this issue now. However, would the right hon. Gentleman care to contemplate why child curfew orders have been such a failure so far? Not one has been granted. Why does Labour's most senior councillor, Sir Jeremy Beecham, say that the extension is unlikely to be used and that curfews are not the most important measure that could be taken? There seems to be lack of enthusiasm on the subject from some of the right hon. Gentleman's colleagues.

Mr. Michael: I am glad to hear the grudging admission that the Opposition are now in favour of child curfew orders, and that they broadly agree with us. I wish that they would give a little more thought to the subject.

Mr. Heald: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Michael: In a moment; let me develop my thought first. I will return to Sir Jeremy Beecham in a moment.

I do not think that the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) has understood the curfew order or the system. We need to ensure that this is not a bureaucratic process. As set out in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, it is not. The local authority—now it could be the police or the local authority—has to set out a scheme. It will have to make simple rules to the effect that, in certain circumstances, it will apply the scheme to young people in an area. It is a warning that the authority is serious; it is a warning to young people that unless they start to behave better, they may lose their liberty. Will the loss of that liberty to be out late at night be onerous? I have never understood why seven-year-olds should be out at 3 o'clock in the morning.

Such a step does not need to be onerous if the measures are used appropriately. First, curfew orders need not be used if partners can succeed with other powers. This is where I agree with Sir Jeremy Beecham. I think that, for many areas, the existence in the background of the curfew power will be sufficient to allow steps to be taken locally, for co-operation to be won with the local community and for something to be done. There are examples of where this has been achieved. Hamilton has been referred to on many occasions, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend, in framing guidance, will be looking to the acknowledged success in the Hamilton area.

The measure will succeed if the ground is well prepared. It is not a case of saying, "We want you all to stop coming out at night." The police and the local authority have to discuss the problem that they are facing and how to target the orders to get rid of the problem.

Why is the curfew order needed? Let me give one example. In my constituency, we were discussing the disorder on an estate and a lot of people in the room were saying, "Those youngsters are out of control. Something needs to be done about them. We need to stop them creating havoc around the estate." One woman got up and said, "My little Johnny is one of those youngsters." Everyone said, "Johnny isn't too bad, he's a good lad." She said, "He's a good lad, he's a nice lad, but he's 6 ft 6 in and I'm 5 ft 2 in. His dad left home some years ago. I can't make Johnny stay in if he wants to go out; he says that everybody else is out, so why shouldn't he be?"

The curfew orders are about giving authority back to parents and communities, not about being excessively onerous. The more we can carry on without the need for specific curfews because people have understood the message and the community is being given back authority, the better it will be. Those are the sort of circumstances in which it is important for this mechanism to be used. Communities and parents need to be given back authority. They have to know that they have the support of the local authority and the police, as they have the support of the Government.

My final point is about partnership. I hope that in his winding-up speech the Minister will assure us that it is not intended that the police could go off at a tangent and impose curfews at will, any more than it was the intention that local authorities should be able to do so, nor that the consultation is simply a matter of going through the form. We expect the police, local authorities and communities to work together, do we not? We expect them to co-operate and to address the real issues of their area. Then the result will be liberating rather than onerous.

The crime and disorder partnerships work. Why is that? First, they focus clearly on a problem. They make sure that they have the facts through the crime and disorder audit. Secondly, they focus on outcomes—they want to see crime going down. Thirdly, they operate through a partnership that shares responsibility. In that case, the police and the local authority both have that responsibility. That is not appropriate for the curfew. It is likely that if both bodies had the responsibility, neither of them would exercise it. That is why I think that the proposed dual mandate is right. Otherwise, it would be a recipe for neither to make a move, and we need both of them to move together.

We must have that partnership. Use of the curfew must be set within the framework of the crime and disorder partnership.

Mr. Heald: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way again. He has not really answered my question, and I would like him to. Why has not a single child curfew order so far been made? My hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) proposed in the Standing Committee considering the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 that curfew orders should apply up to the age of 16, which is what is now proposed. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that this shows that the procedures for child curfew orders are too leaden and bureaucratic and that something must be done about them?

Mr. Michael: If the hon. Gentleman prayed in aid everything that the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) proposed in Committee, he would be

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defending an awful lot of indefensible measures. No, it shows nothing of the sort—it shows that they have not been tested. It shows that although we have heard a lot of rhetoric about the police not having the powers to deal with young offenders, those powers have not been tested. However, we accept that the younger age group has been targeted while the older age group really needs to be targeted. With the combination of the curfew extending to the age of 16 and the antisocial behaviour orders that can be targeted at the older age group, the tools are there to do the job.

As long as we hear in a couple of years that there are no more problems with youngsters on the streets causing mayhem late at night, I will not want the test to be how many curfew orders have been imposed; I will want it to be standards of behaviour in the community, protection of the public and communities that are strengthened by this measure and a proper understanding of it. I suggest that the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire seek to understand the reasoning behind the measure and how it fits in with the reasoning behind the crime and disorder strategies that have been so successful but which have not had the enthusiasm and support from Conservative Members that we might have hoped for. Such strategies are based on the evidence of need; they target the appropriate groups, share support and are clear about outcomes. We can see from the enthusiasm of the partners in the crime and disorder strategies that those aims can be achieved.

I hope that in the guidance, the Home Secretary will point to the strength of partnerships as the core for creating stronger, safer communities, cutting crime and nipping things in the bud in respect of younger offenders. In particular, we do not want local authorities saying, "Let the police do it" or the police saying, "Let the local authority do it." We want them both to have the powers and to share the responsibility so that they do what is necessary, where the community wants it. That will build on the culture of sharing responsibility and effectiveness that we have started to build. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister shares those views and wishes the police and local authorities to push forward together. Let the philosophy be, "Together, let's do it."

6.18 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The Government have now clocked up about 30 Home Office Bills since they came to power. I agree with the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) that there may be some merit in the fact that, for a change, there has not been a lot of sound and fury surrounding the Bill. Instead, there has been a welcome degree of discussion of the issues, some interesting and some also controversial. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I disagree with him about child curfews. He put the case for them, and I will put the case against them. There is much debate still to be had.

This is a long Bill, with 132 clauses and eight schedules. It is another example of a Bill that is much longer than it should be. It is probably a response to last year's request from the Prime Minister to give him something eye-catching before the election. Headline-grabbing, eye-catching ideas were looked for all over the Home Office departments. There are some things in the Bill to do with police powers; it changes a few offences here, a bit of procedure there. It is a Christmas tree decoration Bill—the baubles are on the tree, because the Government need something to show in the window. The reality is that the Government wanted measures that made them look as though they were doing something in the run-up to the election. They have not had quite the success that they expected in their first three and a half years, given that the former shadow Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister, said that, if elected, the Labour Government would be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime.

I took some guests round Portcullis House the other day, and they asked me whether the trees in there were really fig trees. I said that I was not an expert, but I had been told that they were. My visitors said that, for fig trees, they had mighty small leaves. I reflected that the Bill does not provide fig leaves big enough to cover the Government's embarrassment.

Mr. Baldry: They are olive trees.

Mr. Hughes: If they are olive trees, that is the answer to the question.

It is a matter of record that the Government made three specific law and order pledges—I appreciate their honesty about the issue—and it appears that none of them will be met. It is clearly not the perception of the British public that the Government have been tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. All the opinion polls show that the public are not persuaded by the Labour Government's record on that issue. On the pledge for more bobbies on the beat, the Home Secretary struggled manfully on television yesterday to explain how that did not really mean more bobbies on the beat—just relatively more bobbies on the beat than before.

Mr. Heald: It was a metaphor.

Mr. Hughes: Well, it was not quite a metaphor, but it was an explanation that was certainly not persuasive.

Furthermore, it looks as though the target to cut by half the time for dealing with offending by persistent young offenders will not be achieved either. The Government have failed in their objectives and the resulting Bill is a rag-bag of bits and pieces—some good, some bad, some debatable, some not so important.

I am sad that we are being forced by the election timetable into a way of law-making which other countries wisely do not follow. Many of the Bill's proposals may have merit, but no one has ever checked to find out. It would have been better to have a more considered process for examining some of these controversial measures, instead of simply pulling them off the tree, as it were, and putting them into the Bill. We could have had a special Standing Committee, as we have with other Bills, or a draft Bill.

We could have done as the Finnish Parliament does, and taken the Bill proposed by the Government, given it a quick Second Reading, then sent it to a Select Committee where evidence could have been taken. A report could then have been brought back to the Government. In that way, a more considered way of legislating could have been achieved. Furthermore, we could have implemented a measure that the Association

of Police Authorities and I have called for: a standing conference on policing and law and order involving the police, police authorities, magistrates, lay people and politicians. Such a body could consider matters of this nature. However, we have none of those. Indeed, we are discussing measures concerning criminal justice literally a matter of days before we expect Lord Justice Auld to produce his review of the criminal justice system. That review may produce similar proposals to those in the Bill, or different ones. In any event, it is meant to be a comprehensive review.

It is sad that we are considering a controversial Bill containing some untested proposals—I share the view of Conservative Front-Bench Members on that point—a matter of weeks before the expected date of the election. The Bill will probably not become law before the election. If it does not finish in Standing Committee until 8 March, I can assure the House that the Lords are unlikely to whip it through in double-quick time, because its provisions have profound implications for civil liberties, among other things.

On a further practical point, we really should not have Bills in which one clause applies to England and Wales, another to England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the next to the United Kingdom as a whole, and the next only to Northern Ireland. That is nonsense. Northern Ireland-only provisions, England and Wales-only provisions, and UK provisions are spread around the Bill. It would be far better to try to legislate more tidily, so that the Scots, the Welsh, the Northern Irish and the English would know what was in store for them and have a chance to debate it properly themselves.

Mr. Michael: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that it is part of the nature of the devolution process to have different responsibilities in relation to different parts of these islands? It is therefore sensible to deal with them in the context in which they make sense.

Mr. Hughes: Rather, this Bill may show up the weakness of the Government's devolution system, since I am sure that the Welsh Assembly would be interested in formally being consulted on the matters in the Bill that affect Wales—even if they do not relate to devolved issues—and in expressing a view on them. I am sure that the Northern Ireland Assembly would be similarly interested. There are lessons to be learned for the wider constitutional debate.

I have tried to distil the provisions of the Bill, which I believe raises 10 important questions. Should we have fixed-penalty systems, and if so when? Should we have curfews, and if so when? Those are two big, controversial issues. How should we deal with alcohol-related offences and offenders? How should we deal with drug-related offences and offenders? How should we protect witnesses and possible witnesses? When should people be granted bail? That central question was raised by the right hon. Members for Cardiff, South and Penarth and for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman).

What should the information exchange entitlement between public authorities be? For example, should we allow information collected by the Inland Revenue to be passed to the social security system and vice versa? We have never had a great debate about that, but such measures are provided for in the Bill. What should the checks and balances on the powers of detention be? The Bill contains various proposals about that.

On the rights of the state to take and hold information, should it have the power to collect DNA samples and hold them without people's consent, even though those people have been found innocent? That is a very big issue, which we as a nation have never debated properly and widely. The Icelandic people, I understand, have had a great national debate about it and agreed that everyone would have their information put on the national database. Lastly, what should the structure nationally, regionally and locally of our police service be? The last two parts of the Bill deal with that question.

The Bill raises huge issues and I want to flag up the view held by me and my colleagues, which is in some respects similar to that held by the Conservative party. Some of the provisions in the Bill are reasonable and unexceptionable. We shall not, therefore, vote against the Bill on Second Reading; we shall support it tonight. We shall then seek to amend it in Committee and on Report, and we reserve the right to vote against it on Third Reading if some of the provisions that we regard as unacceptable have not been removed in the process. We hope to persuade people of our arguments between now and then.

One provision that is not in the Bill was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) and by the Secretary of State, and several of my right hon. and hon. Friends have particular concerns about it. It touches on the issue of campaigners for animal rights. My right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), and my hon. Friends the Members for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) and for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) all have constituency interests in the matter, as do other hon. Members.

I share the general view that the right to protest and to express one's view is one thing, but that to do those things in a manner that intimidates and frightens not only those directly affected but many who are indirectly affected—the families and colleagues of those concerned—is entirely unacceptable. Whatever one's view about the rights and welfare of animals, one should not be entitled to behave exceptionally badly, as some people have in this country. I spoke to the chief executive of Huntingdon Life Sciences the other day, and to others. The problem seems to be much worse in this country than elsewhere, and we therefore need to deal with it in a way that will reduce that ability to threaten and intimidate.

I shall comment on the less controversial matters in the Bill first, before dealing with the three most controversial issues. On the alcohol-related measures, it seems entirely proper that if one is going to give a power to restrict the drinking of alcohol in public places, it should be given to the democratically elected local authority. We support that proposal. It involves a restriction of liberty, but it is one that a democratically elected local authority could adopt, although only after consultation with the police.

Mr. Heald: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: Will the hon. Gentleman allow me to continue for a moment?

On the closure of licensed premises, we support the proposal that in exceptional circumstances the police should have the ability to say, "I'm sorry, you can't carry on. Your pub is threatening the neighbourhood and

[Mr. Hughes]

causing trouble." As drafted, however, the proposal is draconian and we would be better served by a yellow card, red card system in which a warning was followed by a closure. There is no such provision in the Bill. Under the current proposals, the police could go into licensed premises and close them unfairly, and, once the matter got into the court system, it could be difficult for the licensee to persuade the magistrates to allow him to reopen.

The proposals on the closure of unlicensed premises seem entirely justifiable, as are those for confiscating containers of drink. I understand that the police might not know whether there was drink in such containers, so the measures are necessary to protect the police from what might otherwise be an unjustified allegation.

The proposals to tighten up on serving drink to ensure that it does not go to under-age drinkers are also justified. However, I am not yet persuaded that the wording is right and we must ensure that we have a system that respects the interests of those whose job may mean that they encounter people who represent themselves as being of drinking age—over 18—but who are not. The postscript is that it is of course right to allow test-purchasing of drink by youngsters under the proper controls, just as tobacco is test-purchased to detect people who break the law.

Mr. Heald: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that non-drinking zones and the powers of local authorities to designate them must be considered widely in the council and that the decision should perhaps be debated in full council rather than delegated to one cabinet member, because that could lead to difficulties?

Mr. Hughes: I have not talked to all my colleagues about that, but my initial response is that I share the hon. Gentleman's view. Liberty could be restricted in public places and such a big decision should I believe properly be taken by the full council.

I support the drug trafficking proposals. It is right that people could have their liberty to travel, to which they would otherwise be entitled, restricted if after conviction they could traffic in drugs while travelling. The only issue is that the Bill allows restriction without end, and we may need a maximum restriction. No one should have their ability to travel written off for the rest of their life because of offences they have committed, and I hope that the measure can be amended.

It is of course acceptable that the proposal on intimidation of witnesses should relate to civil as well as criminal proceedings. However, I am concerned that there is a burden of proof issue—the Minister will be aware of it—and simply using certain language or acting in a certain way should not immediately make it people's responsibility to show that they do not intend to pervert the course of justice.

More widely, and for all sorts of reasons—not just constituency experience over recent years—I say to the Minister that we still do badly in ensuring that witnesses and would-be witnesses are protected. The police struggle to protect such people and we do not yet have a system that works quickly. This very week, I am again trying to get somebody moved. Unless they move, they will not feel confident enough to give evidence in a criminal case. The Crown Prosecution Service says that the case cannot be taken to court unless they give evidence. Therefore, it will be unable to prosecute an assailant. The current system depends too much on accidental opportunities to persuade local authorities to move people and we need a much better one.

There is a big question regarding the powers to transfer information between one authority and another. When people give information to the Revenue, do they expect it to go to all the other state authorities? The Revenue is concerned that people may not be as honest if they think that information will go elsewhere. There is an issue there and a further problem in relation to whether we should allow the Bill to be retrospective. I hope that we can amend it to prevent that from being the case, although it obviously has the endorsement of the Scottish Executive, as it is a United Kingdom provision.

The powers of seizure, which are to be extended, are welcome, but we must ensure that we do not give more power than is necessary.

I support the three proposals for making offences arrestable, although, again, they have been picked out of a list and many others could have been chosen. The categories are kerb crawling, failure to stop and report an accident resulting in injury, and importing to the UK indecent or obscene articles. It is perfectly reasonable for those to be arrestable offences and we would support that.

There are generally uncontroversial changes to the way in which we manage people in detention, but we must be careful about thinking that it is acceptable for the police to decide at a distance to extend someone's detention—it is proposed to allow that down the videolink or down the telephone. If someone's liberty is in question, the presumption must be that the person reviewing his or her detention is not 50 miles away at the end of a telephone, but close to the person who is in the cell. We must be careful about giving such extensive powers and careful about giving up the right of the House to consider all secondary legislation. We should not change the procedure from the affirmative to the negative resolution procedure.

Of the remaining non-controversial proposals, the two relating to the police include a proposed improved system for training. That I welcome, but the proposals on structures, particularly for the National Criminal Intelligence Service and others, are not uncontroversial and, as the Minister knows, the Association of Police Authorities has concerns. They appear to increase central Government control and reduce public and police authority control. Debates about control of the special police services and what to do with the police service are going on, but I am not sure that we have so far had the breadth of discussion that we need.

That leaves three issues: DNA, fixed penalty notices and curfews. The Liberal Democrats have never signed up to people who have not consented having their DNA held after being found not guilty or when a case does not proceed. Doing so represents a big step forward—in my view, a dangerous step forward in civil liberty terms. Of course DNA is helpful, but if the Government think that it would help if everybody's DNA was held, let them say, "When a baby is registered, a sample has to be supplied

to the registrar of births, marriages and deaths." That, effectively, is what the Bill suggests. If the Minister wants to confirm that, I should be happy to hear from him.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): To clarify, is the hon. Gentleman saying that the Liberal Democrats will oppose the Bill on Third Reading, following consideration in Committee, if the DNA proposals remain in their current form?

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is a good and intelligent Minister, but that was a cheap and silly question, not least because I have already answered it. I said that we shall seek to amend various aspects, that our judgment as to whether we can support the Bill will depend on our success in getting amendments accepted and that we can give no guarantee at this stage that we will support it on Third Reading. We think that certain provisions need to be amended.

Mr. Clarke: With respect, I did not ask for a guarantee. I asked about the importance that the hon. Gentleman attaches to the DNA point, which is one of the range of issues that he will reconsider after the Bill has been examined in Committee. It would be of interest to the House to know where the Liberal Democrats stand on that important issue.

Mr. Hughes: Where we stand is straightforward: we are not persuaded that we ought to give a further power to the state—the police—to hold a sample taken in respect of a case that is not proceeded with or in which a person is found not guilty. If we remain unpersuaded, we shall consider that a possible ground for voting against Third Reading.

Dr. Ladyman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: No, I am trying to allow time for other colleagues, as many want to speak.

Fixed-penalty notices strike me as fine to deal with a cyclist on the pavement or illegal car parking. Indeed, they are perfectly reasonable for dog fouling and litter dropping. However, it is unlikely that they will work in relation to drunken adults who may not stand around long enough to receive them or may not remember much about receiving them. Some cases may be prejudiced by a person's relative inability to comply with the fixed penalty. The proposal is unfair. The rich can pay up easily; the poor cannot. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps the hon. Member for High Peak (Mr. Levitt) wants to intervene.

Those with learning difficulties, those who are less intelligent and those who are homeless may not be able to cope with the paperwork in the way that someone with all the time in the world and high intelligence can. The proposal is highly likely to be discriminatory. Summary justice, not normal procedural justice, may be done at the hands of the police in a system under which, the Library research note confirms, millions of pounds worth of fines already go unpaid. Last year, about £80 million of fines went uncollected and now we are to have another system that imposes fines on people who are least likely to pay up and will have to be monitored.

We are by no means persuaded in regard to fixed-penalty notices. I consider the proposal a fig leaf, intended to cover up the extraordinary content of a speech delivered by the Prime Minister to academics in Tubingen, when he said that he would march people along to cashpoints. It is a fallback, intended to give the impression that that was not a completely barmy idea but only a half-barmy idea. The police are unlikely to have enough staff to deal with it, and would be perfectly happy for it not to be included. People such as Fred Broughton have made that abundantly clear.

The curfew proposal has been supported by, for instance, the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth. It would be one thing if such action were to be proposed and agreed by local authorities, but the Bill goes further, allowing the police to impose a curfew irrespective of a local authority's view. Admittedly the police must talk to local authorities, but they can go ahead even if local authorities say no.

When I talked to youngsters at Walworth school about the proposal, one said, "It's like keeping the whole class in when a few have misbehaved." It certainly strikes me as an entirely unfair principle in the context of civil liberties. Of course seven-year-olds should not be out on the street at 3 am, but 14 and 15-year-olds might have perfectly good reasons to be out at 9, 10 or 11 pm. If the right hon. Gentleman thinks that community relations between police and young people will be helped if the police pick on young people regularly, he may be sadly mistaken.

The other day I spoke to some youngsters on the street—youngsters under 16, hanging around in just the sort of group that the right hon. Gentleman described. The public say that something must be done, but according to my experience the more the police stop and search them, the more likely they are to be antagonistic, unhelpful and unco-operative. If the right hon. Gentleman thinks that the curfew proposal will make all difficult youngsters suddenly disappear—that youngsters will become smilingly happy, feeling that the police are the most wonderful people in the world—Cardiff, South and Penarth has changed a lot since I was there in my youth.

Mr. Michael: The hon. Gentleman was probably one of the youths who caused trouble there in those days. He has clearly not learned from those days to do his homework first. He has not read the requirements, conditions, advice and guidance, any more than he listened to what I said. The measure can succeed only in the context of community support and a joint effort to tackle the problem, involving communities, parents, local authorities and the police; but that is what is proposed. Did the hon. Gentleman not understand that?

Mr. Hughes: Of course I did. The right hon. Gentleman should not become so excitable so quickly. If, however, he thinks it a good idea to start stereotyping, and to say that the Peckhams or Penarths of this world should contain no-go areas—curfew areas; "can't go out late" areas—I must tell him that I do not think it will be good for the law-abiding people, including young people, who live in those areas. It can only paint bad pictures: it can only make areas that look as though they have trouble look even worse. By all means let the police concentrate on the troublemakers, but they should concentrate on the troublemakers rather than the places where they live.

[Mr. Hughes]

I hope I have demonstrated straightforwardly that Liberal Democrats have considerable concerns about a Bill that is good in parts, but very worrying in parts. We shall do our utmost to make sure that it is much better by the time it returns to this House.

6.44 pm

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): Last week one of my local newspapers, the *News Shopper*, featured a banner headline: "Crime is on the rise—report". A subhead referred to an increase of £30,000. It dealt a tremendous blow to both the police and the local authority, which had forged an extremely effective community safety partnership. It was, moreover, distressing for all of us because it was simply untrue.

In Lewisham, crime fell by 5 per cent. between the period from March 1999 to December 1999 and the corresponding period in 2000. Burglary fell by 16 per cent., and the borough was top of the Metropolitan police league table in respect of judicial disposals of such crimes. Car crime also decreased, and Lewisham was near the top of the league table in respect of clear-up rates.

The headline might have been justified, although clearly to a lesser extent, with regard to reporting of street crime, which has been on the increase in Lewisham and throughout the country—although the number of such crimes in Lewisham is lower than the Met average.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): I have here a copy of one of my little newspapers, which reports a crime increase of 10 per cent., and states that, in Kent, crime fell by 23 per cent. during the same period. That paper is the Gravesham *News Shopper*. Do we detect a trend?

Joan Ruddock: My hon. Friend makes an important point.

Even where certain crimes have increased, most people are not the direct victims. Most people feel, however, that their quality of life is threatened and often diminished by the fear of crime, which is why it is so reprehensible that local newspapers exaggerate crime levels. Antisocial behaviour gives rise to anxiety, and also creates an impression of lawlessness. That is why I welcome the Bill.

I want to talk mostly about low-level crime. I welcome the measures relating to young people. Let me also say, however, how much I appreciate the provisions for enhanced witness protection. Like many of my hon. Friends, I have dealt with a small but terribly distressing number of cases involving people who have been willing to come forward, but have subsequently lived in terror of victimisation. We owe it to them to improve their treatment.

In Lewisham, as elsewhere, young people commit a disproportionately large number of crimes. In our crime and disorder audit, the statistics relating to robbery, violence against the person, theft and handling all demonstrate that the highest offending rate was among those aged between 15 and 24, and that the second highest was among those aged between 10 and 14. Victimisation of those same groups is equally high, however. In the context of robbery and violence, the highest rate of victimisation was among those aged between 10 and 24.

A raft of Government measures are already addressing many of the underlying causes of crime. Unemployment—to name but one—is falling dramatically in my constituency. Nevertheless, there is a real need for more deterrence. Both my local authority and the Lewisham police service generally welcome the Bill: they are delighted by the Government's recognition that the yob culture will no longer be tolerated.

At present, most people arrested for drunkenness—certainly in my area—get off with a caution. Not even a night in the cells seems to act as a deterrent, and there is a feeling that the courts do not view drunkenness as a serious matter. Such is the frustration of my constituents and my local authority that they are in the process of constructing a case for a byelaw on street drinking. I agree with what my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said about such applications for byelaws: they are difficult to draft, and the local authority has been greatly concerned about the difficulties involved. The Bill will be helpful in that regard as well.

In my experience, there are two kinds of street drinker. There are the long-term alcoholics, who are usually older and penniless, and there are the daytime drinkers, who cause serious offence but who really need "wet centres" and other ways of being helped to overcome a habit that can no longer be deterred. I trust that we can give more help to local authorities and volunteer organisations to try to tackle the—admittedly small—number of people who engage in such disruptive activities.

A much more widespread problem is that of young people who are fit and healthy and who seemingly have unlimited funds with which to purchase alcohol. They cause continual misery to my constituents in their rowdiness in the streets and around drinking places—not only licensed premises, but off-licences as well—particularly in the evenings and at night, on the buses, the tubes and the trains, where they are intimidating and cause real concerns. Indeed, they probably deter many people from travelling when they would wish to do so. It is for that reason that we believe that fixed-penalty notices will be a deterrent and very helpful in trying to deal with that type of antisocial behaviour.

There will always be a limit on the number of those who can be arrested, however many police officers there are on the streets. On the issue of police officers, I tell my hon. Friend the Minister that my borough commander, Mike Humphrey, is very much of the view that the increased payment for police officers in London, and the free travel to be introduced next month, will greatly aid recruitment and retention.

We cannot, however, reduce this debate to simple numbers. As I said, it will never be possible to arrest all who are involved in antisocial behaviour, regardless of what powers or penalties we have. That is why the rest of the Government's initiatives on youth offending are so important and why local partnerships are crucial too.

In Lewisham, the arrest-to-charge target of two days and the first court appearance target of seven days have been met in 84 per cent. of cases, and that is a very considerable achievement. However, it should be seen alongside the many new and imaginative programmes that never existed before the Government were elected. I think that Lewisham was even ahead of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary in targeting mobile telephone crime. We have a special scheme whereby people are encouraged

to protect their telephones by recording the IMEI—international mobile equipment identity—number which is unique to every telephone. That programme has gone to our primary and secondary schools and our local colleges.

Additionally, 10 schools have been targeted with theatre workshops that help children to define robbery and bullying, to consider their legal and social consequences, and to help them to judge their peers and to attempt to modify their own behaviour. The programme is enormously important, and it is to be properly tested so that, when it is in operation, measurements of street crime and bullying will be taken within a half-mile radius of schools participating in the programme.

We are also grateful to my right hon. Friend for selecting Lewisham borough as a pilot for testing the effect of restorative justice on reducing offending by young individuals. Young people will be confronted with their actions and made to realise the consequences of their crime, both for their victims and for the wider community. It is a pilot, building on an already successful scheme that has involved 40 people in the past year in making some type of reparation.

Finally, I should like to say a few words on the issue of new measures to close down licensed premises. In the past year, I have been dealing with some very serious nuisances at two public houses in my constituency. Both premises are in entirely residential areas where their large back gardens abut the gardens of many neighbours.

As we all know, today's pubs are completely different from the drinking places that were established many years ago. I am speaking about Victorian and Edwardian terraces and public houses. Today, amplified music and eating and drinking outdoors, which are associated with licensed premises, have become a major problem to many of the people living around those areas. I am told by residents that, in the summer, they cannot hear themselves speak indoors because of the noise. They also cannot go into their gardens because of the noise, the bad behaviour, the bad language and the quantities of food that are consumed—with the associated smells—and even thrown into their own gardens.

The problem has become a nightmare for very many people in my constituency. Many of them thought that, come winter, the nightmare would end, but for the advent of outdoor heaters and new year's day barbecues in Deptford. It has become a very serious problem. A great deal of drunkenness and riotous behaviour are occurring in just a few of our public houses and in the surrounds of those buildings; and they have to be dealt with. It is utterly unacceptable to us that the rights of those who run public houses and the rights of those who seek to enjoy themselves should have more sway than those of the hapless victims who are the neighbours of those licensed premises.

I join my right. hon. and hon. Friends in welcoming the Bill, which gives us new opportunities to build on the highly successful crime and disorder partnerships that have brought new hope of crime reduction and reduction in antisocial behaviour to so many of our local communities.

6.56 pm

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): I begin by declaring an interest, as always, as a recorder of the Crown court, an acting deputy district judge in the magistrates courts, and a solicitor.

It would be very churlish of me not to wish the Bill well. It is well intentioned. However, it is also rather feeble. We have to consider it against the backcloth of the current situation in the world of crime and the world of law and order. We have decreasing police numbers and a collapse in police morale in many parts of the United Kingdom. Gun crime is at its highest for seven years, with 42 deaths from 4,000 incidents last year involving handguns. That just proves to all of us, if we did not know it, that gun legislation was a mistake.

We have a massive increase in violent crime. In many areas, robbery—much of it street robbery—has increased by more than 20 per cent., especially among under-18s. Additionally, drug-related crime—which is committed to finance a heroin or cocaine addiction—is increasing relentlessly.

I therefore looked forward with some interest to the Government's flagship crime Bill, which is possibly the seventh such Bill that we have had in the past three and a half years. However, I was very disappointed when I read the Bill's opening provisions. Speaking from a practitioner's point of view, I am bound to say that, although the provisions on penalty offences may be well intentioned, they have not been thought through and they will consequently be ineffective.

I should like to focus on clause 1, which is annotated in the Bill as dealing with

"Offences leading to penalties on the spot".

However, that is the first inaccuracy, because the penalties are payable not on the spot, but at a later stage.

The clause then describes a motley collection of about one dozen offences, from the very minor—such as being drunk in a highway—to very serious public order offences. Apparently all the offences qualify, at a policeman's discretion, for a so-called penalty ticket. Goodness knows who dreamed up and drafted the Bill's penalty-notice provisions. Whoever it was, I suggest that he or she knows not a great deal about the criminal law and even less about the real world of crime, criminals and the courts in the United Kingdom. I suspect that it was someone who rarely steps out of his or her closeted office in Whitehall.

The truth is that the proposals are cumbersome and fraught with difficulty. A great deal more work needs to be done on them. I share the view of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes)—who really does know what he is talking about on so many of these issues—that prior consultation on the provisions would have been so helpful.

Mr. Charles Clarke: It has been made clear—perhaps it should be made clearer—that there was full consultation on the Bill. The precise list of offences that was drawn up came as a result of representations from precisely the organisations the hon. Gentleman is talking about, and was not drawn up in any ivory tower.

Mr. Malins: I have not mentioned any organisations. I wonder whether the stipendiary bench, the Crown court judges or the solicitors who practice in the criminal courts were consulted.

I wish to set out a few problem areas to which insufficient thought has been given. The penalty notice provisions apply only to somebody over 18, but most of

[Mr. Malins]

the offences under the clause are much more likely to be committed by persons under 18, who are completely exempt from the provisions of the Bill. Why is that? Is it sensible?

Who selected these particular twelve offences, and on what basis? They vary from the not so serious to the very serious. Wasting police time is a serious offence under the Criminal Law Act 1967 and, rightly, carries up to six months in custody. In what circumstances should a policeman merely issue a ticket for such a serious offence? Likewise, under section 5 of the Public Order Act 1967, threatening behaviour is another offence which can be minor or really quite serious.

The Minister ought to focus on the age problem. Take this example. A constable sees two persons trespassing on the railway, which is a penalty ticket offence. One looks over 18, but is not. The other is over 18, but does not look it. What does the constable do? Can he demand proof of age? Is the constable to make up his or her mind? What if a constable gives a ticket to someone whom he believes to be under 18, only to discover that the person is not? Would what the lawyers call an estoppel operate, preventing a charge being brought against that youngster? That is a serious issue, given that someone receiving a penalty ticket and paying it quickly completely escapes a criminal conviction.

Here is another example. A known 17-year-old and a known 19-year-old are jointly sending telephone messages to cause annoyance, which is another penalty offence. How fair is it for the 19-year-old to escape without conviction because he pays a penalty, while the 17-year-old inevitably gets a criminal record for the same activity?

How many penalty notices can be acquired before a person is brought to court? Is there any provision in terms of building up a record of notices? We have no idea under the Bill what the financial penalty will be. We are told that there is to be a certain maximum, but no guidance is given. Can the Minister help? Does the police officer issuing the penalty have any discretion as to the amount? That is a most important question.

Dr. Ladyman: My reading of the Bill suggests that the constable has the option of taking the individual back to the police station before issuing the penalty notice, so such matters could be determined there. Also, the constable has the option of not giving the penalty notice, but proceeding with a court action in the usual way.

Mr. Malins: The hon. Gentleman is right; perhaps the constable has too much discretion. If he has discretion as to the amount of the penalty that he can give on the spot—despite his other possibilities—there will be a problem as to how he accurately assesses the offender's means. Is it wise for him to be allowed, in effect, to take powers of judicial discretion? Or is the penalty absolutely fixed for every single offender?

We must remember that public order offences cover a wide spectrum of behaviour and in court would command widely differing fines, depending on the facts. If the penalty were fixed, it could be much too high or much too low for particular offenders. Offenders of different means would be severely affected. Courts always take into account the defendant's means before fixing a fine and they give poor defendants time to pay. If a poor offender were given a penalty notice without being given time to pay, that might be grossly unfair. A poor offender who could not pay within 21 days would have to go to court and get a conviction, merely because of his poverty.

As the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey said, collection of the penalties will be difficult in the courts around London. It is worth remembering that most of the offences that come before me in the London courts are committed by those who are on benefits, out of work and without a bean in their pocket. It should not be imagined that we have courts filled with queues of defendants wearing smart suits. Our courts are full of people who are on the breadline. How are they treated by the Bill? Do they get the same fixed penalty? Who makes the decision?

Where does a fixed penalty stand in relation to a caution? Is it to be recordable? Will magistrates be told in later court proceedings about previous fixed penalties? Would not a formal caution have a greater deterrent effect than a fixed penalty, especially if the offender denied the offence but did not bother to ask for a trial? He would then get a fine registered against him, which he would ignore because he does not believe it to be fair.

Furthermore, there will be pressure on people to pay the penalty to avoid having a trial and the risk of conviction and a criminal record. It is manifestly wrong to put pressure on people in this way. A penalty does not amount to a criminal record; the Bill makes it clear that the person concerned shall escape conviction. However, poorer people are disadvantaged by their inability to pay up whatever is demanded within the time demanded.

If the Minister cannot deal with my questions, I would ask him to ask his officials to draft some answers and let me have a full response. People are entitled to answers to these genuine questions. How can a person who fails to request a trial within the time limit avoid the penalty plus 50 per cent? He may have been ill or have had an accident; there are all kinds of possibilities. This could be yet another fine mess for the courts to sort out.

I am worried about the burdens on the police. Clause 3 talks about the notice that had to be served. Can anyone imagine a policeman in the street issuing to some potential offender a notice stating the offences, giving the particulars of the circumstances, specifying the suspended enforcement period, stating the amount of the penalty, stating the justice's chief executive to whom it should be paid—I need not go on: I say to anyone who believes that that will happen on the streets of London, or any other city, with any effect: get real.

The provisions on licensed premises seek to impose a reverse burden of proof on the defendant. That seems to be open to challenge by the European Court of Human Rights, as indeed may be the concept of travel restrictions on drug traffickers who have completed their sentences.

Many things that the Government have tried have been well intentioned. Antisocial behaviour orders were well intentioned, but they have failed. Drug treatment and testing orders were well intentioned but—particularly in the Gloucester experiment—they have failed too. I fear that many of the provisions in the Bill are well intentioned, but will have no real impact on the amount of street crime in this country.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I remind hon. Members that the 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches applies from now until 9.30.

7.10 pm

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): As I have just caught the 10-minute limit, my contribution will be a little shorter than it would have been—but perhaps it will be the better for that.

Liverpool is one of the safest cities in the country. The fact that I can say that so confidently is a tribute to the people of the city, to Merseyside police and to the other partners in the local crime reduction partnerships. It is no surprise that the crime reduction partnerships are known as Citysafe, because we are proclaiming something of which we are all very proud.

Since the election of the Labour Government, there has been a 2.5 per cent. fall in recorded crime, with especially large falls in domestic burglary and robbery, although there have been increases in certain other crimes, and I want to concentrate on those. The city of Liverpool has pioneered the use of antisocial behaviour orders, with a concentration on youth disorder and low-level disruptive criminal behaviour.

For two and a half years, we have had a central antisocial behaviour unit in Liverpool, in which expertise has been gathered and through which cases have been taken to court. One of the first antisocial behaviour orders was made in Liverpool. When orders have been obtained, they have been relatively successful, in that serious problems of antisocial behaviour have been dealt with, but a difficulty has developed over the past couple of years, and in particular over the past six months, as the local authority has allowed staffing levels at the unit to fall, partly because it took its eye off the ball and froze the posts when staff left. That has now changed, and recruitment is going ahead.

The crime reduction partnerships, the city council and the police have established protocols that mean that all serious cases of antisocial behaviour have to be routed through the antisocial behaviour unit. The problem with that is the one that we had in Liverpool before the orders were available or the unit was set up: the local police and housing officers can pass the cases on to somebody else. It is not appropriate for every case to be passed to a central unit: serious cases should be dealt with at such a unit, where the expertise, the lawyers and the enforcement officers are available to deal with them, but I have always viewed the orders as a tool of early intervention rather than a weapon of last resort, and I am very much afraid that in Liverpool they are becoming a weapon of last resort.

In a recent article in the *Liverpool Echo*, the councillor responsible for the antisocial behaviour unit said:

> "We try to do all sorts of things before we serve an ASBO. We only go to court if we have no alternative."

To me, that is a misunderstanding of the nature and aim of the orders, and I have been doing my bit to try to persuade people that it is more appropriate in more minor cases—which are none the less serious to neighbours who are badly affected—for the local chief inspectors and housing officers to go to the magistrates court and obtain the orders, without having to bother the central unit. I would like the city council and the police to co-operate in making that a reality.

The Bill contains provisions for police training. It is a shame that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) is no longer here, because she and I have been developing a dialogue about the importance of police numbers. In Liverpool, police numbers have gradually, gently fallen over the past 10 years—the fall has now stabilised, and there is a planned increase—yet over that period, and especially over the past three or four years, crime has fallen. Increased police numbers do not necessarily reduce crime. I want to discuss why that is, and what the police can do to make themselves more effective.

In the Merseyside police area, in an experiment in Knowsley—it is not in my constituency, but it is close by—a reorganisation of community policing has led to a 71 per cent. fall in youth nuisance. The experiment was dreamed up by a superintendent and a local chief inspector. There is a permanent police presence. The local officers stay in the area and get to be known by everyone there; there is a response team for emergencies; and a problem-solving approach is taken. It has been remarkably successful. In April, Merseyside police plan to reorganise all their community policing in that way. I think that that will be tremendously effective, and I congratulate them.

There are still problems in Merseyside police, however, that mean that a lot of resources are wasted that could be used to deal with low-level disorder and youth crime, which is the type of crime that upsets my constituents the most and adds to the impression that crime is increasing, when in fact it is decreasing.

Over the previous year, the wages of suspended officers cost the Merseyside police £320,000. The police cannot always deal with the cases of suspended officers as quickly as they might like—because of court cases, for instance—but two of the suspended officers had been on suspension for more than two years.

Suspensions are not the only problem: there are sickness and disciplinary matters. I was approached by a constituent who is a female detective constable who joined the force in January 1978. After 20 years of exemplary service, she was forced to go sick in August 1997, following what can only be described as bullying, sex discrimination and harassment. The grievance that she registered shortly thereafter was resolved only late last year.

The investigating officers retired, witnesses suddenly found that they themselves were under investigation, and there were medical retirements—all of which cost money and made the case drag on for three years. My constituent is unlikely to be able to return to work, while the officers who subjected her to bullying and intimidation have not even received words of advice. That is not acceptable in the modern police service.

In a 1999 Merseyside police staff survey, 17 per cent. of police officers said that they had been bullied in the previous year; 59 per cent. had experienced some form of harassment; 4 per cent. had considered leaving the service as a result of sexual, racial or homophobic harassment; and a further 18 per cent. had considered leaving as a result of another form of harassment.

[Maria Eagle]

Those figures are shocking. They show that good forces such as Merseyside police have serious internal management problems and problems of dealing with bullying and harassment that are costing the police, and therefore the taxpayer, hundreds of thousands of pounds a year that could be better directed to dealing with antisocial behaviour on our streets.

That is why I sometimes disagree with the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald that increasing police numbers is the answer. I would like more police to be recruited in Liverpool, but I want them to do a job for the people of Liverpool, not to spend their time bullying each other, being suspended or being off sick because of what other officers have done, and not being able to provide the service that they should.

Merseyside police are changing in a good way. They are seriously considering changing the way in which they police our communities. That is necessary, but there is more to do and I hope that they will do it. I want Liverpool city council and the local police to be more proactive in implementing antisocial behaviour orders, taking such cases to court and dealing with those matters as soon as possible.

7.20 pm

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): I shall be brief because I want to make only two points, either of which could have been made in an intervention. Although the Home Secretary was generous with his time, he obviously wished to proceed with his speech and I was unable to intervene on him. I hope that the Minister will consider the two points in his winding-up speech.

I welcome the fact that my hon. Friends on the Front Bench have decided not to vote against Second Reading, but my first point is that any good in the Bill is likely to be negated in my county of Hampshire. The Minister will be familiar with the argument about that, but I want briefly to bring it to his attention again.

The chief constable of Hampshire readily talks about a crisis in police numbers in the county. It arises from peculiar circumstances. The Government have provided funding for extra police in Hampshire this year, next year and the following year, but our problem is difficulty in recruiting. The crisis is such that the 62 places for which we hoped to recruit this year remain unfilled, and the police authority has approached the Home Office for permission to defer recruiting for those numbers until next year.

If we take normal wastage into account, Hampshire faces the problem of trying to recruit 300 officers. We fear that that cannot be achieved, and that any merits in the Bill and other comparable measures will be negated by the shortage of police numbers. The root of the problem is that police forces in counties such as Hampshire are simply uncompetitive. In places of high employment, high housing costs and relatively high salaries, the starting conditions in the police force are uncompetitive. I urge the Minister to consider that seriously.

Attention has already been drawn to the harassment and intimidation by animal rights extremists of scientists and others involved in medical tests. I welcome the Government's intention to introduce new powers to tackle that serious problem. I want to make one point that relates to an intervention on my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). I hope that the Government's intentions will be framed in measures that are not selective. Immediate attention is focused on the harassment and intimidation of those involved in medical tests on animals, but they are by no means the only people who are targeted. If I remember correctly, the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) referred to the intimidation of scientists whose work relates to nuclear energy or genetically modified food. I hope that the Government will ensure that the measures are not selective and that they will apply to all those who may be affected.

I appreciate that the subject is controversial, but I want to refer to one specific category—the organised harassment and intimidation of those involved in the fur trade and fur retailing. The Home Office knows about the problem through correspondence and meetings with the victims of animal terrorists. The Minister has had several meetings and corresponded with representatives of the British Fur Trade Association, whose anxieties are real. Every act of violence and harassment that is perpetrated against those who work in animal testing laboratories has also been suffered by those who work in the fur trade. I hope that the Minister will consider that long-running problem and ensure that the Government's measures will also be effective for the fur trade.

7.24 pm

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak in the debate. I want to concentrate on the Bill's provisions for combating crime and disorder. In an earlier intervention, I mentioned that some of my constituents work at Huntingdon Life Sciences, although the company is in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). I want to consider the harassment and intimidation suffered not only by the workers and shareholders of that company, but by other scientists who work with animals.

There may be more medical research staff in Cambridge than in any other constituency in the United Kingdom. They do valuable work, which enables us to find drugs that alleviate suffering from crippling diseases and helps us to make progress in many other spheres. For many years, Huntingdon Life Sciences has tested drugs and chemicals. Such testing is required by law. I wish that we could test drugs in other ways, without using animals. New methods are becoming available, but the law currently requires drugs to be tested on animals before they are used on humans. I do not believe that there is much choice about the matter. If a new drug is not tested on animals, it must initially be tested on humans. It is difficult to convey that message to some animal rights protesters.

I am pleased about our progress in the past three years on the use of animals in scientific procedures. There have been recent developments, and the Home Office has an excellent website that promotes the three Rs. They are:

"reducing the number of animals used, refining procedures to minimise suffering and replacing animal use."

There will be an end to testing cosmetics, tobacco or alcohol products on animals. Animals will not be used to develop or test offensive weapons, and the use of great apes, gorillas, chimpanzees, pygmy chimpanzees and

orang-utans will not be authorised. A great deal of progress has therefore already been made. I hope that animal rights protesters will listen to my comments and to those of the right hon. Member for Huntingdon, who gave an excellent description of the stringent precautions that are taken to safeguard animals in testing.

Despite those comments, many of my constituents believe that animal testing is wrong. One lady, who speaks to me regularly, declares that she will refuse drugs because she does not want animals to die so that she can be cured. That is a consistent position, which I respect, although I do not share it. Many others believe that drugs should not be tested on animals, and they protest against the use of animals in tests although they take the drugs that have been developed as a result. I do not condemn that group of people, as long as their protests are peaceful. I believe that everyone has a right to make their opinions known, even if their behaviour is inconsistent. Whatever amendments are made to the Bill, we should ensure the preservation of the right to peaceful protest.

However, the people whom we are discussing are the others; those who use harassment and intimidation to force their views on workers and shareholders at Huntingdon Life Sciences and other scientific research establishments. I should like the Bill to tackle the activities of that group. It is wholly unacceptable for people who work within the law, carrying out work that is required by Government, to be subject to the harassment that they currently suffer.

In this financial year, Cambridge police authority has spent £2.6 million on policing demonstrations by animal rights protesters. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has recently authorised a special payment to Cambridgeshire police and I have received a letter from the chief constable of Cambridgeshire that expresses his gratitude for the extra resources.

I should like to thank the officers of Cambridgeshire police who have been almost unbearably stretched in the past few months. Leave has often had to be cancelled at short notice. The demonstrations have not been easy to police and officers have become involved in ugly incidents as tempers have frayed. Officers have policed those demonstrations extremely well, although many more of them suffer stress and illness as a result of constantly working with insufficient breaks.

At present, the Bill does not offer much protection from the activities of animal rights protesters, so I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary intends to introduce amendments to make such activities illegal. For instance, at present, it is not illegal for protesters to demonstrate outside the homes of people whom they decide to target. During the past few weeks, that has happened to some of my constituents. In one case, the protesters believed—mistakenly—that one of the companies of which my constituent is a director is a customer of Huntingdon Life Sciences. That is not true, but even if it were, my constituents should not have to suffer harassment and intimidation in their home.

Not only scientists are being targeted. Protesters have obtained the names and addresses of shareholders in Huntingdon Life Sciences. Last year, a group of members of the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection—calling themselves the BUAV reform group—wrote to 1,700 individuals who hold shares in Huntingdon Life Sciences. The letter stated that, from 5 April onwards, the group would start to hold 24-hour demonstrations outside shareholders' homes unless they sold their shares by 3 April and sent the reform group a copy of the contract note. That is appalling.

As a result, the share price of Huntingdon Life Sciences collapsed. That is one of the reasons why the organisation had so much difficulty in raising the finance to continue. Surely, such practices are wholly unacceptable. People should not be intimidated such that they feel that they have to sell their shares. We need to introduce legislation urgently. The legislation should allow company directors and shareholders to use service addresses to prevent activists from obtaining their home addresses.

It is not only demonstrations outside the homes of scientists and shareholders that cause anxiety. My constituents have suffered from abusive telephone calls, abusive letters, cards, leaflets and graffiti, and posters and stickers on their homes and cars and around the area in which they live. They have also suffered from abusive telephone calls to their relatives, friends and even to their children's schools. Some have been threatened by telephone and letter. A few months ago, cars were fire-bombed in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Huntingdon.

The law should clearly define what peaceful protest is. It should be an offence to protest in an intimidatory manner. Shouting abuse and veiled threats, such as, "We know where you live", are unacceptable.

I understand that the extremists have turned their attention to some of the large drug companies that use Huntingdon Life Sciences—one of which is Glaxo Wellcome. The world is a large place, and if companies experience harassment and intimidation, they will simply move to another country. I am concerned that those extremist protesters will drive medical research abroad. That is ironic indeed, because we have the best regulated research in the world. Less distress is caused to animals in this country than in any other. If the animal rights protesters are successful in their aims, that will result in more distress—not less—and we in Britain will have lost an extremely valuable facility that is important for human health and for the quality of life.

I conclude by reading a paragraph from a letter from one of my constituents. He writes:

"We have the most effective legislation in the world to protect experimental animals from undue suffering. It would be ironic if the animal right groups force UK research to take place in another country where the protection for laboratory animals is not as good as in this country. It would also be an economic disaster for the UK if pharmaceutical and biotech companies move their research abroad as a result of increasing difficulties in pursuing animal research in this country."

I could not agree more.

7.34 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): For a number of years, my father was research secretary of the British Tuberculosis Association. I entirely agree with everything that the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) has just said. I hope that one thing that emerges from this debate is the united voice of the House telling some people that the demonstrations and behaviour in which they engage are not acceptable in a mature, democratic society.

That is where my consensus politics finish, however. At the previous general election, Labour candidates in my constituency and in other constituencies went around with

[Mr. Tony Baldry]

pledge cards—rather like blood donor cards. There were several pledges on the cards, described as early promises. My electors thought that was because they would be delivered early. However, we discovered that it was because they were promises that had been made early in the election campaign.

The promises were pretty modest. The crime promise was not that Labour would increase police numbers or reduce crime, but a modest pledge that it would reduce the time between the arrest and sentencing of young offenders. That pledge—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron) scowls, but it was an extremely modest pledge and her party has not managed to deliver it. I suspect that many people in Lincoln and in other constituencies will produce those pledge cards at the next general election and ask why the Labour Government have not delivered that pledge.

The Government realise that as they are approaching a general election they need to be seen to be doing something about crime. This measure is very much a "We are approaching a general election and we need to be seen to be doing something about crime" Bill. I say that because if we consider the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, we would be entitled to describe it as a "We have just been elected and we need to be seen to be doing something about crime" Bill.

The first part of that Act deals with antisocial behaviour orders. I wholly agree with the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) who said that those orders seem to be being used only as a last resort. Since their introduction, they have been used on only two occasions in the whole Thames valley area.

Since the debates on the Queen's Speech, I have done some research on that matter. Everyone tries to blame someone else. Magistrates express their concern that human rights legislation would mean that they could not introduce ASBOs. They say that if the police and local authorities had proposed ASBOs, they would have considered such cases on their merits. The chief constable of the Thames Valley force, Sir Charles Pollard, tells me that the police find the use of ASBOs difficult because of the need

"to prove that there is a pattern of behaviour which continues over a period of time and which cannot be dealt with adequately by the prosecution of those concerned for a single one-off incident or criminal act . . . the above requirement, plus the cumbersome evidential requirements that are inevitable whenever an adversarial judicial process is used to resolve a social problem, mean that ASBOs are not likely to be the preferred option when alternatives exist."

We are entitled to point out to the Government that the 1998 Act is a dead-letter for my constituents—it simply does not work. As the chief constable acknowledges:

"in Thames Valley Police area or elsewhere, there remain a significant number of people who have the effect of actively degrading the safety, environment and confidence of the immediate vicinity of where they live. Many but not all of these people are young."

In his speech, the Home Secretary said that the Bill would bear down on yobbish behaviour. However, if legislation already introduced by the Government fails to bear down on such behaviour and is a dead-letter because the police and local authorities are not using it, what hope is there that the provisions in the Bill will be implemented?

I suspect that one reason why the police and local authorities do not use ASBOs is that they have to pay for the orders. The Crown Prosecution Service has no role. If a prosecution is brought for other offences, the CPS has a budget to pay for it. There is still some confusion about who bears the cost of bringing cases involving antisocial behaviour orders before the courts and about who bears the cost if there is an appeal. ASBOs are not being obtained, and the Government are sadly neglecting other aspects of the youth justice system.

This week, I received a letter from the clerk to the Oxfordshire magistrates that makes rather sad reading. She tells me that on 19 January—just 10 days ago—

"the magistrates considered an application by Oxfordshire County Council, for an order, in accordance with S25 Children Act 1989, authorising them to keep a fifteen year old boy in Secure Accommodation.

The court was told that the boy, who turned fifteen last November, had been voluntarily accommodated at a local children's home since 8th January. However, as he regularly absconded from the children's home in order to obtain illegal drugs it was feared he would suffer significant harm unless he could be contained.

In addition, the boy was at risk of causing himself serious harm, having, on 16th January, repeatedly run headlong at a wall and later attempted to hang himself using an electric flex.

Information provided to the court confirmed that the boy used a variety of drugs, including heroin which he injected intravenously. As he was known to share needles doctors recommended he urgently needed a medial examination and to be screened for communicable diseases.

In the absence of any authority to restrain the boy he had absconded from the children's home on a daily basis often being returned to the home by the police. More than once he has been found staggering along the street in a distressed state with blood dripping down his arms from intravenous drugs use.

After contacting over fifty residential rehabilitation centres, social workers had identified only one centre in the whole country that was prepared to take a person aged under sixteen. This establishment is in Lincolnshire and will not have a bed available until March 2001.

In the interim period the Oxfordshire County Council sought an order enabling them to hold the boy in Secure Accommodation. This order was granted by the Magistrates who were then horrified to learn that there was currently no bed available in a secure unit anywhere in the country. Social workers therefore had no alternative but to return the boy to the children's home until a bed becomes available."

There is little point in the Government introducing further measures to deal with young people if comparatively recent legislation simply is not working. It is pointless introducing legislation on curfews if no curfew order has yet been implemented. There seems to be no suggestion that local authorities are keen to introduce curfews. Indeed, all the representations that I have received from local authorities state that they have considerable reservations about introducing curfews.

Although some parts of the Bill may well be worth while and commendable, the Government have to accept that there is considerable scepticism—

Mr. Charles Clarke: And cynicism.

Mr. Baldry: There is considerable scepticism and cynicism. People living in the constituencies of hon. Members on both sides of the House are sceptical and cynical about the fact that the Government have been prolific in introducing measures, spinning them and talking about flagship legislation. However, until people

can see things happening on the ground and local residents can see that the tearaways, teenagers and young thugs who daily make their lives a misery are being dealt with, they will believe that all such legislation is simply spin and no substance.

7.44 pm

Mrs. Janet Dean (Burton): I am pleased to have the opportunity to take part in the debate. The Bill contains many measures that will be widely welcomed and which many people think are long overdue, such as making kerb crawling and hit-and-run driving arrestable offences. Much has been said about animal rights activities, and it is important to recognise that it is not just the laboratories that have been, and are, under attack by animal rights demonstrators.

There is a guinea-pig farm on the border of my constituency and the activities of animal rights demonstrators has been causing great concern to some of my constituents. I acknowledge that many people sincerely hold the view that there should be no animal experimentation whatever—a point referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell). I am sure that we all look forward to the day when such experiments are no longer necessary. It is a fundamental right of citizens to take part in peaceful protests, but it cannot be right that people are terrorised in their own homes.

In my constituency, as in other parts of the country, demonstrators have targeted the homes of those connected with animal rearing and testing establishments. They live in continual fear, and it is not only those who have such connections who are affected—the neighbours of employees, contractors and sometimes whole streets of people have their lives disrupted.

I received a letter from a young father, who said:

"Today is Christmas day and I have just spent the last two hours playing outside in the street with my three children on their new bicycles. A nice picture . . . except for the fact that a dozen Animal Rights protesters joined us and about the same number of Police officers."

My constituent went on to say:

"My children demand the protection that I as a father should give. We have the choice to live in a quiet cul de sac and we have the right to freedom of movement. At this moment in time we do not have this."

The farmer and his neighbours suffer from the protesters' actions. During most of last Saturday night, they had to listen to large explosions that took place on their land. Those explosions were not only frightening to humans, but, I suspect, were pretty frightening to guinea-pigs and other animals as well, yet it does not enter the heads of the animal rights protesters that they might be harming the animals that they are protesting about.

I welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has said that he will consider amending the Bill to try to introduce measures that will give the police the powers so that the lives of people, such as my constituents, will not be blighted by threats, intimidation and fear.

I turn now to other proposals in the Bill. It is right to give the police extra powers to tackle disorder in public places. However, it is important that in proposing to raise the age involved in the child curfew scheme and tackling the yob culture, we remember that we are talking about measures to tackle a problem caused by a very small minority of young people. It is important to remember that most young people today, and in any generation, are great. They are enthusiastic, caring, law-abiding members of society and, too often, wrongly condemned by some older people. However, today's young people have more pressures on them. The availability on our streets of alcohol and drugs has increased over the years.

I welcome the proposals to tackle under-age drinking, but we need to continue to consider the level of excise duty on alcohol, not only because I represent the capital of brewing, but because of the effect on our young people of the sale of illegally imported alcohol. Most young people are well behaved, and we should listen to them and try to meet their needs, but a small minority cause intolerable disruption. The Bill will give extra powers to the police to address the problems that can wreak havoc on local neighbourhoods.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) said, the extension of curfews could help parents to support their children when the parents may be in despair because their offspring will not accept their care and advice. I hope that they will find the backing of curfew orders helpful.

The Bill contains good proposals to make the licensing laws more effective. Several hon. Members have mentioned the crime figures. We sometimes think that violent crime affects only the elderly. They are certainly frightened about the crime statistics, especially when we talk about increases in violent crime. It is important to recognise that most violent crime is perpetrated by one young person, usually male, on another. I hope that the measures to tackle the excessive consumption of alcohol will have an impact on that violent crime.

In supporting the Bill, including the proposals to tidy up and strengthen laws relating to alcohol abuse, I hope that, in the near future, legislation will be introduced to modernise fully our rather antiquated licensing laws.

7.50 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I support the specific provision in the Bill that relates to the handling of DNA samples collected as part of a mass screening inquiry.

I raise this issue because of a constituency case that I brought before the House in an Adjournment debate on 10 March 1999. It was about my constituents, Robert and Gill Smith and their late daughter, Louise. To put it briefly, Louise left home on the Christmas eve of 1995 to go with her friends to a local night club, and she never came back. On Christmas day, her family reported to the police that she had not returned home and a long investigation followed.

There was a mass search for Louise's body and it was eventually found eight weeks later. A DNA sample was taken and the police were faced with the task of trying to match that sample as part of their inquiry. The largest mass screening that had ever been undertaken began and, by the following April, 400 tests had been carried out on local young men. By November, the figure had reached 2,000 and, by the following Easter, it had reached 4,500. Eventually, along with other elements of proof, the DNA match enabled the killer to be identified and he was convicted of this dreadful crime. As the Home Secretary suggested earlier, the DNA was also used to clear the innocent early in the inquiry and to ensure that the police were not diverted down a false avenue.

[Mr. Steve Webb]

However, the family were disturbed to learn that those 4,500 samples could not be retained even if those who had given them wanted them to be kept because the police were obliged to destroy the samples. I wish to explain the scale of the effort involved. The samples were collected over 16 months. The estimated cost of collecting and analysing each swab is a little under £40. If we add to that the costs of cameras, film, cool boxes and other items, the whole inquiry involved about £250,000 of police expenditure. It also involved the expenditure of police time and the time of the volunteers who gave the samples and who in most cases would probably not have had any problem if the samples had been retained with their informed consent.

Louise's parents came to me about the issue and they were determined that something positive should emerge out of something so dreadful. They launched a petition with the aid of a local newspaper, *The Gazette*, and my support, and it was not an easy campaign to run. It is easy to obtain signatures against a proposal to shut a hospital, but it was difficult to explain the complexities of this issue given the intense personal pain that the family felt. They stood out in shopping centres, explaining to passers by why the campaign was necessary, and they accumulated nearly 10,000 signatures on a petition that I presented to the House in March 1999.

The following day I had the Adjournment debate to which I referred earlier and to which the Minister of State, Home Office, the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), responded. He was very generous in giving time to the family that day and they very much appreciated that. He assured us then that legislation would be forthcoming on this issue, and I am pleased to welcome the fact that the promise has been honoured in clause 81.

I have looked at the Bill and the Library's notes on it and would like clarification on one point. When the Home Office consulted on this issue in July 1999, it said:

"The police believe that amendment of section 64"—

of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984—

"to permit the retention of samples, and the DNA profiles derived from samples, for use in future investigations would be mutually beneficial as volunteers would need to approached . . . on only one occasion."

Such an approach would also be beneficial to the police.

The consultation document added:

"The practicalities . . . would need to be considered but clearly appropriate safeguards would be required to ensure, as a minimum, that samples were indeed being given and retained voluntarily".

That point is covered in the Bill, but the consultation document also refers to the need to ensure that

"the right to withdraw consent at any time was available."

That was the Home Office's view in the summer of 1999, and safeguards are valuable in ensuring that the people providing the samples willingly give consent. We want them to provide samples and they are more likely to do that if there are safeguards on the giving of consent. The Home Office rightly said that they would be able to withdraw their consent if, for example, they feel uncertain about the use of the sample or another reason.

People who are told that, if they give a sample they will never be able to revoke their consent, are less likely to consent in the first place. We want them to consent, so I agree with the position that the Home Office took in July 1999. However, clause 81 suggests that consent, once given, can never be revoked. When the Minister sums up, will he comment on why there has been that change in approach?

I do not want to detract from the warm welcome that I give to the fact that the Government have introduced the specific provision to deal with DNA samples and mass screening in which consent can be voluntarily given. I welcome the fact that the Government have honoured their promise to introduce such a change in the law.

7.56 pm

Miss Geraldine Smith (Morecambe and Lunesdale): Over the past three and a half years, the Government and the police working together have undoubtedly had a considerable measure of success in bringing about significant reductions in those crimes that affect ordinary people most—domestic burglary and car crime. Domestic burglary has fallen by 28 per cent. since the general election, and car crime by 20 per cent. In my constituency, the reductions in the levels of these crimes have been far more impressive, and are well above the national average. I therefore place on record my sincere thanks to Chief Superintendent Stuart Kirby for the superb job that he and his officers do in tackling crime throughout the Morecambe and Lancaster area.

Despite the fact that overall crime has fallen by 7 per cent. nationally since 1997, crime, the fear of crime and violence and disorderly conduct remain a matter of grave concern to me and many of my constituents. I therefore welcome many of the measures in the Bill, because they provide the police with an additional range of tools that will greatly assist them in carrying out their extremely difficult and dangerous task of protecting the public from criminal activity and bringing those who transgress the law to justice.

The introduction of fixed-penalty notices for offences, such as drunken and disorderly behaviour, will provide an imaginative option for the police to deal more effectively with the yobbish behaviour that pervades our towns and cities particularly at the weekends and on Saturday night. The further measures to combat alcohol-related disorder are also most welcome. The ability of the police immediately to close down disorderly licensed premises will prove a potent weapon in dealing with those establishments that are notorious for violent, drunken and loutish behaviour.

The measures that will allow local authorities to prevent the consumption of alcohol in inappropriate public places will certainly receive widespread public support in my constituency, where we faced a problem with drinking in public places. It took about seven years to introduce a byelaw to stop it happening. These measures will speed things up and will enable action to be taken more quickly. I also welcome the toughening up of the law relating to the sale of alcohol to young people under the age of 18.

Further measures to combat crime in this wide-ranging Bill—such as the travel restrictions on drugs traffickers, the measures to prevent the intimidation of witnesses, child curfew schemes, the police's additional powers of seizure, new powers of arrest and detention and the new procedures relating to the taking and retention of DNA samples and fingerprints—all have the common aim of

strengthening the position of the police and other law-enforcement agencies in their continual battle against crime. As such, they should be welcomed by both sides of the House.

However, the full potential of the measures in the Bill will undoubtedly not be realised unless they are accompanied by substantial increases in police numbers.

The public's confidence in the ability of the police to win the war against crime will not be restored until the police are able to provide a regular, high profile and visible presence on the streets of our towns and cities, particularly in the evenings and at night. There is no doubt in my mind that the vast majority in my constituency feel it essential to have more police on the beat. I make no apology to my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench for saying that I entirely support that view.

Having said that, unlike Conservative Members, who try to give the impression that everything on law and order was fine when they were in power, I do not seek to lay blame on this Government for the situation that they inherited from their predecessors. It is a fact that, in common with the rest of our public services, the police suffered underinvestment under the Tories, and as a result police numbers have steadily declined since 1993.

Mr. Heald: I am sure that the hon. Lady would not want to give a false impression. Surely she is aware that the number of constables on the beat—the people about whom she is concerned—went up every year under the Conservatives. Police numbers rose by 15,000.

Miss Smith: One can say many things with statistics. This Government are committed to additional funding over the next three years—huge Home Office spending. Will the hon. Gentleman intervene to tell me whether his party will match that spending if elected?

Mr. Heald: We have made it perfectly clear that one would have to be a fool to think that the Conservatives would not match the sort of budget that the Labour party has set.

Miss Smith: I am not quite sure whether that was a yes or a no.

If, when they came to power, the Government had been faced only with finding additional resources to fund extra police, I would have demanded that it be made available immediately. However, as all Labour Members know, as do the public, when the Conservatives left office in 1997, virtually all our public services were in crisis and the national debt was spiralling out of control. Such was the Tory legacy. In case Conservative Members should delude themselves that people have forgotten their miserable record on public services, let me assure them that they have not. If any should do so, we shall certainly remind them. Given such a background, the Government's tardiness in dealing with the issue of police numbers is, if not acceptable, at least clearly understandable.

Virtually everyone agrees that those who commit crimes should be caught, convicted and punished appropriately, but what people really want is not to be a victim of crime in the first place. Extra police on the streets can play a vital part in a cohesive crime prevention strategy. Apart from the physical deterrent of a visible police presence, the intelligence gleaned by police patrolling on foot cannot be replicated by officers sitting in vehicles patrolling huge areas.

Even if accompanied by a substantial increase in the number of police on the beat, the measures in the Bill are by no means all that needs to be done to address criminal behaviour. The link between criminal activity and high unemployment, deprivation and social exclusion is now almost universally accepted. Although such behaviour can never be condoned, it does not take too much stretching of the imagination to understand how people living in areas suffering from such problems can be drawn into a life of crime.

I am well aware that tackling social exclusion is at the centre of the Government's social policy and that successful delivery of it will make the biggest single contribution to crime prevention. However, there is still a long way to go. In the meantime, areas of severe social deprivation will benefit most from high profile policing. That point was made time and again at recent public meetings that I held in the west end of Morecambe and in Heysham. Although local police have undertaken to do as much as they can to raise their profile in such areas, limited resources will restrict their achievements.

One other point that came from those public meetings was concern about the small number of antisocial behaviour orders issued to date. Although antisocial behaviour is a real problem in my constituency, only one such order has been issued. There appears to be a reluctance and lack of enthusiasm in the police and on the local council to pursue that course of action. They say that it is because of the time and resources required to collect the evidence. I am well aware that that is not unique to my constituency; indeed, many Members have mentioned it in the debate. What measures are in place to audit the operation of antisocial behaviour orders legislation, and what remedial action can be taken if it is not properly applied?

For far too long, the quality of life of many has been wrecked by the fear of crime, especially of violent crime. They have become virtual prisoners in their own homes because they feel that it is no longer safe for them to walk the streets, visit their friends, use public transport or undertake a whole host of other activities that would constitute a normal life.

I quote as an example one of my constituents, Mr. Kenneth Appleby, who came to see me about the serious problems with antisocial behaviour in the Kingsway area of Heysham. He has been the victim of repeated attacks of extreme vandalism, believed to be by children. His car was covered in black paint on two occasions, even when it was on his drive and the gate was locked—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order.

8.6 pm

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): I welcome the opportunity to make a brief contribution to the debate. I should like to follow the path of responsible opposition taken by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) in welcoming some of the Bill's provisions, subject to appropriate scrutiny. Such a course was not always taken by the then Opposition prior to 1997, but is appropriate for a criminal justice Bill containing a variety of measures.

[Mr. James Clappison]

In my comments on the generality of the Government's policies on law and order, I would not want to be taken as opposing some of the individual measures which deserve a fair wind, subject to appropriate scrutiny. I am thinking of two provisions. The provisions relating to DNA could be an important step in assisting the administration of justice, making it more efficient, and in helping the police investigate crime and the courts avoid miscarriages of justice. They will also help in cases such as the tragic one of Louise Smith, properly raised by the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb).

The Government's provisions on animal rights protests also deserve a fair wind. Indeed, to go a little further, I very much endorse the Home Secretary's approach on the matter. He was clearly speaking for Members on both sides of the House in taking such a robust approach. People who are engaged in research on animals are doing very important work. They deserve recognition for the importance of their work and certainly deserve the full protection of the law. I should like to add one more point to those already made in the debate.

Besides the illegal protests, threats and intimidation, we have seen in the name of the animal rights protest in recent times some serious and horrific acts of violence against innocent members of the public. That was brought home to me some weeks ago when, in the village where I grew up, a member of a well-known local family who was working as a secretary in an estate agents' office opened a parcel only to find it explode in her face, damaging one of her eyes. I know that that was a terrible experience for that lady. It must be deprecated. The full weight and force of law and order must be brought against those who participate in criminal offences of that general character, so I shall give a fair wind to anything that helps to deal with such problems.

I now turn to more controversial matters—in particular, child curfew orders. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald was good enough to mention the amendment that I tabled to the Crime and Disorder Bill two years ago which would have extended the age range up to 16. The amendment was rejected out of hand by the Government. I am pleased, however, that the Government have now adopted the proposal. I am slightly surprised because, notwithstanding the Government's attitude originally, in recent weeks and months I have seen the proposal being trailed as the centrepiece of the Government's legislative programme and one of the flagship measures in the Queen's Speech. It has been trailed across newspaper front pages as one of the Government's principal so-called solutions for the problem of low-level disorder.

I am surprised that the Government have placed such weight on the proposal, but perhaps the change was inevitable. The success of the order in its original form—it was restricted to children of up to 10 years of age—was not entirely self-evident because no such order was made. In addition, the number of antisocial behaviour orders made was pitifully small. Against that background, the Government tried initially to argue that the number of orders made was not the measure of success. Instead, they tried to argue that the orders were a success because knowledge of their existence deterred youngsters from taking part in the activities that the orders were directed against. That assumes a knowledge of the law and a degree of sophistication that is beyond most under-10s. I am pleased that the Government have abandoned that line of argument.

The Government are still clinging to antisocial behaviour orders. These orders were the flagship of the Government's Crime and Disorder Act 1998. In their original form, the child curfew orders were only the supporting act. The star turn was the antisocial behaviour order. It was trailed by the Labour party when in opposition and it was included in amendments to Bills. It was highlighted as being the linchpin of the "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime" campaign. It led to many visits by Ministers to inner-city risk estates and to the launching of many press releases and initiatives. It was to be the answer to disorder.

The order may have been the flagship, but it was beached long ago. There have been numerous attempts to relaunch it, none of which has been successful. At first, the Government tried to argue that antisocial behaviour orders had been successful. When so few were made, the Government began to try to find someone to blame. By implication, the Government tried to blame magistrates. When it became apparent that magistrates were not imposing the orders because no few applications for them were being made, by implication the Government tried to blame the police and local authorities.

The Home Secretary even tried to blame civil liberties lawyers, one of his favourite targets. The right hon. Gentleman should be careful in that direction. There is no evidence that they have had anything to do with the failure of antisocial behaviour orders. The Minister of State, who has taken his place on the Government Front Bench, even tried to blame the Opposition. He said that we should not have opposed the orders in Committee. He missed the simple point that the Opposition did not oppose them. We simply said that they would not be of much use. That has not been entirely disproved.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): If the hon. Gentleman considers that antisocial behaviour orders are full of problems and to be deprecated, is he looking to a future Conservative Government to repeal them?

Mr. Clappison: It is pathetic that Ministers rely on such an argument. As far as I am aware, no one has said that a future Conservative Government, which I hope will come about, will repeal the orders. Ministers must face the fact—the Home Secretary made the point—that the orders have not lived up to expectations. Will the Minister say that about 150 antisocial behaviour orders—if that is the number—over two years have delivered on Labour's promises to tackle disorder in our inner cities? Does he think that all the disorder is being caused by 150 individuals? If so, that is pathetic.

We have a small foretaste of the Government's re-election campaign. Their orders have failed and the Government have failed to give people what they were led to believe they would get. The Government have now made a last-ditch attempt to blame the Conservative party.

Once again, law and order is being taken from the top shelf, dusted down and put in front of the electorate. It is an ingredient of the Government's failed campaign. We know that an election is coming when we hear the Government start to talk about the yob culture. There can

be no more convincing evidence that the Government's policies over three and a half to four years have failed to deliver what the people were led to believe they would get, which was decent law and order. They are now trying to cover up for their failures. Given the way in which it has been presented, the Bill is the most cogent and compelling admission of the Government's failure. They deserve to get a kick up the backside from the voters for their failure, and they will.

8.15 pm

Mr. Paul Stinchcombe (Wellingborough): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for inviting me to make a brief contribution to this important debate. I declare an interest: I am a barrister.

The Bill is a substantial measure. It contains 132 clauses and it is divided into seven parts, one of which is divided into three chapters. I shall be brief because I wish to speak on only one of those chapters, which relates to alcohol-related crime. I shall do so because of the crime figures in my constituency, which includes Wellingborough and Rushden.

Over the past few years we have heard from some Opposition Members that crime has risen, but it has not risen in my constituency. Indeed, it has fallen year on year since the election. In the past year it has fallen by 5 per cent. overall. There has been a fall in auto-crime of more than 12 per cent. The fall in burglaries has been nearly 22 per cent. In target areas, where Home Office money has been invested in certain estates, there has been a fall in crime of about 25 per cent.

Some hon. Members have traded their local evening newspaper headlines. There have been headlines in my constituency. On 12 January, there was a report headed "Dramatic Drop in Burglaries". That was a drop in the Christmas month 1999 to 2000 of 50 per cent., and there has been a drop of 62 per cent. over the past two years. There is a fall not only in burglaries but in violent crime. At the end of last year, there was a month-on-month reduction of 31 per cent.

Crime is falling and police numbers are increasing. Nearly 50 new full-time officers joined the Northamptonshire police force during the six months between April and September last year. These facts and figures are causes of considerable celebration, but not complacency. Although the figures overall are good, there are disturbing trends within them.

Violent crimes in licensed premises rose from 51 in 1999 to 71 in 2000, which is a rise of 40 per cent. I understand that we may be getting off lightly in Wellingborough. It appears that about 13,000 violent incidents take place in or near licensed premises every week. More than 30 per cent. of violent attacks that involve strangers occur in or near pubs and clubs. That means people being bottled or glassed, hit with pool cues, knifed, headbutted, kicked or stamped on. People are attacked inside pubs when they are having a drink or attacked outside when they are trying to go home.

If we are to be tough on crime and on the causes of crime, we must tackle more than poverty, drug addiction, homelessness and helplessness, the areas in which crime breeds. We must be tough on alcohol abuse as well. This abuse makes its criminal manifestations known in many forms. There is drink-driving, domestic violence, being drunk and disorderly and drunk and incapable in public. In Wellingborough, these events take place outside the pubs and between the pubs and on the streets as people walk to clubs.

We have developed anti-crime orders and strategies; we have consulted and there has been a full household survey; and we know what people in Wellingborough fear most about alcohol-related crime. They are concerned about the rising crime that takes place outside licensed premises. They are concerned especially about youngsters who drink too much. They are concerned most of all about kicking-out time, when dozens of youngsters spill into the streets at the same time, often intent on walking to the same night club.

Are the measures included in the chapter designed to curb drinking, youthful drinking and violent crime induced by alcohol going to work? One has only to note the particular concern in my constituency to realise an inherent irony. We are concerned about licensed premises, and such concern means that a system of control and regulation should already be in place. If licensing already exists, one should have a system that works to prevent violent crime from arising. Manifestly, however, that has not been the case: violent crime is endemic throughout the country and is focused on areas outside pubs and clubs.

I shall look at a few practical problems and see whether the measures in the Bill will address them. I shall deal with just four features of alcohol-influenced violence: first, the pressures from breweries to sell more alcohol; secondly, under-age drinkers; thirdly, door-to-door management of pubs and clubs; and, finally, licensing hours.

I shall start with the breweries, not because I want to take on big business but simply because huge pressure is placed on pub managers to sell more alcohol. There is nothing surprising about that; that is the job of breweries. They raise targets year on year. The bonuses of pub managers are linked to those targets and when managers fail to meet targets, breweries immediately suggest that they undertake promotions. Those promotions always focus on youngsters and, increasingly, on high-percentage spirits.

A pub manager may not want to follow those promotions because he does not want to deal with the resulting drunkenness but, with no viable alternative and with bonuses at stake, the pressure can become irresistible. One then has happy hours, alcopops and the promotion of shots, such as Aftershocks in red or blue, and the pornography, in my view, of adverts offering two double vodkas and a Red Bull at a cut price—which is four shots in one go. Inevitably, all of that encourages binge drinking, especially by youngsters.

That leads me on to the second feature that I mentioned—the risks of alcohol-influenced violent crime are surely exacerbated if there are inadequate controls on under-age drinking. I am not seeking to take any high moral ground. Like, I suspect, most people in this country, when I was 15 or 16 I thought that it was a positive challenge to try to get served in pubs. With the maturity of hindsight, I can say that if that remains the reality for youth today, if advertisements put pressure on young people to buy more high-alcohol spirits, and if pressure is put on pub managers to sell those drinks, it is essential that we take sensible measures to try to restrict the potentially adverse consequences.

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[Mr. Paul Stinchcombe]

That leads me to the third factor, for one such measure would be to tackle the problem of door-to-door pub management. We need more than bar management to try to stop someone selling alcohol to people who are getting drunk or are already drunk. We need more than door management to kick them out or stop them coming in if they are drunk. We need door-to-door management to alert neighbouring pubs and clubs to the problem of a drunk customer who is about to arrive. If there is one bad publican in a high street, all the other publicans there can suffer, as drunks then turn up at their public houses, making drink-related violence real and obvious.

Finally, those risks are exacerbated by the current licensing hours. Last orders are uniformly at 11 pm and drinking up takes place at 11.20 pm. Large numbers of youngsters are therefore all deposited in the street at the same time, often intent on going to the same club. Many of them will have sunk the last few rounds as quickly as possible to make sure that they downed them before closing time.

There is a fairly potent cocktail of problems. There are four features of drink-related activity outside licensed premises that need to be addressed. We need to see action on brewery promotions, under-age drinking, door-to-door management and out-of-date, poorly thought out licensing hours. The question is whether the Bill, in its relevant chapter, deals with those factors. I have come to the conclusion that it does so in part and after a fashion. It does so only in part because it does not contain any provisions on licensing hours, on which reform is now long overdue, and because it does not say anything about the compulsory use of proof-of-age cards. The proof-of-age scheme promoted by the council in my constituency did not meet with the marked approval of many of those selling alcohol.

The Bill deals with those factors after a fashion because the tool that we are using to close down disorderly pubs—although welcomed by the police in my constituency—is blunt and indirect. It puts pressure on the publican, but does not target minds, as it should in my view, or the breweries or the specific problem of door-to-door management.

Those on the Front Bench are routinely challenged at Question Time about who is responsible for crime. Criminals are responsible for crime. In this case, it is drunken thugs. Crime is not the responsibility of Government, nor indeed is it their responsibility to do everything they can to prevent it. We live in a free world and sometimes the price of freedom is exposing ourselves to the risk of criminal activity. There is always a balance of liberty against justice and victims' rights, but liberty is not so important as to allow people to be drunk and then be violent, nor to sell alcohol to those who are drunk and may become violent. The liberty of us all is the ability to go to the pub and drink in peace.

8.25 pm

Mrs. Helen Brinton (Peterborough): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak in this important debate, as I believe that the Bill offers a package of measures that will help the police and others to deal effectively with a range of disorderly and criminal behaviour. In doing so, it builds on the excellent Crime and Disorder Act 1998 pioneered by my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael).

According to the British crime survey, crime has gone down by 10 per cent. by since 1997; recorded crime, which is based on police figures, has gone down by 7 per cent. The Bill gives the police further powers to build on that very good start. The Government are committed to reducing and preventing crime; part of the strategy for doing that is to support the police, who are at the front line in grappling with crime. While being far from expert in the field, I have certainly gained more personal insight into the problems confronting police forces through my participation in the past year in the excellent police parliamentary scheme. I have discussed the Bill with the police and, in particular, with my own force in Cambridgeshire.

Tonight, however, I shall voice more of a constituency concern. For some time, I have been extremely concerned about the level and nature of protests by animal rights activists against employees and others associated with Huntingdon Life Sciences. I am not alone in that. I am proud that five Cambridgeshire MPs on both sides of the House have expressed their concern tonight—as I am doing—and have written to the Home Secretary. They are pleased to welcome the extra resources that the Government are providing.

Huntingdon Life Sciences is not in my constituency, but I am none the less concerned. We have already heard excellent speeches on the topic, notably from my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell). However, the most outstanding speech was given by the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major).

I speak on behalf of those in my constituency of Peterborough who work for or have connections with HLS. Like the right hon. Member for Huntingdon, I believe that the Bill as drafted does not go far enough to protect my constituents and his. Over the past three years, individuals, including my constituents, have suffered a horrifying range and number of illegal—I believe—tactics used by animal rights extremists. I use that word advisedly. I shall give the House a selection of complaints and abuses in relation to which my constituents have e-mailed and spoken to me and have come to visit me in my surgery. It is a long list, and I shall read only part of it.

The list includes demonstrations outside people's homes; verbal abuse using a loudhailer outside the home or workplace; goods and services ordered in an employee's name, and hoax free advertisements placed, resulting in one person receiving 50 response calls in one day; abusive graffiti, posters and stickers on people's homes and cars and in the area where they live; abusive telephone calls to relatives, friends and children's schools—the lowest of the low, in my view; telephone calls threatening to kill or injure the employee, partner or children; and letters making similar threats. It makes people feel dirty and contaminated even to touch such writing paper.

The list continues, with arrangements for the undertaker to call to collect the employee's body or the body of a child or partner; physical assaults on employees and their partners, including spraying cleaning fluid into the eyes; the smashing of all the windows in a person's home while the family was at home watching television; sledgehammer attacks to a car when the owner was in it; the fire-bombing of a car parked next to a house; the fire-bombing of sheds and garages; bomb hoaxes; and nail bombs in the post.

Most people would say that all those acts were criminal, but at present not all of them are. Some of them fall within the current definition of peaceful protest. My constituents do not understand that. I would be the first to defend the right to peaceful protest, but there is a world of difference between what most civilised, ordinary people understand by the term "peaceful protest" and the vile, evil acts of aggression and intimidation that I have listed.

People living in a democracy, as we should be grateful that we do, have a right to expect protection from such acts. Our police must have the powers to provide that protection. The House must examine how the law can more clearly define peaceful protest, and we must make it an offence to protest in an overtly threatening manner.

Finally, I shall comment briefly on what some have called secondary targeting—the targeting by activists not only of direct employees of HLS and their families but of HLS's suppliers, customers, shareholders and company directors at their homes. I understand that the Bill may not be the best vehicle for all the changes that may be necessary, and that amendment of existing legislation may be more appropriate.

However, we must act urgently to restrict access to the addresses of such groups, and secondary targeting should be an offence. Surely it is unacceptable that, as has happened, electricians should feel compelled to cancel their work for a targeted firm, or cleaners should feel personally threatened if they continue with their honourable day-to-day work at the firm. Of course, it is another matter if they choose to dissociate themselves from the targeted firm, but that must be their free choice and action, and it must be protected.

I welcome the introduction of the Bill, and I trust that in Committee these issues and others will duly receive careful cross-party consideration. That would be the best approach. I know that serious concerns have been expressed by civil liberties and human rights organisations about individual freedoms and rights, which we will debate at a later stage. Such concerns should not be used to legitimise the serious infringement of liberty or the harassment and the intimidation which I—and, I am glad to say, others—have described in our debate.

8.33 pm

Mr. John Grogan (Selby): I shall follow the example of my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe), whose powerful speech concentrated on alcohol-related violence and crime and the parts of the Bill dealing with that scourge and blight on so many of our communities.

In particular, I shall consider the practical implementation of clause 32, which deals with sales of alcohol to those who are under age. The explanatory notes are instructive about the meaning of the clause, which increases the responsibility of all licence holders, whether they be on-licence holders or off-licence holders, to seek proof of age. The notes state:

"The defendant will be deemed to have taken 'all reasonable steps' if he asked the customer for evidence of his age."

They continue:

"The intention is to ensure that licensees and their staff seek proof of age before making sales."

I want to examine how we can make that process of seeking proof of age as smooth and as routine as possible. Only if that is achieved will the Bill work in practice.

Many of the alcohol crime measures contained in the Bill were previewed in the White Paper on liquor licensing reform. My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough rightly said that we must not forget the other measures proposed in that White Paper. In particular, flexibility of licensing hours was designed as an anti-crime measure. We heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) about the kebab shops that grace his constituency. He told us about one street in particular. I would almost bet that his local police will tell him that any violence outside the kebab shops occurs at closing time for the pubs or clubs. I hope that, before long—and certainly before the Bill completes its passage—my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will report to the House on the consultation undertaken by the Government on the White Paper on liquor licensing reform and again commit them to implementing its broad principles.

I am a member of the all-party beer group and am currently a member of a panel that is taking evidence on proof-of-age cards and their practical implementation. The country currently has three schemes: the validate scheme, which is especially prevalent in the north of England and Scotland; the citizen card scheme, which is backed by the retail industry; and the "Prove It" card, which is backed by the Portman group. As was pointed out in the validate scheme evidence, use of the cards applies not only to alcohol, as age restrictions apply to a range of products.

The all-party beer group has received evidence from more than 15 organisations, ranging from the Association of Chief Police Officers to the Association of Convenience Stores. Common to the evidence is a concern about the difficulties associated with a plethora of schemes that work to different standards. The Association of Chief Police Officers perhaps put that view most cogently. It stated:

"This lack of a consistent standard across the country makes it difficult to train staff as to what to look out for. It also makes it comparatively easy to produce forged cards thus undermining the value of the scheme."

ACPO went on to state:

"The mere fact that there are so many different methods in use . . . detracts from their usefulness as a reliable tool."

The Association of Convenience Stores pointed out that routine requests for proof of age would be a big cultural change for retailers and publicans, and that, unlike America, Britain has no culture of proving age. ACS argued that requests for identification in this country sometimes cause offence and can lead to staff intimidation. The Portman group commented on the voluntary schemes that are currently in operation and referred to a survey in which 59 per cent. of managers said that they had suffered verbal abuse as a consequence of asking for proof of age. Of the managers questioned, 52 per cent. said that they had suffered shoplifting as a result of having made such requests.

We must do more to help retailers, publicans and youngsters themselves. The British Retail Consortium pointed out that if a scheme is especially strong in one area, youngsters who travel away from that area may find that their card becomes useless and is no longer recognised. Such factors could demotivate young people who are considering whether to apply for a card.

No one is asking the Government to introduce a national identity card, but people are asking them to use their influence to try to bring some coherence to

[Mr. John Grogan]

arrangements in respect of proof of age. The Association of Licensed Multiple Retailers accepts that the Government might be reluctant to endorse a single commercial venture, but believes that they could set out criteria against which schemes can be judged. The ALMR states:

"This should include the geographic and age-related coverage of the scheme. Ideally, ALMR would wish to see a national scheme that adopts an integrated approach to proof of age and is not simply restricted to the age of 18. Other criteria would include anti-forgery measures, including a secure photo and date of birth. Effective schemes could be granted a Government kite-mark or badge of approval."

The attitude of young people to proof-of-age cards is interesting. No opinion survey has been conducted recently, but the qualitative and anecdotal evidence suggests that such cards are popular among young people. The Local Government Association says that experience among local authorities

"supports the view that the majority of young people would welcome the introduction of a national proof of age scheme."

It goes on to say:

"The marketing of the scheme would be vital to its success, however it is possible to make the card an 'attractive' item for the individual to carry thus it becomes a 'must have' item for every young person."

The National Union of Students did not come out against a more national, coherent approach to proof-of-age cards, but merely asked to be involved in consultations. It pointed out that the cost of introduction for individuals could be a factor in how uniform the system was, and said that reassurances must be given on the data and information held on the card.

It is useful to look at the United States experience. During his first term, President Clinton firmly associated his office with the campaign to cut down under-age drinking. There was a significant marketing campaign, with posters in bars saying, "No ID, No Sale". That helped retailers, publicans and bar owners in the United States because it reinforced the culture of asking for a card. It also helped youngsters realise the importance of carrying the card.

Mr. Heald: When the Licensing (Young Persons) Bill was going through the House, the Minister suggested that the Department for Education and Employment card, Connexions, could be used as a national proof-of-age card. Does the hon. Gentleman have any further views on that?

Mr. Grogan: The hon. Gentleman gives me a perfect cue. We are now at a crucial stage of deciding whether to adopt the Connexions card. My understanding is that in the pilot scheme in Merseyside, there was provision for a proof-of-age element to be included on one side of the Connexions card. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister can confirm that we are down to the last two tenderers for the Connexions card and that the decision will be made in March. At least one tenderer intends to incorporate a proof-of-age element in its card. Clearly, if the Connexions card is to be used for proof of age, a disadvantage is that it was intended to provide it only to those in full-time education over the age of 16. However, at least one of the tenderers sees no reason why a proof-of-age element could not be made available to all youngsters. Indeed, the proof-of-age logo could be common throughout the United Kingdom. A problem with the Connexions card, if used for this purpose, is that it is available only in England.

If we are to make this a responsibility that licensees and retailers can exercise effectively, we need to do more to help them—whether by public education, providing leadership or co-ordinating the various cards.

I have two further comments on other aspects of the Bill. I welcome the statutory force given for the first time to test-purchasing, which was pioneered by North Yorkshire police and is now used not only by police but by many pub companies as a method of improving standards and employee practice. That is greatly to be welcomed.

It is important to recognise that, under the Bill, the closure of pubs would take place only when there was a risk of public disorder. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) referred to the sounds and smells of a new year's eve party in her constituency. Unless there was a threat to public order, the Bill would not—quite rightly—lead to the closure of that pub as a temporary measure. The answer to her constituents' problems is the complete reform of the licensing laws and the introduction of a premises licence which specifies what activities should go on in a pub at any time.

I hope that we never reach the stage where publicans of well run pubs are frightened to call the police because they fear that their pub will be closed down. Many senior police officers see this as essentially a reserve power to deal with badly run pubs. The best way of ensuring that our pubs and bars are well run is a close partnership, such as the many pub-watch schemes involving police and licensees up and down the land.

8.44 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden): Any Bill to reduce crime is to be welcomed. Any Bill that tackles head on the burgeoning yob culture prevalent in so many parts of society will be warmly greeted by our constituents.

I, too, welcome all the measures in the Bill, but I think that the Government have missed an opportunity to tackle a serious antisocial offence. I offer one or two suggestions as to how to improve the legislation to make it even more effective in the war against crime.

During the debate on the Gracious Speech, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said:

"Three years ago, evidence was produced showing that, unfortunately, compared with otherwise similar low-income estates, disorderly estates on which there were higher levels of graffiti and litter and a greater sense of abuse had higher crime levels. If we nip lower-level offending in the bud, we can stop offending entirely."—[*Official Report*, 12 December 2000; Vol. 359, c. 518.]

I could not agree more. That is why I find it disappointing that the Government have not taken the opportunity afforded by the Bill to tackle one of the prime causes of our graffiti-ridden neighbourhoods: the easy availability of spray paints.

Graffiti is a blight on even the best neighbourhoods, and costs councils a fortune to clean up. The London borough of Merton, in my constituency, calculated that if it were to clear up every piece of graffiti tomorrow,

it would cost £60,000—enough money to employ two extra teachers. Furthermore, as we all know, the graffiti would re-appear within days and the expense of the clear-up would be money down the drain.

We often talk about crime in terms of vast statistics, and the media focus is on extreme cases such as murder, which is, thankfully, relatively rare. However, the experience of crime for the vast majority of ordinary people—our constituents—is having their garage doors sprayed with idiotic slogans, or their lifts vandalised and defaced. Just as importantly, graffiti has an impact on the fear of crime, which is out of all proportion to actual crime levels. If an otherwise safe and decent area experiences a wave of graffiti-writing, people begin to feel unsafe.

The Bill seeks to crack down on the sale of alcohol to children, and we all agree with that. I wonder whether the Government might consider tabling an amendment in Committee to extend the prohibition to the sale of spray paints to minors. My local police inspector reckons that the average age of graffiti writers is between 12 and 14. I can think of only one reason why a 12-year-old would want to buy a can of spray paint: to create graffiti. An unpleasant side effect of the use of spray paint is that the cans are frequently used by teenagers to gain the same effect as drugs, only more quickly and much more cheaply.

Making the acquisition of spray paint more difficult would certainly result in an immediate and dramatic decrease in instances of graffiti. As has been pointed out, that would lead to a fall in other crimes as well. I referred to the acquisition of spray paints, because many of the cans used to create graffiti have been stolen. We should try to make the sale of spray paint to minors illegal, and shops should be required to store cans of spray paint in secure areas, as they currently do with fireworks.

That provision could be extended to the sale of indelible marker pens, which are also used to disfigure and vandalise property. I never thought that I would say such a thing in the House of Commons, but I have received extensive lobbying on the issue from the chief inspector of my local police force and by councillors and council officers. Such a step would be drastic, and would have connotations of the nanny state, but something needs to be done to stamp on this problem, which is getting worse, and is not peculiar to my constituency.

I would go further, and suggest that we introduce a 10:1 ratio for fines involving graffiti. In other words, if it cost a council £100 to clean up someone's mess, that person should be fined £1,000, and so on. That would certainly have a shock effect. My hon. Friend the Minister might point out that steps to tackle the problem can be taken by means of council byelaws, and he would be right. My borough is actively considering taking action in that way, in partnership with the local police. Examples of good practice by responsible retailers already exist. However, byelaws are not enough. There would be little point in making the acquisition of spray paints difficult in one borough, if all an enterprising graffiti artist had to do was hop on the bus to the next borough to buy some.

The Bill seeks to extend certain schemes that were initiated through byelaws, and the Government could take this opportunity to send a clear signal that they are declaring war on graffiti. My constituents—and, no doubt, those of the Minister—would warmly welcome such a declaration. If, for whatever reason, it proves impossible to amend the Bill, will the Minister at least undertake to consider the matter with a view to future legislation?

This is a good Bill that will have a positive impact on crime reduction. If the Government could incorporate some tough action on graffiti, it would be even better.

8.49 pm

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): I begin on a note of some consensus. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on an excellent speech, full of constructive ideas. I hope that the Minister will have time to reflect on a number of them and will respond—although not tonight, perhaps—not just to the hon. Lady, but to the House in general. A number of hon. Members on both sides of the House will agree that her suggestions have much to commend them. As she pointed out, the problem of graffiti is not confined to her borough or her area.

Also in the spirit of consensus, let me say that my constituency neighbour—the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Miss Smith) who, sadly, is not in her place—was correct to say that crime is a problem in the north-west of England. She rightly identified instances of crime increasing and said also that the problems did not begin in 1997, although I think that she was trying to be controversial, as no Conservative Member has ever pretended that Britain was without crime in 1997. Of course it was not; Britain certainly had problems with crime then.

I differ with Labour Members over their belief that the answer to Britain's crime problems somehow lies in providing the police with additional powers rather than additional numbers. The police's principal difficulty is not a lack of legislation, which they could study, be trained in and implement, but the lack of numbers to cope with the legislation and powers that Parliament has already given them.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): May I put to the hon. Gentleman a constituency case involving an elderly gentleman? He has been tormented constantly by gangs of youths fuelled by alcohol. The police know who the youths are and are aware of what is going on, but under current legislation, they lack the power to take swift action. If the hon. Gentleman believes that the Bill is useless, what has he to say to that elderly gentleman?

Mr. Collins: The hon. Lady perhaps ought to make a point to her elderly constituent—one that he probably believes anyway. He will undoubtedly remember a time in this country which is well within the memory of many people, not just the elderly, when all the disorder problems to which she referred—not least drunkenness and disorderliness—were substantially less than they are today. A reason for that was that police numbers were greater and the restraints under which they operated were fewer. An important way in which the House can assist the police to provide the underpinnings for a law-abiding society is to provide the resources and the help to enable the police to get back on the streets. That is one of the best ways to tackle the range of problems that she mentioned.

Mr. Heald: Does my hon. Friend agree that most offences of the sort to which the hon. Member for

[Mr. Heald]

Warrington, North (Helen Jones) referred are arrestable? If the police know who those people are, they can arrest them and take them to court. Is not the problem the fact that there simply are not enough police to do so? Perhaps he read the story in the *Yorkshire Post* last week about an elderly gentleman who has to ring the police so often that he has arranged a cheap deal with BT so that he can do so at a discount.

Mr. Collins: My hon. Friend is right. That service, which provides for a customer's top 10 numbers, is called "friends and family". Sadly, such examples occur all too often.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) made clear, we do not oppose any and every aspect of the Bill. There are proposals that Conservatives will be able to support following due consideration, but Labour Members should not kid themselves. People who voted for them thought that their platform of being tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime would result in more police, not fewer, and tougher action on crime. Unfortunately, there has been tougher action on the crimefighters instead.

For example, in my area, Cumbria constabulary has done an excellent job in many respects. It has managed to produce reductions in several of the crime statistics and has coped with a great difficulty relating to the way in which it is funded. That difficulty is caused by the failure of the police funding formula to take enough account of the huge number of visitors to the lake district. The area covered by my constituency and those surrounding it is the most visited part of the United Kingdom, after Greater London, but that is rarely if ever taken into account.

Police numbers have fallen by some 5 per cent. in Cumbria since this Government came to power. The chief constable has repeatedly appealed to Ministers to address the issue of underfunding, and in particular to consider including a full and permanent sparsity factor in the allocation of Home Office grant. I am glad that some months ago the Minister of State was able to announce a one-off, temporary half-provision of sparsity funding; that was a great deal better than nothing. It was not, however, the same as a permanent allocation on which the chief constable could rely. It provided only about half the resources that he wanted.

Mr. Charles Clarke *rose—*

Mr. Collins: The Minister clearly wishes to intervene.

Mr. Clarke: Just for the record. I would not normally have intervened on such a specious contribution, but the fact is that the rural funding we have announced will last for three and a half years. It is substantial funding: the total provided nationally is roughly equivalent to the sparsity costs suggested in the report involved. The money is being distributed to forces—including the hon. Gentleman's—with that very much in mind. It has, incidentally, been welcomed by both the hon. Gentleman's police authority and his chief constable.

Mr. Collins: It is no surprise that the police authority welcomes it, as the police authority is run by Cumbria county council, which is run by the Labour party. The Minister has given us the staggering information that the Labour party welcomes things that the Labour party does. When I tell my constituents that, no doubt they will feel much happier.

Mr. Heald: I do not know whether my hon. Friend has looked at the Cumbria police website recently, but the chief constable there makes the point that there will be cuts again this year. Are there not great concerns about funding in Cumbria?

Mr. Collins: Indeed; the chief constable remains concerned. Police stations continue to close in my constituency and across Cumbria, police numbers continue to be lower than they were when the Government came to office, and Cumbria constabulary continues to feel that it cannot cope with the pressures imposed on it.

One provision in the Bill demonstrates the Government's funding priorities. According to the summary of the financial effects, the transitional—that is, the one-off—cost of establishing the new central police training and development authority will be £3.5 million. The explanatory notes tell us that, as recently as 1993, an organisation called Police Training was set up to carry out the same functions. Now we are being told that a new quango will be established, with its own chief executive, its own chairman and its own authority, at a cost of £3.5 million. That happens to be three times the shortfall about which the Cumbrian chief constable is complaining.

The Government seem to be demonstrating a wholly false sense of priorities. Of course police training matters—

Mr. Charles Clarke *rose—*

Mr. Collins: The Minister knows that I cannot give way. I shall have to end my speech in the next minute.

Throughout all this, my concern is not that the Government are doing things that are in themselves automatically wrong; it is simply that they are setting out the wrong set of priorities. If they had wanted people to feel that their priority of tackling crime was being actioned, they would have tabled measures, even at this late stage of the Parliament, to return police numbers to the levels that they inherited in 1997.

The Conservative party will do that, and it has said how it will do it. As Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald will deliver greater police numbers, and that will contribute more to the fight against crime than everything that has been said and done by the Labour party in four wasted years.

8.59 pm

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): There is no doubt that crime is falling. We can have our knockabouts over whether it was falling when the last Government were in power, and whether it is falling faster now, but it is certainly falling. In Kent, my county, it is falling substantially: the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), who has just left the Chamber, will know that it is down by 23 per cent.

What is not decreasing—although not many hon. Members have mentioned it today—is the perception of crime. If hon. Members were to knock on doors in their

constituencies, they would find people who believe that crime is soaring when it simply is not. I welcome the Bill because it targets the most appropriate crime and disorder issues to help people realise that crime is decreasing and that the streets can be made safe again for them.

On-the-spot penalties, for example, will give police a real opportunity to make a dramatic impact in our economically important town centres, where there are often high levels of disorderliness that are often associated with drink. Like other hon. Members, however, I should like to know how those penalties will be enforced. Taxi drivers in my constituency have told me of cases in which their taxis had been vandalised or they had been the victims of other types of crime, but the fines and costs imposed by the court on those who committed the offences were not enforced. I should therefore like my hon. Friend the Minister to address the enforcement issue.

There are questions, too, about the age of those who will be subject to on-the-spot penalties. I would quite welcome the imposition of such penalties on youngsters' parents. I think that we should investigate the possibility of extending the provision in that manner.

My constituents are aware of the advantages of DNA evidence, and they will welcome our extension of the law to make that evidence a more powerful tool for police. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) had serious civil liberties concerns about the proposals. However, I do not know how it can harm an innocent individual for his or her DNA to be on record. Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman was not in the Chamber to hear the speech of the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), who gave a moving account of why it is so important to build up such a database.

Today, however, I should like to focus on the important issue of attacks on scientists. The subject is very important to me because my constituency contains a major pharmaceutical company that employs 5,000 people and represents a £1 billion United States investment in the United Kingdom. That type of investment will stop unless we can give those investors confidence that the United Kingdom is a place where they can do business and their work in freedom.

I have another interest in the matter. I am what animal rights activists like to call—when they scream out to me in the street—a vivisector. I started my scientific career doing animal experiments. I have no fear of saying that whatsoever. I am proud of the work that I did.

When I first started that work, at the Medical Research Council, my then boss had been newly appointed from Huntingdon Research Centre, which is now Huntingdon Life Sciences. Soon after I started working there, I went to him and said, "I feel very uncomfortable doing these experiments." His response was, "Good. That's the way you should stay feeling throughout your career. No one who feels comfortable doing these experiments should be doing them. That's how we keep them to a minimum. That's how we keep standards high and ensure that we do not cause any unnecessary suffering to animals."

I saw those high standards being pursued throughout my career in the pharmaceutical industry, not only in that job and in subsequent jobs, but in everything that I observed in the industry. It is downright wrong for those who are doing vital and important work to be intimidated, threatened and bullied.

I think that I owe the House an apology. I have been banging on about this subject since I was first elected to the House. A few months ago, I spoke to the Research Defence Society's annual general meeting and said that I did not think that there were more than a dozen Members of Parliament who would be prepared to put their heads above the parapet on the issue. Over the past few weeks, I have been delighted to realise that I was wrong. If what has happened has given the House a wake-up call, so that we realise that we are in danger of putting off huge investment in the UK and stopping vital research work, all that the poor people who worked at Huntingdon Life Sciences had to put up with will not be in vain.

I am delighted by the response in the House today and recently, but I am not so delighted by the reports that I have heard so far about how the Government are intending to tackle the matter. I have heard good words, but there are some holes in what the Government are proposing. I will be looking for proposals to deal with the way in which campaigns are organised, so that responsibility for what activists do is taken by the leaders of campaigns. I shall be looking for changes to the legislation on harassment and for the limits on peaceful protest to be defined, as well as proposals to deal with secondary targeting. The addresses of shareholders and directors of companies should be protected and the Malicious Communications Act 1988 needs to be reformed, as the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) said in a very good speech. Protests outside people's homes also need to be dealt with. All those issues are vital.

I hope that before my hon. Friend the Minister tables amendments to the Bill, he will meet the Research Defence Society, the Association of British Pharmaceutical Industries and other leaders in the industry to discuss proposals to deal with all of their concerns. If he has any difficulty in putting together the meetings, I would be delighted to facilitate them.

This is an important issue, and I have been delighted by the response of the House today. I am looking forward to the Government making my constituents safe so that they can continue their vital work in creating drugs that will be vital to every man, woman and child in the country.

9.7 pm

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): I join my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) in underlining the fact that crime in Kent has fallen by 23 per cent. However, that is not matched by the perception of what is happening, or by a fall in the fear of crime. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) referred to her local newspaper, which comes from the same stable as my local paper. Both papers said that crime was increasing in our areas, although it has been falling.

We must pay tribute to the work of the Government since 1997 in providing mechanisms for the police. We must commend also the work of the police, the partnerships between the police and local authorities and the way in which the police have operated, particularly in Kent. Under the leadership of Sir David Phillips and with an intelligence-led approach, we have seen some dramatic changes.

Extra resources are important and Kent police has earned the extra 6.9 per cent. that was announced recently; for the second year running, Kent has received the largest

[Mr. Chris Pond]

increase of any police force in the country. My local superintendent was able to provide me with a briefing as to what he will be able to do with the extra funding. In Dartford and Gravesham alone, 23 additional officer posts will be provided, including seven officers to work in rural areas and an extra two on rural crime, plus a team of eleven operating strategically for north Kent and Medway.

All this is part of the initiatives on the crimefighting fund and on dealing with rural crime; it will mean that, by 2002–03, Kent will have an additional 250 officers. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) said earlier, however, it is not simply about numbers or resources but about how those numbers and resources are used.

I want to highlight two initiatives in Kent that I hope Ministers will not only encourage but build into legislation as the Bill develops. The first is an initiative on cell intervention: going into the cells and providing advice on debt and employment to people in police custody. That small-scale project, piloted by my local police force, has had dramatic results in leading people away from a life of crime and towards a life of more productive employment.

Alongside an overall reduction in crime, there has been a worrying increase in racially motivated crimes in my area. I am pleased that the Government have been tough on such crimes. One of my constituents noted a catalogue of incidents over two years, which included:

"Bricks thrown through the conservatory roof . . . Stones and sticks thrown at the house around midnight by a group of six youths . . . I was attacked outside my house . . . punched in the face and my hair yanked out . . . My car was vandalised . . . Bag of dog faeces thrown on my patio . . . Racial abusing, threatening my children. They climbed on our fence and threatened to kill my children if they showed their little black faces outside or even dare peeped out of the window . . . Petrol bomb thrown outside my front door."

We have to be tough on the perpetrators of such activities, but we must also be tough on the causes by making sure that young people understand the implications at an early age. The second initiative that I commend to Ministers is the project which my local police force hopes to develop of working closely with schools on issues of race and the effects of racial crime.

My constituents will certainly welcome the Bill, and in particular the fixed penalties. Opposition Members have made some criticisms, but my local police have welcomed the fixed penalties and think that they are a useful additional weapon to deal with the one in six crimes in Gravesham and Dartford that are not serious enough to take the offender through arrest and the court process but which can create a climate of anxiety, fear and yob rule. We must deal with those crimes, and if the Bill can take us further in that direction, I welcome it.

9.13 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): The Bil is wide-ranging, but I intend to confine my comments largely to those aspects that directly affect the lives of the people whom I represent, and to the problems that most concern them.

Civil liberties objections have been made to the Bill, and that is an important issue that deserves serious consideration. We should be very careful about restricting civil liberties unless there is good reason to do so, but we must not confuse liberty with licence. When I see some of my constituents who are tormented in their own homes and fear to walk the streets because of the abuse and intimidation to which they are subjected, or who are insulted and abused when going about their lawful business, I have to ask whose civil liberties are being restricted. We must be concerned not about the perpetrators but about the ordinary, decent people who are subjected to such torment.

I see the Bill through the eyes of my constituents. I mentioned earlier an elderly gentleman who was subjected to abuse, night after night, by a gang of youths, usually fuelled by alcohol, often bought for them by an adult and handed to them outside the shop in return for a share of the goods. Decent, honest shopkeepers in my constituency who try to prevent sales to minors say that they are powerless when such incidents occur. They will welcome the provisions that prevent people from buying alcohol for minors in that way.

We also welcome the provisions that require those who sell alcohol to take reasonable steps to satisfy themselves of the age of the person to whom they are selling. That strengthens the hand of decent, honest people in the trade and helps to get at rogue traders, who do not care about the damage that they cause to others when they flout the law. I suspect that hon. Members could point to such people in their constituencies. I can do that in my constituency, and so can local people. The police know about the problem, but it is difficult for them to take action. Strengthening the law is therefore important.

I have believed for some time that we should extend to trading standards officers the power to use minors in test purchases. No honest shopkeeper or licensee has anything to fear from that. If we fail to tackle such problems, we abandon people such as the elderly gentleman who was tormented day in, day out, week in, week out. It is not my role as a Member of Parliament to protect his persecutors. We need swift action to deal with causes, and we also need fixed-penalty notices, which will enable the perpetrators to be tackled quickly and efficiently.

There is merit in the argument that orders should apply to 16 and 17-year-olds. The groups of youths are often of mixed ages; some may be 18 but others are not. We should not underestimate the problems that harassment causes. The damage to people's health can be incalculable. I, like other hon. Members, have seen the victims of harassment in my surgery.

I remember two, quiet, middle-aged ladies, who had been tormented day after day in their homes by a neighbour. They could not even go into the garden without being sworn at and abused. They had never caused trouble in their lives; they had never owed the council a penny in rent. They deserve better protection from us. So do people who have been threatened, had graffiti daubed on their houses, objects thrown at their windows, and their children threatened, often for no apparent reason, except that some local group had decided to target them, sometimes because they were from a different area, sometimes because they had intervened when people were behaving badly. They need the full protection of the law.

Child curfews and action on the sale of alcohol will help the people whom I described. Extending the criminal law to cover witnesses in civil cases is also important.

Those witnesses are often afraid to give evidence in harassment cases or applications for antisocial behaviour orders. I cannot blame them for that. If I had been subjected to some of the torment that they suffered, I would also be afraid. The provision will give them more security.

We are not simply considering law enforcement. That is important, but, in tackling yobbish behaviour, the Bill stands alongside other measures that the Government have introduced to promote social inclusion and to tackle poverty. It is often rightly said that, when we were younger, any passing adult would probably have intervened if we were behaving badly. However, it is not often said that in those days, that passing adult would have known our mums, our dads and most of our relatives. That community spirit has broken down in many areas. It was destroyed in the 1980s and early 1990s by poverty and unemployment, which was caused by a Government who said that there was no such thing as society. We have to remember where the blame belongs. As well as tackling yobs, we should encourage the people who are doing their best to repair that damage and to rebuild a sense of community. Members of residents associations in my area—in places such as Blackbrook, Grasmere and Greenwood—invest a great deal of their time in such activity. Their work should be supported and valued by the Government.

Most of all, we need to offer our young people an alternative and to realise that most of them are not badly behaved, but have much talent and potential. It is no use complaining that they hang around the streets if we offer them nowhere else to go. It is no use saying that they are irresponsible if we do not help them to accept responsibility.

Last Friday, I had the privilege of opening a new youth centre at Birchwood in my constituency. The young people put on a marvellous display—dancing, singing and poetry. They showed what a wealth of talent is available. The people who set up that club deserve our congratulations. Sadly, however, such facilities are extremely rare. We need to invest in our young people and to show our confidence in them. As well as introducing measures such as this Bill to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour, we need to start seeing our young people as part of the solution and not just part of the problem.

The Bill goes a long way towards tackling the problems that affect my constituents and it will be welcomed by many of them. However, I hope that, when my hon. Friend the Minister replies to the debate, he will put the measure in the context of the Government's overall strategy. We need to recreate a civil society in which people can feel safe in their own homes and on the streets. That is about taking back our communities and regaining control of them. I hope that the measure will help decent people to do that. I commend it to the House.

9.22 pm

Gillian Merron (Lincoln): I welcome the Bill as another step on the way to refining our approach to tackling and preventing crime. It confirms to me and to many of us the effectiveness of a partnership approach in which the Government are prepared to take a pivotal role in meeting their full responsibility in preventing and solving crime and—crucially—in reducing the fear of crime that blights the lives of many of our constituents.

Under the Labour Government, crime in Lincolnshire has reduced by a fifth—twice the national reduction. Lincolnshire police have confirmed to me that, by April, their officer strength will be 1,240—the highest-ever in our county. It is important to talk up the above-average effectiveness of the Lincolnshire police force, because I am concerned that many of the comments made by Opposition Members serve to paint a somewhat inaccurate picture of policing and of crime rates. That stirs up the fear of crime and is irresponsible.

Lincolnshire police are to be congratulated on their above-average performance in the following matters. They are among the top ten forces in solving crimes of violence. More than nine in 10 phone calls are answered within the 10-second target time. They have reorganised the force by putting more officers in the front line and by reducing the burden of management. We should pay tribute to them for their first-rate efforts in policing our county.

In my constituency and throughout the country, it is unacceptable that an elderly lady cannot go to bingo with her friends; that a young man has to steel himself against the possibility of a fight while he is in a city centre on a Friday night; or that neighbours act in a less than neighbourly fashion—terrorising people both inside and outside their homes. Some people might regard those matters as minor nuisances. I do not. No one should be frightened to go about their daily life in peace. We are all entitled to be and to feel safe.

I shall focus on the child curfew scheme—one of the many down-to-earth provisions that offer opportunities both to prevent and cure problems of public disorder. My constituents look to the Government for such provisions. I welcome the proposal to improve the scheme by applying such curfews to people up to and including the age of 15. That was proposed in a ten-minute Bill—of which I was pleased to be a sponsor—introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker). I pay tribute to him for championing such proposals.

The overwhelming majority of young people are law abiding and have a sense of community. In my experience, they want that sense of community and responsibility to be supported and protected by measures such as those in the Bill. Child curfew schemes involve designating a particular area—for example, a park, an alleyway or shop fronts—for a specific, fixed period between 9 pm and 6 am as being out of bounds to young people of a particular age unless they are accompanied by a responsible adult.

I thought that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) was somewhat alarmist in his explanation of what he believed child curfew schemes involve. Indeed, the purpose of the schemes is to take the very action that worried constituents say that they want. They want to protect themselves in certain areas where children may gather and engage in threatening and/or criminal behaviour. However, the schemes are also intended to protect the children themselves. They may be at risk from their older peers, who may encourage them to offend, or from adult drug dealers or pimps—something about which every parent has a fear. The changes will make child curfew schemes more useful; they will certainly be taken up more widely. Extending the age range will recognise the fact that intimidating groups of children often comprise young people of different ages, and we need to tackle that problem.

[Gillian Merron]

The Bill is intended to give the police, as well as local authorities, the practical tools needed to do a practical job, which many of our constituents want to be done without criminalising children. Of course, we all know that peace and order in many local communities can be thrown into disarray by just a few people or households, and they cannot be allowed to continue to keep their unhealthy hold on a community. That is why the extension of witness protection to those giving evidence in cases involving antisocial behaviour orders is also to be welcomed.

There is an urgent need to promote the use of the numerous new measures in the Bill. They are very much what people in Lincoln want, but we must continue to work in partnership with the police, local authorities and local communities to ensure that people, such as those in Lincoln, see the measures working to protect them.

9.28 pm

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): We have had an excellent debate with some moving contributions, as well as some thoughtful ones. I should like to highlight the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), who in representing a constituency interest, expressed the concern that we all feel about what is happening with Huntingdon Life Sciences and other companies. My constituency is about equidistant from Huntingdon, Cambridge and Peterborough, and some of my constituents are being treated in the way that has been described. We must all feel their sense of terror when they experience fire-bomb incidents; cleaning fluid is thrown in their eyes; they receive hate mail; and their children are threatened.

My right hon. Friend described incidents such as that in which undertakers were called to a house to take away someone's child when, of course, the child was alive and well. The distress caused by such behaviour has been recognised on both sides of the House, and by the hon. Members for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman), who has worked in the industry, and for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) and others. So it is right to concentrate on that issue.

The Home Secretary said that he is prepared to consider amending the Public Order Act 1986 to protect people in their houses and to curtail protests outside houses. That is welcome. He has told us that he is prepared to consider the way in which the Malicious Communications Act 1988 works and to consider an objective rather than a subjective test.

Is the Minister still considering what other measures might be possible? Some of the incidents that have been described do not fall into a clear category, but they were very threatening. It would help if the Minister were to make a commitment on issues such as secondary action and to give the clear statements that my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon wanted. The Minister should point out that United Kingdom legislation demands tests on animals; animal tests are required by regulators; the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 has the strictest requirements for animal research anywhere in the world; and the legislation demands that animal tests should not be available if other non-animal testing is possible. It would be good if the Minister could give such clear statements tonight. This important issue is worrying the country, but all Members agree about it.

The same cannot be said of all the other matters that have been debated. Although the Opposition take the view that this is a crimefighting measure that will give powers to police officers and others to help in the fight against crime, we have the important reservations that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and other Conservative Members have highlighted in their contributions.

First, we are concerned by what the Bill has left out. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) painted a picture of a Christmas tree with empty baubles on it and the Minister rushing from the Home Office to each Department to ask, "Have you got anything on the shelf that we can trot out in this pre-election period?"

Mr. Charles Clarke: Perhaps I should be called Santa.

Mr. Heald: The Minister would like to be called Santa. Perhaps this Christmas tree has lights, but they are not twinkling.

The country faces important challenges. Violent crime, street crime and the incidence of robbery are rising. Yet, when the Home Secretary and the Minister have the time available to consult on the offences against the person legislation and the means to provide modern laws to strengthen the fight against violent crime, they do nothing. They have had the opportunity to reform the early release scheme so that those who assault police officers in the execution of their duty are not released before they have served half their sentence, and we have managed to convert the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey on that point. He used to take the same line on this as the Minister, but he is now a convert. Come on, Minister—we want him to decide that the police should be protected in that way.

As one of the largest reviews ever of the criminal justice system is about to report, it is curious that the Minister is putting before the House a set of slighter measures simply because an election is in the offing. They are slight measures by comparison with the challenge that the country faces in terms of violent crime, falling police numbers and all the problems that he and I have debated on many occasions.

The Bill raises concerns about bureaucracy. The Police Federation and the Police Superintendents Association wonder whether the fixed penalties notices will save any of their time so that the police can have a more visible presence on the streets. The worry is that clause 8 seems to require a police statement to be prepared in every case, so where will the saving be made? It would be helpful if the Minister could assure us and the police that the new procedure will serve to save police time and give them a greater ability to do the job that they and the public want them to do.

It would be helpful if the Minister addressed some of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins), who explained, given his experience as a recorder and a stipendiary magistrate, the difficulties of distinguishing between an 18-year-old and an under-18-year-old who are drunk in the street. He described the difficulties of finding out how many times a person had had the benefit of fixed-penalty notices. Will notice after notice be served without the person ever ending up in court?

One thing that victims of criminal damage want is some compensation, but it is available only on conviction. Will the Minister give victims some consolation? Will they be able in some way to receive compensation if their fence is kicked in or other criminal damage is done, for example, to their vehicle? There is a range of practical issues to do with fixed penalty notices on which we are looking for answers.

The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) was generous about my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald and considered the issue of non-drinking zones and closure orders. *[Interruption.]* No, he was generous—for him. There are questions about how non-drinking zones will be implemented. Will councils decide such issues in full council, or under the new system will one Cabinet Member be in charge of designating the zones? That concern has been raised with me by councillors, and it would be helpful if the Minister reassured us that there will be a proper debate in full council on the designation of zones.

We heard important comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter), who pointed out that it is all very well introducing measures such as child curfew orders, fixed penalty notices and so on, but there is not much point to them if there are not enough police officers to enforce them. Many Labour Members proudly read out how burglaries and car crime have fallen in their areas, which is good news. *[Interruption.]* That is good news, but they also said, "But we are very worried about street crime, robberies and violence." They might like to ponder the fact that intensive police operations targeting known car thieves and burglars use a lot of manpower that could be providing a visible presence on the streets. If there are enough police officers to go round, both can be achieved. At the moment, however, assigning police officers to particular campaigns makes the streets less safe.

Maria Eagle: If police numbers are the only thing that matters, will the hon. Gentleman explain why between 1980 and 1989 police numbers increased but crime went up by 40 per cent?

Mr. Heald: I have never said that it did not take us a long time to turn round the disastrous Labour years of the 1970s. This Government inherited falling crime and rising police numbers. The Home Secretary likes to say that he has had the best start of any Home Secretary since the war. The truth is that he did because we gave it to him. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) introduced tough measures and always, year on year, increased the number of police constables. It was his legacy that the Home Secretary took on, and squandered.

Mr. Straw: There is a serious point about the relationship between police numbers at the margin and overall levels of crime. If the hon. Gentleman seriously examines figures for the past four years, he will see that police forces with the best record in reducing crime are not necessarily those that received the largest increases in budget or in police numbers, of which there are quite a number. Does he accept that the critical issue is not police numbers at the margin—although of course I want them to increase—but the efficiency and effectiveness of the police service in any area?

Mr. Heald: The right hon. Gentleman and I have debated the issue on other occasions. He knows that I say that if there are two police forces that are efficient, and one of them has more than 1,000 more officers than the other for the same head of population, it will do more. We cannot assume that each police force will for ever remain inefficient here and efficient there. We should be aiming for the best standards for them all. If that is achieved, the force with the more police officers will do more work. That makes sense.

The Home Secretary must recognise that by letting police numbers fall by 2,500 and by allowing the number of special constables to collapse by almost one third, it is no coincidence that we have soaring violent crime. Letting out prisoners early means they are outside committing crimes. The right hon. Gentleman knows that. There is the irony of the right hon. Gentleman saying that we need tougher measures on bail so that those who have not been convicted will be put more regularly into custody awaiting trial, when at the same time he is saying that those who are known to have committed crime—those who have been convicted—should leave prison before serving half their term. How can that be explained? The Government are nonsensical on law and order on so many occasions. There is a great deal of spin but there is not much delivery.

Civil rights constitute an important issue for the House, for Conservatives and for Liberal Democrats. We support measures that make crimefighting easier. For example, we support a wider dissemination of information between the Inland Revenue and crimefighters. However, it is important to uphold the principle that confidentiality should be breached only in circumstances where that is necessary; that is, where there are good reasons and where there is a serious investigation. I would welcome assurances from the Minister that he will not establish a general principle that confidential information can float around government without proper controls being in place.

Mr. Straw: What about benefit fraud?

Mr. Heald: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says from a sedentary position.

I was the Minister who took through the House the Social Security Administration (Fraud) Bill, which allowed data matching. It enabled the information that the Department of Social Security had as to whether people were claiming benefit to be matched with the information that the Inland Revenue had about whether they were working. We were able to find numerous cases of people who were working and claiming. That was a good reason for introducing the Bill, and I make no apology for doing so. The Minister must come up with a similarly good reason for his proposed measures. Given the context, and given that Inland Revenue information would be involved, it would seem that a serious investigation should be in hand.

The Minister must answer the CBI's concern that information that is held by the Office of Fair Trading will be given to overseas authorities for criminal anti-trust

[Mr. Heald]

investigations where the same circumstances would not lead either to a criminal or a civil investigation. Is that right? If so, why?

Many issues arise from the Bill. It is good if we can close rowdy pubs, provided that there are proper protections. It is good if we can limit drug traffickers' travel. It is good if we can have better witness protection. It is good if we can stop the importation of obscene and paedophiliac information. It is good if we can strengthen bail laws and it is good also if we can have new powers of arrest for kerb crawling, for example. It is good if we can improve the life of scientists, whose lives are being made a misery.

Against the scale of the challenge on law and order, the Conservative party's contention is that the Bill is a disappointment because it will not meet the challenge of the time. It is a Christmas tree of a Bill, as the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, the Liberal Democrat spokesman, said. It is disappointing when it comes to bureaucracy, practicability, targeting and civil rights. It is no surprise that the Prime Minister is not prepared to debate law and order matters with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition.

9.44 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I agree with the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) about one thing: generally, it has been a good debate which, for the most part, has not been politically partisan. However, interestingly, there were 17 contributions from Government Members and 10 from Members of Opposition parties, including two from Liberal Democrat Members. I was a little disappointed that the Conservative Benches were often empty during our debate.

I do not intend to address in detail very familiar discussions about falling crime, rising police numbers, growing police morale and early release issues. We had an Opposition day debate on those matters just a few days ago and on Wednesday this week we shall debate the police grant settlement. Those are full opportunities for addressing what are, I acknowledge, important issues. I do not therefore intend to address them in detail this evening, except to say that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) said, the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and the principle of partnership underlying it are at the core of everything that the Government are seeking to do and of the Bill itself.

I shall deal first with matters not included in the Bill, of which criticism has been made. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) made a point about victims. There are provisions on witness protection in the Bill, about which my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) spoke eloquently.

A victims' rights consultation paper will shortly be launched, with a series of key proposals, to transform the position of victims throughout the country. It is not, as the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald said, a question of four years; it is a question of 18 years during which nothing was done and four years in which we have been developing a programme of action to support the position of victims. The way to deal with legislation in that area is to be coherent on the position of victims of a range of crimes.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald has raised the question of changes to the offences against the person legislation, and the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire raised the matter at the end of our debate. The Opposition are right to say that we issued a consultation document on the matter in February 1998. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald may disagree but, in our view, an overhaul of the offences against the person legislation is best handled in the context of a law reform Bill, which would also include changes to the law on involuntary manslaughter and corporate killing. We are still considering the final shape of our policy in the light of responses to and debates on those matters, but we think that that is the best way to deal with those circumstances.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) raised the matter of graffiti. I can give her the assurance that she sought. We are considering the matter—in fact, I addressed it in a substantive Adjournment debate at the end of last year—and we are looking at introducing measures. However, we did not consider them appropriate for the Bill.

My hon. Friends the Members for Selby (Mr. Grogan) and for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) addressed the need for fuller reform of the licensing law. Perhaps I can help them by indicating that, as is well known, we are committed to reforming the whole licensing situation as a result of the White Paper. Licensing legislation takes high priority. We have included only certain measures from the White Paper in the Bill because of the need to give the legislation a comprehensive nature. However, I can give my hon. Friends the assurance that they sought: licensing reform remains a high priority, not only for general reasons concerning the civilisation of our country but for the crime reduction reasons discussed in some contributions.

The main matter not included in the Bill that was addressed in debate concerned animal rights and protests on that issue. The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire raised that matter, perfectly reasonably, in his winding-up speech. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary made the position clear in his opening speech, but we heard excellent speeches on the matter from the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major)—whose speech was outstanding—the hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter), and my hon. Friends the Members for Burton (Mrs. Dean), for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton), for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) and for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman). Those Members focused on the matter, but it was also raised by others.

We will try to table amendments for the Committee stage of the Bill, as requested. We will examine carefully points made in this debate and those made by the Research Defence Society. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet, we are familiar with the RDS's specific proposals, which have been echoed by some speakers in the House this evening. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), who is dealing with the matter, is already meeting people involved in those areas and will continue to do so. We are happy to have meetings to discuss the issues in great detail.

The right hon. Member for Huntingdon made several specific points, to which he asked for responses. Out of courtesy, I shall give them from the Dispatch Box now. The right hon. Gentleman asked, first, whether the present UK legislation required new medicines to be tested on animals, and whether animal tests were also required by regulatory bodies for agrochemicals, pesticides and so on. The answer is that where manufacturers of medicines and agricultural products have to provide safety data relating to their products, they must find the most suitable tests to provide that data. In many cases, the only suitable tests involve the use of animals.

Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman asked me to confirm that the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 contains the strictest rules governing animal research. Again, I can confirm that he is correct. The Government consider that legislation to be the strictest of its kind in the world. That endorses the various points made in all parts of the House about the quality of the safeguards, which are the best in the world. If we threaten the industry in this country, that will have the direct effect of impairing conditions for animals throughout the world.

Thirdly, the right hon. Gentleman asked whether I could confirm that before animal research is licensed, the Home Office must be assured that tests could not be adequately be carried out without animal experiments. That is indeed the case. If there is a non-animal alternative, a test cannot be licensed. That is a requirement of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act.

I can confirm various points that were made. In the light of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet, I confirm also that any new powers will be directed at intimidating protests outside homes generally. They will not relate only to Huntingdon Life Sciences or only to animal rights protesters, but to other scientists such as those mentioned by my hon. Friend.

As a result of the strong feeling expressed during the debate, I am confident that proposed legislation and Government amendments on the matter will receive widespread support in this House and in the other place. We will consult other political parties about the amendments that the Government intend to introduce. We are keen to carry through the clear feeling of the House this evening, to ensure that the appalling behaviour about which we have heard is isolated and rendered unacceptable in this country.

I shall deal with the matters that are included in the Bill, but which are controversial. The first is the issue of DNA sampling and testing. I was delighted by the general agreement about the need to include legislation on that. I except from that the comments of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and, to some extent, those of the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison), who expressed doubt.

The hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) made a powerful and moving speech from his own experience, and indicated—I hope I am not misinterpreting him—his strong support for legislation on the matter, for reasons that he identified from his constituency experience, with which many hon. Members would agree. He is correct to say that under the Bill, consent to retain samples cannot be revoked. No doubt that will be debated in Committee.

We believe that the provision will not deter volunteers from giving informed consent, whereas allowing consent to be withdrawn would lead back to the problems of the current law, which were exposed in the R. *v.* B. case, to which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary referred. If a match were made in the context of a serious crime after a person had withdrawn his consent, what would be the situation? Our proposal is intended to cover that case. I acknowledge the seriousness of the hon. Gentleman's argument, and we are prepared to consider the matter in detail in Committee.

I asked the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey to be clear about his party's position on the matter, but I do not think that he was clear. Given the feeling in the House on the DNA issue, it is important that the hon. Gentleman's party should make its position clear by the time the Bill reaches Committee. The Government's proposal will undoubtedly bring benefits to crime solving.

The second issue on which there was controversy concerned fixed-penalty notices, about which we heard comments from the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, my right hon. Friends the Members for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) and for Cardiff, South and Penarth, the hon. Member for Woking (Mr. Malins), and my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) and for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Miss Smith). Many of those speeches were strongly in favour of the Government's proposals and set out clear arguments for improving the weapons available to the police to deal with low-level disorder. Some doubts were expressed, and the issues will be debated in Committee. The hon. Member for Woking asked about the logic behind the list of offences, and suggested, in an uncharacteristically insulting way, that insufficient thought had been given to the matter. Several offences on the list were originally proposed in our consultation paper for inclusion in the scheme. A range of other possible offences were suggested by those who responded to the paper. The list covers a wide range of offending behaviour. The Government consider that some examples of the behaviour covered by each offence would be suitably dealt with by means of fixed penalties.

The organisations whose views we requested provided a substantial response. They include the Justices' Clerks Society, the Magistrates Association, the Law Society and a wide range of other organisations. Of course, they had different opinions, which I am sure will be reflected in Committee. I said in answer to a question asked by the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire that the responses would be placed in the Library for hon. Members to consider before they participate in Standing Committee debates. There will be full debate on the points that have been made, which will be considered in great detail.

Curfew orders were the third controversial issue in the debate. They were dealt with in the powerful speeches made by my right hon. Friends the Members for Manchester, Gorton and for Cardiff, South and Penarth, and by my hon. Friends the Members for Lincoln (Gillian Merron) and for Warrington, North (Helen Jones). I associate myself with the praise given by my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln to my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker) for his consistent campaigning to ensure that the matters with which the Bill deals featured properly on the statute book.

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

I have some key points about the concerns expressed. First, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth referred to the critical importance of partnership. Indeed, all the measures are products to be used in partnership. That is the approach that we are trying constantly to build, as it is critically important in achieving our aims. Secondly, the measures must be targeted at the troublemakers and the people who are creating the difficulty. They do not ensure a universal curfew for everyone. They are intended to be targeted on particular individuals who are making other people's lives a misery. It is important to have power to deal with such people.

Thirdly, Opposition Members did not appreciate that the purpose of the range of measures—the antisocial behaviour orders, curfew orders and so on—is as much to prohibit and prevent antisocial behaviour as to punish it. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that our measures are achieving that purpose in a wide variety of ways. My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet rightly referred to parents. In Islington, police and housing services are working together exceptionally closely and involving parents in the conduct of their children. That is an excellent example of such activities. The threat of antisocial behaviour orders and other measures is available to ensure that other arrangements can be properly enforced—an important factor to which sufficient attention has not always been paid.

The final point of controversy in the Bill is the range of alcohol measures, which will again be considered in Committee. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald asked about the difference between the Bill and current local arrangements and the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire asked about council approvals. Many local authorities already have alcohol byelaws. The Bill provides a uniform and comprehensive set of powers, as it is vital for such powers to exist. The police will be able to direct people not to continue drinking and to confiscate glasses and bottles that might otherwise be used as weapons. The council need only designate the area and the police powers will apply, which is a far less bureaucratic arrangement than the current byelaw procedures.

Mr. Heald: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: I shall not do so as I have so little time; I apologise to the hon. Gentleman. The procedure for the council to make the designation—the point that he mentioned—will be set out in regulations made by the Secretary of State. There will be parliamentary scrutiny of those points.

The Government believe that the legislation is necessary. It will extend civil liberties, help to drive down crime levels, give more targeted weapons to partnerships, improve detection and the solution of crimes, build up intelligence-led policing and improve police training. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Criminal Justice and Police Bill (Programme)

Motion made, and Question proposed:

That the following provisions shall apply to the Criminal Justice and Police Bill:

Standing Committee

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

2. The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.

3. Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 8th March 2001.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at half past eight o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is Thursday, at half past five o'clock on that day.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at ten o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is Thursday, at seven o'clock on that day.

6. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Lords amendments and further messages from the Lords

7. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any motion to vary or supplement this order for the purpose of allocating time to proceedings on consideration of any Lords amendments, or on any further messages from the Lords, and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: I call Mr. Heald.

Mr. Heald *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: My apologies. I should have called Mr. Clarke.

10 pm

Mr. Charles Clarke: I beg your pardon, Mr. Speaker. I apologise to you and to the House for not being quick enough off the mark.

The motion proposes that the Committee stage of the Bill should finish by Thursday 8 March. By suggesting that date, we believe that we have allowed adequate time in Committee—that is, a total of 16 sittings. Of course, the Programming Sub-Committee will consider the detailed timetable and may decide that it is necessary for the Committee to sit more frequently than usual.

The Programming Sub-Committee will also enable Conservative Members to decide to spend more time on the parts of the Bill that they most wish to discuss. Let me take this opportunity to reiterate what we see as one of the most positive aspects of the programming of debates: it offers the Opposition the opportunity to determine the structure and focus of the debate.

We believe that the arrangement of business within the time allocated should be a matter principally for the Opposition and for Back-Bench Members.

It may be of interest to reflect on the experience of the programming of the Vehicles (Crime) Bill, on which I led for the Government. The Government's stance throughout, in the Programming Sub-Committee and elsewhere, was very simple: we wanted to have debates in which there was cogent argument and room for full discussion. We were less concerned with some of the techniques that certain Opposition Members sought to use and develop to take up time. Our experience was that the programme motion allowed the issues to be fully and cogently debated despite the substantial effort to consume time of some Opposition Members of the Committee, who preferred listening to their own voices to debating the points before them.

We believe that it should be for the Opposition to come forward and say, within the time available, "These are the issues that we most want to debate." I place it on record that we will listen and that we will honour that wish as we proceed.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): It has already been said in the House that Programming Sub-Committees are unaccountable. Their proceedings are not transparent and there is no record of them. Now the Minister is giving an account of what happened on the Vehicles (Crime) Bill as a way of explaining how everything is working perfectly. Is the hon. Gentleman now a convert to the idea of having a proper record of the proceedings?

Mr. Clarke: I did not suggest that it was working perfectly. In fact, the Government's view, as clearly set out, was that they were very happy with whatever arrangements were made in that regard. However, the rules of conduct of the Programming Sub-Committee were a matter for the Chair, and you, Mr. Speaker, have made your judgment on that. I think I am right in saying that the Chair's decision was that the Programming Sub-Committee was to be treated broadly speaking as a Select Committee.

I am saying that, above and beyond that, there is in my opinion an obligation on all members of the Committee to take the debate on the legislation seriously and make a distinction between points that are serious and substantive and those that are not. As Conservative Members in Committee and even the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) may concede from our experience of Bills in the last Session of Parliament, as a Minister I sought at all times to take seriously the serious points that were made and to accept amendments that were put forward, including those from the Opposition, if they seemed right. However, there is a distinction between serious debate, which the procedure is designed to encourage, and the kind of time-wasting filibustering that some Conservative Members sought to engage in.

Mr. Heald: Is not the problem that, according to the programme motion, on a substantial Bill with more than 130 clauses, we will have to finish consideration by 8.30 pm and Third Reading by 10 pm? That really is not good enough. If there were a statement on the day in question and the time was even further constrained, it would not leave us enough time to debate such a substantial Bill. Does the Minister not agree that, with a Bill of this size, it is inevitable that a significant number of amendments will be tabled? He has already mentioned that.

Mr. Clarke: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman, but I accept that his points are legitimate. By that, I mean that he is right to focus on the amount of time that will be taken up with genuine debate—and I believe that the hon. Gentleman will engage in serious debate rather than in the kind of filibustering that I have just described. He raises an important and legitimate point. However, when he asks whether I think we shall have enough time, my answer is that I think we shall.

Furthermore, we have the ability, through the Programming Sub-Committee procedure, to extend the amount of time available by increasing the frequency of our sittings or by whatever means may be necessary in order to achieve that end, if it is desirable. To give an example from our deliberations on the Vehicles (Crime) Bill, we reconvened the Programming Sub-Committee at one point during the Committee stage to change our timetable. That was entirely legitimate and was done with the agreement of all members of the Committee.

Mr. Malins: I want to make a serious point, and I hope that the Minister will forgive me for saying this. Will he accept that the Bill covers territory with which I am very familiar through my judicial work? Will he also accept that I cannot serve on the Committee because I am on the Chairmen's Panel? Thirdly, will he accept that I asked him a dozen questions during the course of this afternoon's debate, and that he has not been able to answer any of them? I appreciate that he might possibly write to me about them.

Does the Minister accept that someone in my position finds the prospect of so truncated a consideration of the Bill on Report quite impossible? I have at least a dozen amendments to table on Report which I cannot table in Committee, all of which will need the proper scrutiny of the House.

Mr. Clarke: I accept the hon. Gentleman's first two points, relating to his expertise and his membership of the Chairmen's Panel, and to the consequence of that membership on his ability to serve in Committee. As the hon. Gentleman was speaking, Mr. Speaker, I asked for and received your guidance as to whether people on the Chairmen's Panel could serve in Committee. You confirmed to me the view that the hon. Gentleman has expressed.

I can commit myself to answering in detail the points that the hon. Gentleman raised in debate this afternoon. I am sorry that I could not do so in the short time available for summation earlier. Secondly, I also guarantee that all the points that he raised will be addressed in Committee. If they are not addressed to his satisfaction, he may wish to table amendments at a later stage. However, I remain of the view that the amount of time allocated in the programme motion is perfectly sufficient to allow us to debate the issues at great length. I am therefore delighted to support the motion.

10.7 pm

Mr. Heald: The Opposition find this procedure unacceptable. Before Second Reading, the Government tabled a motion setting out how much time there would be for debate in Committee. At that point, we had heard neither the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) nor any of the range of views expressed in almost 20 other speeches made today.

The Bill clearly throws up a range of issues, including the practical issues about the way in which fixed-penalty notices will work, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins) brought his knowledge. The right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) proved an expert on curfews and told the House how good they would be, despite the fact that not one has been granted under the present regime, which he introduced. A range of issues on civil rights, among other matters, was also raised.

What makes this programme motion even worse than the others that have gone before it is that, this time, the Government are seeking in advance to programme consideration and Third Reading. That has never been done before in a programme motion, and it should not happen. The idea that a Standing Committee's proceedings can be programmed without hon. Members' having heard the Second Reading debate is laughable. The idea that we can say how much time will be needed for consideration and Third Reading, when we do not have a clue what the Committee will throw up, is even worse. It is time for those who understand the procedures of the House in detail, and the usual channels, to reconsider the matter. How can it be right to programme proceedings when we do not know the ambit of debate? That is nonsense.

We know that a significant number of amendments to the Bill will be tabled on the range of issues outlined by my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon—issues relating to the scientists being persecuted at Huntingdon Life Sciences, and to other scientists referred to tonight. It seems daft to say, "Oh well, we haven't seen the amendments, but we know that we need 16 sittings." More than 16 sittings are provided for us to consider the Finance Bill, which is usually about the same length as this Bill, even though the range of issues considered by a Finance Bill Committee is in some ways narrower.

The Government are wrong to have tabled the motion. If consideration is taken on a day on which there is a statement, it may begin at five o'clock but it will still have to finish by 8.30 pm—even though the Bill deals with a range of issues such as civil rights, fixed-penalty notices, curfews and evidential requirements involved with disclosure of information. That is unrealistic and I ask the Minister to think again. The hon. Gentleman referred to the Vehicles (Crime) Bill—as he will remember, I complained loudly about the programme motion—and said, "Actually, you were right because we had to change the timetable mid-way through the proceedings." That represents a concession that the procedure is flawed.

Mr. Clarke: May I clarify that? We changed the timetable, but we did not lengthen it. The time allocated remained the same and we completed our debates within it, to the satisfaction of all sides.

Mr. Heald: But does not the Minister agree that the fact that the programme had to be changed while the Committee was in full flow showed that deciding all such matters at the outset is wrong? It is not in the Opposition's gift to say how long will be needed in Committee and how long will be needed for consideration and Third Reading. The Opposition used to have more locus and more ability to influence such matters. The change is bad for democracy.

This big Bill deals with many issues and it will take a long time to consider them thoroughly. As the Minister said, I am not one for filibustering, although I like to take him to task on the provisions in detail, but we simply cannot say at this stage that 16 sittings are enough; nor can we say that it is adequate—and I am sure it is not right—for consideration and Third Reading to take place on one curtailed day.

A considerable number of new clauses will be tabled on matters other than Huntingdon Life Sciences and its problems—on prisoners who have been released early, for example. *[Interruption.]* The Minister laughs, but that is a serious point. Large numbers of police officers are being assaulted and the people going to prison for such assaults are being released having served less than half their time. That is an insult to the police, who feel that early releases are bad for morale. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) originally agreed with the Minister on that matter but has been converted. It is time that the Minister also came round. Police morale is a serious issue and letting people who have assaulted officers out of prison early is an insult. The Minister can be fairly sure that there will be a new clause on that, because I have just tabled one. Similarly, he can be pretty sure that there will be a new clause on the important issue of the early release of child sex offenders, because I have just tabled one. There is a range of new clauses that will require debate.

We ought to reflect on the issue of modernisation. Is it progress to say that the Opposition cannot have the time they need to debate important issues? What could be more important than how we deal with the persecution of people in their own homes and how we tackle violence in our streets? Confidentiality and the Inland Revenue, documents that may help in huge investigations, and importing pornography are big issues; and it is not right for the Minister to guillotine proceedings, particularly as he always appears to enjoy engaging in debate. Why be so sparing with time?

Mr. Clarke: I do not know whether it would help the hon. Gentleman if I gave him the assurance that I gave the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) in connection with the Vehicles (Crime Bill); but in the event of serious debate of serious issues in Committee, if there is no attempt to filibuster and if we seem to be running short of time, I am prepared to commit myself to discussing with Opposition parties the possibility of reconvening the Programming Sub-Committee to establish how we can make time available.

Mr. Heald: I realise that the Minister feels he has made a great concession. That is marvellous for him, but we should not have to request time for debate from him; the Opposition should have a right to the time that they need to scrutinise the Government's legislation. It should indeed be a right, not a privilege. I made the same point when we discussed the Vehicles (Crime) Bill. "Modernisation" is a backward step if it means inadequate time for scrutiny.

In a way, it is typical of Labour to describe something so retrogressive as modernisation. If anything, it means returning to an era when there was no true democracy, and a Member could not argue his case. The whole principle is wrong. There is likely to be an election and the Bill may well not make the statute book, but we could at least do it the justice of debating each and every clause in detail.

Mr. Clarke: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can refresh our memories. Was there any occasion in the 18 years during which his party was in government when it guillotined consideration of these matters, in Committee or at any other stage?

Mr. Heald: There were guillotines—no one would argue with that—and Labour Members often objected. It is rather sad when a Minister stands at the Dispatch Box and says "Oh, you were absolute shockers, and we are going to be worse." That is no way in which to govern the country sensibly.

The Government are developing a bad reputation. There were 118 amendments to the Bill that became the Freedom of Information Act 2000, 77 of which were not debated here. There were 268 amendments to what became the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, 47 of which were not debated here. There were 666 amendments to what became the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, 522 of which were not debated here. Those amendments were debated more extensively in the House of Lords, where people are not elected to represent the interests of electors, than here in the House of Commons, where we are all elected to come and do this job. Is it right for Labour Members, in the interests of finishing early or having an easy ride in debate, to deprive the Opposition of the time that is needed?

Let me make two more points. First, the Minister has made an offer regarding the Standing Committee, but what about Report and Third Reading? Not everyone can be on the Committee, but issues involving civil rights and the like are of great interest to members of all parties. It seems wrong that the debate on Report—when members of the Committee give the House their views, and others can consider what happened in Committee and present their own opinions—should be so curtailed. What account is being taken of all the Members who cannot be on the Committee?

Secondly, what about Back Benchers? True, the Minister and I, and doubtless a Whip from each side—perhaps more—will go into a huddle, and there will be no record of the proceedings. In Committee I may unburden myself a little, so that other Committee members know something of what happened. But the fact is that we shall be there making judgments on how long Back Benchers want to discuss particular issues in Committee, which is not an easy exercise.

When I was a silent one, I did quite a lot of trying to timetable debates involving the whole House—on, for instance, the Bills that became the Scotland Act 1998 and the Government of Wales Act 1998. We often found, with the best will in the world—having worked hard to decide how long was needed—that a Member from Scotland or Wales would have a perfectly legitimate point to make about a particular aspect of the legislation, and others would not be able to make their points. In a number of debates significant points could not be debated because we had not managed to secure the fingertip control of timing that we wanted. It is unfair to Back Benchers if a heavy-handed approach is taken.

I therefore ask the Minister whether it is not time to reconsider, to withdraw the programme motion and to allow matters to proceed as they used to in the good old days—when time was allowed seriously to debate the issues for as long as was warranted. Is not the motion a backward step, and should not the Government think again?

10.20 pm

Mr. Malins: This programme motion—I have not spoken to a programme motion before—is shameful. I hope that the Minister will be kind enough to listen to my arguments.

Never mind for now that the Minister and the Government have decided that the Committee should finish by 8 March—although I simply do not know where they got that date from. Let us consider how consideration on Report will operate. As described on the Order Paper, it seems that Report may last for less than four hours. The Bill has well over 130 clauses and various schedules. Moreover, it raises a great many issues.

The Minister will know that, today, on Second Reading, I spoke for 14 minutes and never strayed from the subject, focusing only on the Bill's first dozen or so clauses. He knows that the penalty issues—the so-called on-the-spot penalties—are themselves a fairly major topic that has to be examined very closely by people who know what they are talking about, but the Government are offering us only four hours to consider those provisions.

It is worse than that. As I said earlier, the Committee will include only three or four Opposition Members, each of whom may or may not have some expertise on the subject. Other Labour Members and Opposition Members will not be able to serve in Committee. Believe it or not, some of those hon. Members may have real expert knowledge of the subject. In my view, one of the great tragedies of this Chamber is the amount of our debate that consists of our doing no more than mouthing platitudes at one another or watching the clock until there is another vote. There may be another shout and another rampage, but where, oh where is the constructive, sensible thinking?

Today, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) alluded to the fact that many hon. Members have some knowledge of a subject but that very rarely do they have the chance to share it. As he said, there are so many ways of approaching a Bill to make it better.

It is not many weeks since the House considered two quite important pieces of legislation—the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill and the Football (Disorder) Act 2000, which had to do with jury trial and with preventing some football fans from going abroad. I may lack absolute knowledge of many subjects, but I worked very hard on those two Bills, preparing amendments for consideration on Report.

I thought that my amendments were worthy of debate, so I sat in the Chamber all day in the hope of speaking to them. I had not spoken in the House for weeks, but I wanted to comment on an issue about which I knew. Is anyone surprised to learn that our consideration was

[Mr. Malins]

guillotined and that not one of my amendments was touched? That made me sad, not because I have that much great wisdom but because I had something to say on those matters. There are hon. Members who have something to say about the Criminal Justice and Police Bill.

So the Bill will be considered in Committee and the usual formalities will be observed. As we know, someone will say, "Please speak for 20 minutes." If another hon. Member asks me to speak for 20 minutes, I shall go mad. I may want to speak for 20 seconds, five minutes or 25 minutes. I want to speak about things that really matter. I do not mind instructions telling me to speak for 15 minutes, except that Labour Members have been told the same thing. What type of Chamber is this? How often do hon. Members with real expertise have a chance to make a difference? It is a tragedy.

Some hon. Members may want to table new clauses on Report. Some will have something positive to say about the remaining stages of the Bill. However, I know what will happen, as does the Minister. We will not have the time. What were we elected to this place for? Was I elected to go through the Lobbies night after night? Was I elected to be told to speak for 15 minutes? Was any Member to this place elected for that? It is sad, but many of us feel that we were.

The Minister knows as well as I do that four hours on Report may not be enough for the serious debate that the Bill deserves. To force us to complete the debate in four hours is to attack the rights of Back Benchers. It is sad that we have reached this stage, which is why I repeat that this is a shameful motion.

10.26 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): These programme motion debates are now colloquially referred to as "pot and kettle" debates, because so much time is spent trying to pretend that the sins of the previous regime somehow mitigate those of the present regime—or vice versa.

There is however a serious issue here. The motion is defective in two important respects. The Minister made the best of a bad brief, but frankly, had he been a member of the Modernisation Committee, he would have known that his explanation this evening was misleading. The Modernisation Committee wished to make it certain that Opposition parties and Back Benchers on both sides had a real opportunity to debate issues in a Bill that were important to them.

The Government have a right to expect that their legislation will get through in due course, assuming that they maintain their majority in the House, and they may seek to put a marker down for when they want the Committee to be completed. However, they do not have a right to determine precisely what debate takes place in the intervening period.

In advance of the Second Reading of the Bill, it is ludicrous to determine precisely how much time will be required for Report and Third Reading. If the Minister made a genuine concession just now by saying that he was prepared to listen to arguments from other parts of the House about the progress of the Bill, let him say clearly now from the Dispatch Box that he is also prepared to take back to his colleagues the proposal that Report and Third Reading may also have to be extended if necessary.

This is a Bill different from many of the others that have been programmed in recent weeks. First and foremost, there has been no preliminary discussion, draft Bill or inquiry by a Committee. The House has never looked at most of the issues before. Secondly, there are huge issues that are not even in the Bill, yet which the Minister has said he intends to try to include in it. I know that amendments have already been taken to the Clerk for tabling. When preparing the programme motion, how did the Minister and his colleagues know how many amendments were to be tabled or how significant they would be? How many new clauses will be tabled by the Government to deal with issues that are outwith the Bill?

This is very much a tentative Bill; it is not by any means a complete work. There are already in excess of 132 clauses. I wager that there will be a considerable increase in that number and, if anything, we may find that the existing clauses are subject to substantial Government amendment.

The timing is absurd. To table a programme motion even before the Second Reading debate has taken place is to make an absurd presumption about the views of both Opposition Members and Government Back Benchers. I serve on the Selection Committee. On Wednesday, we will appoint the members of a Committee to consider the Bill. We will look at the contributions made by hon. Members on Second Reading. Without knowing who the Committee members will be, how can we pre-determine how they will want to handle the Bill? How can they decide how they want to handle it before they know who they are?

There is no practical reason why the Government should continue to insist on taking programme motions on the same day as Second Reading. It flies in the face of common sense and practical reality. Incidentally, if the Conservatives have not decided whether to force a vote on Second Reading, we can end up with very late votes on programme motions, directly contrary to the Modernisation Committee's intentions of trying to ensure that main votes are taken at 10 pm and not thereafter.

The motion is a bad one, and I hope that the Minister will withdraw it.

10.31 pm

Mr. Clappison: I agree with the description applied to the motion by my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins): it is shameful. He made more eloquently than I could the point that the amount of time allotted for Report will prevent many of us from contributing at that stage.

That also casts a reflection on how the Government intend to approach the Committee stage. Whoever is in government, Ministers will rarely accept in Committee amendments tabled by the Opposition. They more commonly say that they will reflect on the point and perhaps table an amendment on Report. The shortness of the time allowed for Report stage means that it will be very difficult to do that.

The Minister spoke about past guillotines. I cannot recall an occasion when a criminal justice Bill of this length has had such a short Report stage. For example, I remember that the then Opposition spent several days on Report on the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill of 1994, introducing matters such as the right to silence—an important and sensitive subject that it was right to

debate—and it is interesting to see that, in government, Labour has gone back on what it said then and abolished the right to silence for 10 to 14-year-olds.

The motion suggests to me that the Government are not interested in listening to argument and certainly not interested in the details of the legislation, which is being pushed contemptuously through the House. It suggests that what really matters to them is not getting the detail right so that the legislation works in practice but all the headlines that were generated some weeks ago, before the Queen's Speech, when Cabinet Minister after Cabinet Minister was wheeled out to talk about the yob culture.

We even heard the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), when he was still one of the band of brothers, saying that the Bill was an attack on yob culture. The only time I have heard him saying something deranged is when he said that the Government were winning the war on crime. The rest of the time, he has made perfect sense.

This contemptuous motion says all that we need to know about the Government's attitude towards policy, towards the House and towards democracy.

10.34 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison). Indeed, I agree with all the comments by Opposition Members, including the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), about the programme motion.

I was unfortunately unable to attend the whole debate, but I heard some of the Home Secretary's remarks on the issue that worries many hon. Members: the attacks on scientific workers who practise around the country. The problem affects many constituencies, especially that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). When my right hon. Friend mentioned his anxieties about Huntingdon Life Sciences, the Home Secretary was good enough to say that he hoped to table amendments in Committee to deal with the serious problem that affects so many ordinary people around the country who feel intimidated. The headquarters of Novartis is in my constituency. I met the staff on Friday, and they are worried about what is happening.

However, the Home Secretary said that he could not give an undertaking to table amendments in Committee that are capable of dealing with that genuine problem. The public expect Parliament to respond to the serious problem of intimidation. If, for good and valid reasons, the Home Secretary is unable to table well drafted amendments in Committee because the Government have so programmed that stage of our proceedings that it must end by 8 March, there will be no other opportunity to table them. The idea that the Home Secretary will be able to table them on Report is unrealistic. If Report lasts only hours, and there is a statement on the relevant day, the debate will be truncated even more. We will then be in the farcical position that, although the Home Secretary has told the House that he wants to table the amendments and hopes to do so in Committee, after failing to do that, he is unable to do so on Report.

The Minister is a reasonable man; we believe that he is being groomed for even higher office. Would it not be bizarre if a matter of such importance could not be decided or even properly debated in the House because tonight the Government have hamstrung themselves with a timetable motion which will prevent a serious matter from being resolved in the House? It would therefore be the responsibility of the other place to try to resolve the matter. I have great confidence in the ability of the hereditary peers to do their constitutional duty. I believe that immense wisdom reposes in their Lordships, and I have no doubt that they would be able to deal with the matter. *[Interruption.]* The Minister says that they are enabled to do so by birth. That is true, but they also have the wisdom of experience.

Mr. Malins: They are independent.

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend is right.

It is not good enough for the Government to table such a motion. It is inconsistent with the Home Secretary's earlier commitment to deal with the matter to which I referred. The Government are curtailing the debate so that even if they are able to table amendments in Committee, there will be only four hours on Report for other hon. Members who are not members of the Committee to comment on important measures for dealing with intimidation at Huntingdon Life Sciences, and also with the hunt saboteurs who go round disrupting hunting in this country.

Mr. Heald: Does my hon. Friend agree that some Members whose constituents are affected—perhaps even our right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major)—will not be able to sit on the Committee, but will be desperately keen to attend the debate on Report—[HON. MEMBERS: "Why not?"] It will not be possible for every Member with a constituency interest in the matter to be a member of the Committee, so it would be wrong if they did not have the opportunity on Report to propose new clauses or amendments on further points that needed to be dealt with.

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The case that the measure is shameful is overwhelmingly made. The motion does not even meet the Government's own requirements; it puts a straitjacket on their intentions for the Bill. It undermines one's confidence in the Government's commitment to address the serious issues.

If we can deal with the problems for scientists on Report, I hope that I shall be able to raise the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act 1875—many of whose provisions could well do with re-enactment in the Bill.

10.41 pm

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The manner of the programme motion is not just shameful—it is scandalous. The motion brings the House into grave disrepute—as do all its predecessors during this Session.

It is an example of the complete contempt in which the Executive hold the legislature that a representative of the Executive can tell the House that he thinks there is enough time for the Committee to discuss the Bill. In a fit of seeming generosity, the Minister of State responded to an intervention by saying that, of course, if he considered that there had been serious discussion in Committee of the proposed amendments, he would generously be prepared to reconvene the Programming Sub-Committee to see whether a few more sittings could be squeezed in for the House to consider the measure. That is

[Mr. Crispin Blunt]

an appalling example of an overweening Executive, supported by legislators on the Labour Benches who betray their duty to the people whom they represent.

The motion is a scandal. We do not yet know who is to be appointed to the Standing Committee.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Does the hon. Gentleman concede that only six Back-Bench Conservative Members contributed to the Second Reading debate?

Mr. Blunt: I am glad that the Minister made that point. He draws attention to the extraordinary fact that the number of contributions made in the debate by Members on both sides of the House reflects the relative number of Members elected to the Chamber—in other words, there were 17 speeches from Labour Members and 10 from Opposition Members, of which six were made by Conservatives. That is almost a precise reflection of the make-up of the House of Commons.

For it to be a matter of such extraordinary note that Government Back Benchers contribute to a debate in the same ratio as their election to this place shows what an idle lot they normally are, because they do not turn up to represent the interests of their own constituents. Now that we have timetabled programmes for Standing Committees, they have no excuse not to make contributions. It can make no difference to the passage of the Bill. Labour Members should be able to turn up and speak on the interests that they are supposed to represent rather than sitting in Standing Committee like a lot of jellyfish, saying nothing that would disturb the Executive.

The problem is that there is a large number of newly elected Labour Members who see their duty as simply to support the Executive. In this Parliament, legislators are betraying their duty to the people who elected them—they are betraying the House of Commons. These programme motions and the contempt they show for our legislative duty are a prime example of that. Such motions should earn the Executive the calumny that they so thoroughly deserve.

10.44 pm

Mr. Charles Clarke: There is, of course, room for argument as to whether there should be programming. As hon. Members have pointed out, it is a serious debate and it divides the House. In my opinion, and that of the Government, programming allows more contributions from the House than would otherwise be made. That key point needs to be understood. I believe that the current system is vastly superior to what went before, when debates were curtailed and guillotined all the way through. As it happens, I respect the contributions made by the hon. Member for Woking (Mr. Malins)—

It being forty-five minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER, *pursuant to Order [7 November 2000], put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair.*

The House divided: Ayes 286, Noes 137.

Division No. 88] **[10.45 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally

Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. Don Touhig.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Fabricant, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Farnham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Mates, Michael
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David

Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Keith Simpson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND POLICE BILL
[*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State for or in connection with the carrying out of his functions under that Act; and

(b) any increase attributable to that Act in the sums which are payable out of money so provided under any other Act.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

The House divided: Ayes 298, Noes 0.

Division No. 89] **[11 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted

Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverhton SE)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and
Mr. Clive Betts.

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Wilshire and
Mr. Eric Forth.

Question accordingly agreed to.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND POLICE BILL
[*WAYS AND MEANS*]

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(a) the imposition of charges to corporation tax by provisions of that Act relating to the treatment for the purposes of the Tax Acts of the Service Authority for the National Criminal Intelligence Service and the Service Authority for the National Crime Squad; and

(b) the payment into the Consolidated Fund of sums paid to the Secretary of State by the Central Police Training and Development Authority.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

The House divided: Ayes 291, Noes 0.

Division No. 90] **[11.12 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbett, Robin
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John

McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and Mr. Clive Betts.

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Wilshire and Mr. Eric Forth.

Question accordingly agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

COMPANIES

That the Companies (Fees) (Amendment) Regulations 2000 (S.I., 2000, No. 3325), which were laid before this House on 19th December 2000, be approved.—[*Mr. Mike Hall.*]

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

COMPANIES

That the Open-Ended Investment Companies (Investment Companies with Variable Capital) (Fees) (Amendment) Regulations 2000 (S.I., 2000, No. 3324), which were laid before this House on 19th December 2000, be approved.—[*Mr. Mike Hall.*]

Question agreed to.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Motion made,

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest.—[*Mr. Mike Hall.*]

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That, for the current Session of Parliament, Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 37, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 46, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 48, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mr. Mike Hall]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Motion made,

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session—[*Mr. Mike Hall.*]

Hon. Members: Object.

NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, That—

1. The matter of human rights and equality in Northern Ireland, being a matter relating exclusively to Northern Ireland, be referred to the Northern Ireland Grand Committee;

2. The Committee shall meet at Westminster on Thursday 8th February at 2.30 p.m.; and

3. At that meeting—

(a) the Committee shall take questions for oral answer; and shall then consider the matter of human rights and equality in Northern Ireland, referred to it under paragraph (1) above;

(b) the Chairman shall interrupt proceedings at 5 p.m.; and

(c) at the conclusion of those proceedings a Motion for the adjournment of the Committee may be moved by a Minister of the Crown pursuant to Standing Order No. 116(5) (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (sittings).—[*Mr. Mike Hall.*]

Hon. Members: Object.

TREASURY

Ordered,

That Mrs. Liz Blackman be discharged from the Treasury Committee and Judy Mallaber be added to the Committee.—[*Mr. John McWilliam, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*]

Fluoridation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mr. Mike Hall.*]

11.23 pm

Mr. Bill Etherington (Sunderland, North): I begin by explaining to my hon. Friend the Minister that no discourtesy was intended on my part when I failed to get in touch with her. When I arrived this afternoon, I phoned her office and got an answerphone; I left word that I would be present at 7.15 pm but got no word back. I apologise only when I do things wrong so I am not apologising, but I regret that this has happened, because it puts a person at a disadvantage, and I would not seek to do that.

Since coming to this House in 1992, it has been my opinion that the Department of Health is absolutely paranoic in its support for fluoridation of water on the basis that it goes a long way to help reduce dental caries during the formative years of a child's growth. I am pleased to say that, since my party came to power, two significant moves have alleviated that position to some extent, although there is still a long way to go.

The first big step forward was when the Government agreed that, instead of local health authorities having the power to decide whether water should be fluoridated, it would be left to local councils to consult the people living in the area and to make a recommendation to the local health authority, which the health authority would accept.

The importance of that change is that health authorities do their work as they are told to do it by the Department of Health. There is no independence, and anyone who thinks otherwise does not have much knowledge of the Government or of those whom they appoint to do a job for them. Councils are rather different. They are, to some degree, influenced by the fact they can be removed by the people in their area, if they do not provide what the people want. That change was particularly welcome to me.

When this matter was discussed at great length in my constituency four years ago, there was a phone-in to a local newspaper in which more than 2,000 people took part. More than 90 per cent. of those who responded were against the fluoridation of water supplies. I have no fears about this matter. If we can go out and campaign fairly, I have no doubt that the public will democratically decide that they do not want fluoridation.

There was a second important factor. There must have been some doubt on the matter somewhere in the Department of Health, because last year it set up a review procedure under Professor Sheldon at York university. That review would take note of whatever evidence was available on the advantages and disadvantages of the fluoridation of water, and notice would, of course, be taken of the resulting report.

When the report came out in late autumn last year, I was delighted, as someone who is opposed to fluoridation and the secretary of the all-party parliamentary group against fluoridation. Having read the report, my view was that it in no way endorsed the views that we have been given for many years about the tremendous benefits of fluoridation, about there being no danger involved and about there being no evidence that it could be harmful.

I say to the Minister with all sincerity that I am very disappointed that the Department of Health has joined forces with the British Dental Association, the British

[Mr. Bill Etherington]

Medical Association and the British Fluoridation Society in a pre-emptive strike to try to undermine the report. I make no apology for reading out a letter that was sent to the Government on 10 September by Professor Sheldon. I shall read it word for word, although I do not like doing that; I like spontaneity rather than chuntering on. Professor Sheldon wrote:

"In my capacity as chair of the Advisory Group for the systematic review on the effects of water fluoridation recently conducted by the NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination at the University of York and as its founding director, I am concerned that the results of the review have been widely misrepresented. The review was exceptional in this field in that it was conducted by an independent group to the highest international scientific standards and a summary has been published in the British Medical Journal. It is particularly worrying then that statements which mislead the public about the review's findings have been made in press releases and briefings by the British Dental Association, the National Alliance for Equity in Dental Health and the British Fluoridation Society. I should like to correct some of these errors.

1 Whilst there is evidence that water fluoridation is effective at reducing caries, the quality of the studies was generally moderate and the size of the estimated benefit, only of the order of 15 per cent., is far from 'massive'.

2 The review found water fluoridation to be significantly associated with high levels of dental fluorosis which was not characterised as 'just a cosmetic issue'.

3 The review did not show fluoridation to be safe. The quality of the research was too poor to establish with confidence whether or not there are potentially important adverse effects in addition to the high levels of fluorosis. The report recommended that more research was needed.

4 There was little evidence to show that water fluoridation has reduced social inequalities in dental health.

5 The review could come to no conclusion as to the cost-effectiveness of water fluoridation or whether there are different effects between natural or artificial fluoridation.

6 Probably because of the rigour with which this review was conducted, these findings are more cautious and less conclusive than in most previous reviews.

7 The review team was surprised that in spite of the large number of studies carried out over several decades there is a dearth of reliable evidence with which to inform policy. Until high quality studies are undertaken providing more definite evidence, there will continue to be legitimate scientific controversy over the likely effects and costs of water fluoridation."

I pay tribute to Lord Baldwin, who has been an inspiration to all those who are worried about water fluoridation. I shall now pick out one or two highlights from a piece by Jerome Burne in the *Financial Times* on 27 January. The article is headed "Fluoridation findings set teeth gnashing" and says:

"A systematic research review has failed to find reliable evidence that it works, but doctors and dentists are refusing to accept the fact".

I do not have time to read out the whole article, but it also says:

"Anyone who thinks this report a ringing endorsement is either scientifically illiterate or dishonest".

Those are not my words, but I certainly go along with them.

Several statements have been made since the York review. I shall call it that because everyone—not that many are here—will understand it. The BDA said:

"The review . . . confirms that water fluoridation is safe and effective."

The York review said:

"The studies included for [effectiveness] were of moderate quality (level B [moderate risk of bias]), and limited quantity."

John Hunt, chief executive of the BDA, refers to the

"compelling evidence provided by the review",

but the review says:

"Any future research . . . [should use] . . . appropriate methodology to improve the quality of the existing evidence base."

The BDA says:

"The report confirms that there is clear evidence that fluoridation reduces [decay]."

The York review says:

"To have clear confidence in the ability to answer the question [on caries reduction], the quality of the evidence would need to be higher."

The BDA says:

"The report confirms that fluoridation reduces dental health inequalities . . . [and] significantly narrows the dental health gap".

The York review, in its executive summary conclusions, says:

"The research evidence is of insufficient quality to allow confident statements about other potential harms [than dental fluorosis] or whether there is an impact on social inequalities."

The BDA says:

"There is no evidence that water fluoridation is linked to cancer, bone disease, or any other adverse effect."

The York review says:

"High quality research [into adverse effects] that takes confounding factors into account is needed."

The BDA says:

"Dental fluorosis is recognised by the York review as a cosmetic issue, not a health problem."

The York review says:

"This is nowhere to be found in the report. The lead researcher confirms 'we . . . did not say it was a cosmetic issue.'"

The BDA says:

"projections in the review estimate that fluoridation might . . . increase . . . dental fluorosis of 'aesthetic concern' . . . to around 10 per cent."

The York review says:

"The proportion who have teeth that are affected enough to cause aesthetic concern is approximately 12.5 per cent."

That is pretty good for the BDA: it was only 25 per cent. out on that issue, whereas on all the others it was nearly 100 per cent. out. I could go on indefinitely with those quotations, but I shall not.

According to a BDA parliamentary newsletter, the York review

"confirmed that water fluoridation is safe and effective".

The York review replied:

"Interpreting the results of studies of other possible negative effects is very difficult because of the small numbers of studies . . . and poor study quality . . . other potential adverse effects"—

other than dental fluorosis, that is—

"may take longer to occur, or may occur largely in an adult population . . . High quality research is needed."

I think I have made my point in that regard, but the Department of Health, which commissioned the report, has made statements on one or two issues. It has said:

"This report clearly shows that fluoridating water helps to reduce tooth decay."

The York review said:

"The studies included"—

for effectiveness—

"were of moderate quality . . . and limited quantity . . . Only one study addressed the positive effect of fluoridation in the adult population. Assessment of the long-term benefits of water fluoridation is needed."

According to the Department of Health,

"The findings show that water fluoridation improves dental health".

The York review said:

"it is surprising to find that little high quality research has been undertaken."

Perhaps the most surprising aspect involves a statement by the British Fluoridation Society, which compared dental health in fluoridated Sandwell with that in unfluoridated Bolton, to Bolton's disadvantage. According to the York review:

"Crude league tables cannot be scientific, as they do not control for other variables. Ireland for example, most heavily fluoridated in Europe, ranks below 4 unfluoridated countries for dental health in 12-year-olds."

I have quoted quite enough, and I want to give the Minister a chance to reply—after all, she has already suffered one disadvantage—but I think that the present situation is untenable. I want the Department of Health not to try to rubbish reports that it has commissioned, and to ensure that what goes out to the public uses such reports in their proper context. I consider it scandalous for a Government Department to act in such a way: I cannot put it more strongly than that.

This is nothing short of deception. It is not for me to say whether it constitutes a deliberate attempt to mislead people—I leave others to judge that—but I know that it does mislead people. Despite all its problems, most of the population have a high regard for the Department of Health; I have myself, but not on this issue. It is about time the Department took another look at the matter.

I should like to know why we are about the only European country that tolerates the poison that is put into our water—for that is what we are talking about: it is a poison, nothing else. The Government themselves have said that fluorosis is a sign of toxicity, although people are saying that it is only cosmetic.

Let me say to the Minister again, in all honesty and sincerity, that if we do not get this matter right there will be a public backlash that will make many other recent events seem fairly small. There has been a bad misjudgment for many years, and it is time that it was corrected.

11.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, North (Mr. Etherington) on securing this debate on the important issue of oral health. The subject provokes strong reactions, both for and against the fluoridation of water supplies. His speech showed great passion, but I accept that he has never intended any discourtesy. I am just sorry that we were not able previously to speak about the subject so that I could address the specific issues that he has raised.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's record on the issue. Not only has he expressed his concerns in today's Adjournment debate, but he has a long track record of tabling parliamentary questions on the issue. He also paid tribute to Lord Baldwin, who in the past few months has pursued the issue in the other place.

The United Kingdom has seen dramatic improvements in health, and that includes oral health. Last July, to build on those improvements, the Government published the NHS plan, which is the most far-reaching reform programme in the history of the national health service. Part of the plan details how we intend to redesign the NHS around patients and deliver fast and accessible care. We should remember that the fluoridation debate has arisen because we wanted to improve dental health.

In September, the dental strategy "Modernising NHS Dentistry—Implementing the NHS Plan" dealt in greater detail with oral health matters. The strategy essentially will

"give the next generation a healthier start with oral hygiene that will benefit them throughout their lives".

The strategy also has the support of the British Dental Association's recently published five-point plan, which includes a comprehensive programme to improve oral health and reduce inequalities.

Quite apart from the fluoridation issue, which I shall address in a moment, I should like to assure my hon. Friend that the Government are determined to address oral health inequalities and to allow everyone who wants it access to NHS dentistry. At the front door to those services will be NHS Direct. When it goes live for dentistry, NHS Direct will be a convenient route for patients to access NHS dentistry whether for urgent or routine treatment. No matter where in the country one lives, one telephone call to NHS Direct or logging on to NHS Direct Online will enable one to find the nearest NHS dentist or dental access centre.

Additionally, NHS Direct will provide information on self-care and patients' rights and charges, so that patients are fully informed about dental treatment and services. Currently, two pilot projects—one in the south-west and the other in the north-east, which covers the Newcastle and north Tyneside area—are testing NHS Direct's ability to direct callers to dental treatment. NHS Direct will also provide useful information and feedback to health authorities about dental services, ensuring that access difficulties are identified and dealt with in all parts of the country, and will help to tackle inequality in dental services.

However good the access to dental treatment is, people still need help in reducing their need for restorative treatment. Oral health is central to healthy living and contributes to the well-being of us all. We know that children who start brushing their teeth in infancy are less likely to experience tooth decay than those who start brushing later. We also know that using fluoride toothpaste is an effective way of preventing decay.

We cannot, however, be complacent, and I hope that my hon. Friend accepts that the Government are not complacent on the issue. Later I shall outline in more

[Ms Gisela Stuart]

detail what we are doing as a result of the York research. However, the fact is that more than half the country's 15-year-olds still experience decay in their permanent teeth. We also have very good evidence that significant inequalities remain throughout the population. Children from deprived communities, for example, including some black and minority ethnic communities, are less likely to visit a dentist regularly. Even at regional level, there are major differences in the levels of tooth decay in children.

In 1999, for example, five-year-olds in the west midlands had on average less than half the number of decayed, missing or filled primary teeth than those in the north-west. Moreover, 19 per cent. more five-year-olds in the west midlands had no tooth decay at all compared with their counterparts in the north-west. A similar picture emerges in relation to 12-year-olds and their permanent teeth.

The challenge for local health authorities is how to improve oral health generally and to tackle those inequalities in health status. Reducing inequalities in dental health is not easy. One option that was considered was to add fluoride to school milk. A number of health authorities—such as Knowsley, St. Helens and the Wirral, where water is not fluoridated—are currently running pilot schemes. However, although those are worthwhile initiatives, for the best benefits children need to start using fluoride before the age at which they start school. That is why successive Governments have preferred the further option of fluoridating the water supply in areas with high levels of dental decay. It is the view of dental professionals that the fluoridation of water offers the most effective means of reducing tooth decay.

As the recent review of the evidence shows, fluoridation of the water supply to the optimum level of one part in a million can significantly reduce the amount of tooth decay in children from similar backgrounds. About 500,000 people in this country receive water that is naturally fluoridated at, or about, this level. I was interested in the reports about the mottling of teeth. One of my children has mottling, simply by virtue of growing up in a part of Essex which has extremely high natural levels of fluoride.

A further 1 million people receive water which is naturally fluoridated at a lower level, but which still provides some dental benefit. These areas are generally found in a band running down the eastern side of the country, from Hartlepool in the north, down to parts of Essex. Some 5 million people receive water where the fluoride content has been artificially increased to this level. Major schemes are in operation in Birmingham and throughout the west midlands, and also in Tyneside.

Successive Governments have recognised that fluoridation is an important and effective method of protecting the population from tooth decay. In "Modernising NHS Dentistry", we quoted the example of Sandwell, which is next to my constituency. The water supply there was fluoridated in 1986. Over the following 10 years, the amount of tooth decay in children had more than halved. During the same period, Bolton—an area with a similar population mix, but without fluoridated water—saw little change in its children's oral health.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the example of Ireland and I will look at the comparison he raised. That example has been replicated in many other places over the past 50 years. Sadly, it is also true that where fluoridation schemes have been withdrawn—in Anglesey and Kilmarnock, for example—levels of tooth decay in children have risen after having fallen during the periods of fluoridation.

Nevertheless, we have a duty—as my hon. Friend forcefully reminded me—to examine carefully any claims that there are risks which may be attached to fluoridation, as well as benefits. It was for this reason that we commissioned the NHS centre for reviews and dissemination at the university of York to review the evidence on the relationship between fluoride and health. The report of the review was published last October.

The review confirmed that fluoridating water helps to reduce tooth decay and that there is no clear evidence of other adverse effects on general health associated with water fluoridation. The only problem identified was the cosmetic side effect of fluoridation—dental fluorosis. The report did, however, identify the need for more good-quality research on the effect of water fluoridation.

The final decision on implementing fluoridation schemes rests with the water undertaker. The Water (Fluoridation) Act 1985 was consolidated in the Water Industry Act (1991), section 87(i) of which states:

"Where a Health Authority has applied in writing to a water undertaker for the water supplied within an area specified in the application to be fluoridated, that undertaker may, while the application remains in force, increase the fluoride content of the water supplied by the undertaker within that area."

Since 1985, nearly half of all health authorities in England have requested water companies to introduce water fluoridation. None of these requests has been accepted. The reason for that is, quite simply, that none of the water companies has exercised the discretion to agree to a health authority's request. The key issue here is whether the "may" should become "shall".

We have been encouraged by the readiness with which the water industry has indicated that it is prepared to look again at both the legal and practical problems around fluoridation. What the water operators want, above anything else, is clarity over the distribution of responsibilities. They have emphasised that their primary duty is to provide a sufficient and wholesome supply of water. They consider that the question of whether a water supply should also contribute to wider public health objectives should be for the health service to decide. When a fluoridation scheme is approved, the health service meets the operational costs and indemnifies the water operator against any unforeseen cost consequences. There is little that we can disagree with in that.

How, then, are we to proceed? I have seen evidence in the west midlands that fluoridation can reduce dental decay, but there is strong public opinion against it. My hon. Friend cited a radio phone-in. National opinion polls show that about 70 per cent. are in favour of fluoridation, but environmentalists have considerable concerns. The York study showed that there are some shortcomings.

Oral health measures, such as regular brushing with fluoride toothpaste, can achieve good results, but experience shows that the best reduction in dental decay, particularly among deprived communities, is achieved when the fluoride is added to the water, so we will

encourage health authorities in areas of high dental decay to consider holding consultations with local people to discuss current views on fluoridation, in light of the York report's findings. No community would or should be required to fluoridate unless there is a significant majority in favour.

The York report highlighted the need for more good-quality research. We have asked the Medical Research Council to suggest where it might be possible to strengthen the evidence currently available. It is certainly not our intention to cover the same ground, but rather to give advice on how to fill in the gaps identified in the York report. We are also discussing the report with representatives of the water industry. When the discussions are complete, we will review the need for legislation.

The MRC has provisionally agreed terms of reference stating that it should

"Provide advice on current scientific evidence regarding the health effects of water fluoridation . . .

Consider whether further research in this area is required to inform public health policy . . .

Report to the MRC Physiological Medicine and Infections Board and the MRC Health Services and Public Health Research Board"

and

"Report to the Department of Health."

The MRC has let us know that its working group may want to refine those terms of reference. Its first meeting will be in February.

Any proposals for change will, of course, be brought to the House and right hon. and hon. Members will have the opportunity to debate further this sensitive issue before any decisions are reached. We are clear that we need a good, solid evidence base, but we are also clear that we need the support of the public. The two elements will go forward in tandem.

I respect my hon. Friend's strong views. I hope that he is reassured by the fact that we are commissioning further research to fill in the gaps clearly identified in the York study. I thank him warmly for raising the issue tonight.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seven minutes to Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Tuesday 30 January 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

ROYAL LIVERPOOL CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL INQUIRY REPORT

Ordered,

That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there will be laid before this House a Return of a report, summary and conclusions, evidence and supporting papers of the independent confidential Inquiry established under section 2 of the National Health Service Act 1977 to investigate the removal, retention and disposal of human tissues following post mortem at Alder Hey Hospital (the Royal Liverpool Children's Hospital NHS Trust) and to make recommendations.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Winter Fuel Payment

1. **Mr. David Marshall** (Glasgow, Shettleston): How many pensioners in Scotland are benefiting from the winter fuel payment scheme. [146179]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mrs. Helen Liddell): About 1 million people aged 60 or over will benefit from the winter fuel payment scheme in Scotland. My hon. Friend will be interested to know that that includes about 11,500 people in his Shettleston constituency.

Mr. Marshall: I welcome the Secretary of State and the Minister of State back to the reality of Scottish politics and wish them every success in their new roles. Their political opponents will be in for a rough ride in the months ahead.

Does the Secretary of State agree that pensioners throughout the United Kingdom and especially in Scotland gave a warm welcome to the winter fuel payment of £200 this winter, particularly because of the severe cold weather of the past five weeks? For once, it was not a choice for some of them between eating and heating, as it was under the Tories. Does my right hon. Friend also agree that if the Tories were ever to regain power—God forbid that that should happen—the winter fuel allowance could be part of the £16 billion-worth of public expenditure cuts that they promise?

Mrs. Liddell: I thank my hon. Friend for his generous comments. I pay tribute to my predecessor, who is now Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—a job in which all Scotland wishes him well. As not only the first woman to be Secretary of State for Scotland, but the first mother, I am conscious of the fact that this afternoon I am to welcome to Dover House six young people who are to recite Burns for me. That is an appropriate start to my role.

My hon. Friend is correct about the importance of the winter fuel allowance. Like me, he was a Member of the House before the 1997 general election and witnessed the official Opposition's introduction of VAT on fuel. I am pleased that a Labour Government cut VAT on fuel, pleased that a Labour Chancellor is ensuring that every pensioner receives a £200 winter fuel allowance and pleased that, across government, Labour is seeking to deal with fuel poverty. That represents a significant dividing line between this side of the House and that side. We have practical solutions for real problems.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): I offer my congratulations to the Secretary of State and my good wishes to her predecessor in his new role.

Does the Secretary of State realise that those pensioners are receiving a non-means-tested benefit? Can she explain to them why the Government think that personal care should not also be non-means-tested? She proudly referred to the £200. Can she explain to pensioners why the Government plan to cut that back to £150 next winter?

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Gentleman seems to forget that the Government have spent more than £9 billion on pensioners in the lifetime of this Parliament. That goes way beyond the proposals on which he fought the last election. He knows that matters of personal care are for the Scottish Parliament and it underlines the power of the devolution settlement that the Scottish Parliament can take such decisions. The Government have made progress in creating a stable economy, low interest rates and low unemployment so we are in a position to benefit every pensioner in the country. We shall do so with fairness and compassion. We shall not pull the wool over their eyes.

Mrs. Rosemary McKenna (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): I also congratulate the Secretary of State and the Minister of State.

The Secretary of State will be aware that in my constituency as in hers, many pensioners are not yet taking up fully the benefits to which they are entitled. We must remind pensioners about the minimum income guarantee because taking it up would give them £100 more in disposable income than they had when the Government were elected. Will she remind pensioners that they ought to take up the minimum income guarantee, especially as the application forms have been simplified?

Mrs. Liddell: Predictably, my hon. Friend makes a sensible point. Many pensioners are too shy to apply for the benefits that are available to them. Indeed, some may not have received their winter fuel allowance, and I urge them to take it up. There is a helpline, and I am sure that the House will not mind me reading out the number, which is 0845-915-1515. Help is available for pensioners and it is important that they realise that the minimum income guarantee is their due. It is not charity; it is their due. Many pensioners are not aware that, from April 2001, pensioners who have savings of up to £6,000 before their

minimum income guarantee award can still receive the minimum income guarantee. The savings limit is to go up to £12,000. That is very important for every pensioner: the Opposition do not like it, but pensioners do.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): I too welcome the Secretary of State to her post. May I ask her how the issue of fuel payments relates to the welcome announcement of free personal care? Although extracted at the point of a parliamentary gun, and humiliating for the Secretary of State, it was welcome none the less.

Was the Secretary of State kept in the dark about the announcement yesterday, as suggested by that fine newspaper the *Daily Record* this morning? If not, can she explain why she said on yesterday's "Today" programme that the Scottish Executive were still considering the matter and would report back—just a few minutes before the First Minister's announcement?

Mrs. Liddell: What a pleasure it is to see the hon. Gentleman back in his place. We have not seen him here for a long time. Indeed, when he last left he said that he was going to Holyrood because this place was—what was it?—an outdated irrelevance. Apparently we were soon to be extinct, but now the hon. Gentleman is coming back. Edinburgh is not big enough for him and his hon. Friend the Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney).

In the context of personal care and the Sutherland report, it is a sign of the strength of the devolution settlement that the Government have provided a Scottish Parliament with the will of the Scottish people. As for what I said yesterday on the "Today" programme, the hon. Gentleman will today hear from the Scottish Executive about their arrangements for the Chisholm committee. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Chisholm) is present now.

Labour Members believe in devolution as something that strengthens the United Kingdom, unlike the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), who wants to split Scotland from the United Kingdom and has been chased back down here by his hon. Friend the Member for North Tayside. He is the weakest link; goodbye.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): I add my welcome and congratulations to those extended to the Secretary of State and the Minister.

Does the Secretary of State believe that the winter fuel payment, together with other relevant Government measures, can help to cut the tragic incidence of hypothermia and other cold-related serious illnesses among the elderly, not least in the cold north-east of Scotland?

Mrs. Liddell: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The whole issue of fuel poverty has been at the forefront of the Government's thinking. A fuel poverty taskforce, working across Government and with the devolved Administrations, has come up with real proposals to deal with the problem. It is estimated that some 35,000 deaths in the United Kingdom are caused by diseases related to cold, which is why what the official Opposition propose is such an unpleasant prospect. They intend to get rid of a winter fuel payment that puts £200 into the pockets of pensioners—the people who need it most.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I welcome the Secretary of State and the Minister to their new responsibilities.

May I raise again the question of benefits to pensioners from free personal care? The right hon. Lady says that the Executive are looking at the Sutherland proposals, whereas the First Minister is embracing the Sutherland principles in full. Is there not an incompatibility between those two expressed viewpoints? And what on earth was Lord Lipsey doing in Scotland over the last few weeks if he was not seeking to influence the decision of the Executive? My impression was not that he was there to learn reeling from the White Heather club.

Mrs. Liddell: I suspect that the hon. Gentleman does not even know what the White Heather club is.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): Oh yes he does.

Mrs. Liddell: Perhaps I was being over-generous: I did not think the hon. Gentleman was of that vintage. Anyway, I thank him for his good wishes.

As for the Sutherland proposals for personal care, because of the devolved settlement which the hon. Gentleman's party opposed, the Scottish Executive are in a position to make their own arrangements for care of the elderly. I believe in devolution; I have been committed to it for many years. The opponents of devolution sit on the Conservative Benches, and link themselves to the separatists.

Lord Lipsey is free to go to Scotland and say whatever he wants. Unlike some Opposition parties, we do not seek to cut Scotland off from the rest of the United Kingdom. As the Scottish Executive take further their proposals on the Sutherland report, they will have to consider the means whereby those proposals are implemented. That is common sense: if is what I said yesterday, and what the First Minister said yesterday.

I have known the First Minister for 30 years, and I have a good deal of respect and affection for him. He is leading Scotland along with this Westminster Government, because we believe that together we can create a better Scotland and a better United Kingdom.

Mr. Grieve: I thank the right hon. Lady; I find those remarks reassuring. However, what seems to have occurred in the past 18 months has been the operation of a system in which the Government have given devolution with one hand, but tried to claw it back through the back door—through the mechanism of Labour party control—with the other. May we have some reassurance that that USSR style of Government will not be hers, and that in future there will be transparency and a respect for the arrangements to which devolution inevitably leads?

Mrs. Liddell: I was over-generous in assuming that the hon. Gentleman was much younger than he is, because he obviously lives in some sort of dark age. The reality of devolution is that the Scottish Parliament can take its own decisions. It was Conservative Members who opposed devolution, and who—in some of their wilder proposals—would seek to reduce the powers of Scottish Members in this Chamber. They will be going into the next general election saying, "Please vote for me because I will not be voting at Westminster on your behalf." Those are the

bizarre proposals that the hon. Gentleman promotes. Labour Members believe in partnership—a partnership of the Scottish Parliament with this Parliament, a partnership that rights a 300-year-old wrong, and a partnership that strengthens the United Kingdom.

John Robertson (Glasgow, Anniesland): May I also congratulate my right hon. Friend on becoming the Secretary of State? Does she agree with me—my constituency has one of the highest proportion of over-60s—that over-60s and pensioners are far better off under this Government than they would be if any Opposition party had control?

Mrs. Liddell: I well remember going at the end of last year to a pensioners' club in my hon. Friend's constituency. It was obvious from the support that he was enjoying that his pensioner community very much recognises what the Government are doing for them. As election fever is whipped up and we see the posturing of Conservative Members, of course we have to examine what they would do for the pensioners of Scotland—such as removing the winter fuel allowance. However, many pensioners are interested not only in pensioner issues, but in issues such as the working families tax credit—which is under threat from Conservative Members. Pensioners are also interested in the new deal—which is under threat from Conservative Members. All the communities of Scotland, including the communities in my hon. Friend's constituency and in mine, recognise that the Labour Government are working for the people of Scotland.

Manufacturing Employment

2. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): What recent discussions she has had with the First Minister regarding manufacturing employment. [146181]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mrs. Helen Liddell): I have had a number of meetings with my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Fife (Mr. McLeish)—the First Minister of Scotland; I keep forgetting that I must not refer to him as an hon. Member in this place—on the support and development of employment in all sectors of the Scottish economy. It is an exciting time for the Scottish economy, and we shall work together to strengthen that economy.

Mr. Brady: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for those comments. It is clear that, despite having, as she claims a 35-year friendship with the First Minister, she has not necessarily had the fullest discussions possible about the loss of manufacturing jobs in Scotland. With manufacturing jobs going across the country at the rate of 100,000 in the past year, and going at the same rate in Scotland, why does the right hon. Lady not give proper priority to the loss of manufacturing jobs? What is she going to do about it? Is it the responsibility of the Government here in Westminster or of her friends in the devolved Administration in Edinburgh?

Mrs. Liddell: I will take no lessons from the hon. Gentleman on manufacturing industry. He may have forgotten that, last Thursday, there was an Opposition-day debate on manufacturing employment; I know because I replied to it. I can tell him that looking at the Opposition Benches was like looking at the Mary Celeste.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I was here.

Mrs. Liddell: Yes, the hon. Gentleman was present. The SNP Benches were singularly empty.

What the Government are doing for manufacturing industry in Scotland is to create a stable economy, with low inflation. Employment in Scotland is at its highest levels since 1960, and claimant-count unemployment in Scotland is at its lowest level since February 1976. So no one in this House will take lessons from Opposition Members about manufacturing industry in Scotland.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, for the first time in 20 years, the Scottish coal industry is starting to recruit workers? Does she agree that the announcement of 150 vacancies is tremendous news, for the central region of old and for west Fife? The revival of the industry means that we will be able to get cheap coal—and therefore cheap electricity—which will fire Scotland's manufacturing industry and secure employment for years to come.

Mrs. Liddell: My hon. Friend makes a poignant point. Like him, I represent a mining constituency. *[Interruption.]* We can hear the barracking from Opposition Members, whose Government sought to destroy the coal industry and coal communities in Scotland. I was very proud to be the Minister who was able to negotiate the deal that will save Longannet. I wish the work force there every bit of luck in the future. The complex has modern technology and committed people with great drive who deserve the support of everyone in this House.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): I welcome the Secretary of State and the Minister of State, respectively, to their new posts. I am sure that they would both acknowledge the tremendous contribution made by the onshore oil fabrication sector to the manufacturing base of Scotland and the UK as a whole.

The Secretary of State will be aware of the downturn in employment in that sector, with some large-scale redundancies being the order of the day of late. In her previous ministerial capacity, she will have learned that McDermotts is seeking to retain about 65 per cent. of the surplus in its pension fund. Representations to the firm are in order: can we seek the right hon. Lady's support?

Mrs. Liddell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his good wishes, and I should be happy to meet him to discuss these matters. I am well aware of what is happening with McDermotts, and in the offshore supplies industry in general. Because of the partnership that was developed between the Government, the industry and those who work in it, I was able, as Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, to announce before Christmas an additional investment of £1 billion in the industry in Scotland. That helped to protect the 200,000 jobs that depend on the oil and gas industry. I am aware of the issues that the right hon. Gentleman has raised and should

be happy to meet him in a delegation, if that would be of value to him. I am also happy to make representations with him to Treasury Ministers, and especially to my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who I am sure will take an interest in these matters.

Mrs. Irene Adams (Paisley, North): I, too, extend my congratulations and good wishes on their recent appointments to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Minister of State. Does my right hon. Friend share my fury at the audacity of Conservative Members in raising in this Chamber the subject of manufacturing jobs, on which they have shed crocodile tears both today and last week? When the Conservative Government were in office, my constituency and the area covered by the Paisley postcode lost 95 per cent. of its manufacturing jobs: 10,000 jobs at the mills in Paisley; 5,000 at the Linwood car plant; 5,000 at Babcock; 7,000—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I think the Secretary of State has got the message.

Mrs. Liddell: I am sure that hon. Members will have noted how Conservative Members responded to the catalogue of disasters visited on my hon. Friend's constituency. The actions of the previous Government decimated the manufacturing sector in Scotland. With the exception of the hon. Members for Lichfield and for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), no Conservative Member now heckling from a sedentary position bothered to attend last week's debate on the manufacturing industry. I was there; I replied to it.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): I sincerely congratulate the right hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) on their elevation to the Scottish Front Bench. If we had a decent amount of time for Scottish questions, we might even hear the hon. Gentleman, which would be a pleasure. In particular, I congratulate the right hon. Lady on her historic position as the first woman Secretary of State for Scotland.

Now, more than ever, Scotland needs strong voices here at Westminster, and however much we might disagree with what the right hon. Lady and the hon. Gentleman say, I am sure that theirs will be strong voices. This afternoon, however, they have addressed the wrong statistics. The fact is that we are facing yet another broken promise by the Labour Government. They promised to increase manufacturing industry in Scotland but the fact is that 300,000 jobs have been lost. Will the right hon. Lady apologise to the people of Scotland?

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Lady is a fine product of St. Columba's in Kilmacolm. I am sure that her former teachers will be very proud of her good manners—slightly more gracious than those of some of her right hon. and hon. Friends.

Manufacturing is very important to the Scottish economy, but what is even more important is building a manufacturing industry for the future. The previous industrial revolution was based on coal, on iron and steel, on shipbuilding and on textiles. The new industrial revolution will be based on knowledge. The Scottish economy is well suited to play its part in that knowledge-driven economy. I see my job as Secretary of State for Scotland as promoting that knowledge-driven economy. We will ensure that, in the future, Scotland will have as proud a record in employment as it has today, with the best employment figures for more than a generation.

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): I welcome the Secretary of State and her ministerial colleague to their office. Bearing in mind the fall in manufacturing employment since Labour came to power in 1997 and the Government's responsibility to create the right economic conditions for manufacturing, is the Secretary of State concerned by the expectation of the First Minister and the Scottish Executive that jobs created by inward investment will have fallen by 11,000 in Scotland from last year to this? Is that because the Government have got the economic conditions wrong for Scotland, or is it just another example of the First Minister and the Scottish Executive failing to deliver?

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Gentleman, in one of his rare forays down here, should have noted that manufacturing output is actually up in Scotland. The stability that has been created by this Labour Government and our reputation for competence make Scotland more attractive to inward investors. Separating Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom would damage the Scottish economy and damage jobs.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

The Advocate-General was asked—

Football Transfer Fees

25. **Mr. Jim Murphy** (Eastwood): If she will make a statement on representations she has received on the European Commission's proposed reform of European law relating to football transfer fees. [146204]

The Advocate-General for Scotland (Dr. Lynda Clark): I have received no such representations. However, I understand that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is actively involved in this area.

Mr. Murphy: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that answer, which will no doubt fill the football fans and football players of Scotland with a great sense of reassurance.

Despite the excellent efforts of Craig Brown, Scotland currently lies 25th in the FIFA world rankings, a mere four places above Trinidad and Tobago. The FIFA general secretary said today that a new deal on transfer fees will be announced within weeks. I ask my hon. and learned Friend to use her influence so that, when asked for a legal interpretation, she will ensure that football's unique position is respected. In that way, we can ensure that Craig Brown and the Scotland coach have a generation of young talent for years to come. If we abolish transfer fees, my fear is that up to 10 Scottish clubs will go bankrupt or part time within the next five years.

The Advocate-General for Scotland: If someone beats a path to my door seeking my advice, I will do my best to give a legal opinion, if appropriate. So far as giving help, comfort and support is concerned, I think that the Prime Minister and other Members the Government have already made it plain that they support a system that will assist smaller clubs, promote the development of young players, stabilise the sport and encourage those in it. The junior clubs in my hon. Friend's constituency will, I am sure, be very grateful for his support in this matter.

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Govan

3. **Mr. Mohammad Sarwar** (Glasgow, Govan): When she next plans to visit Govan to inspect projects which have attracted EU regional aid. [146182]

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. George Foulkes): I hope to have the opportunity to visit my hon Friend's constituency to see projects that have benefited from EU structural funds, especially the national science centre, which was awarded a grant of £20 million—the largest single award in the west of Scotland from structural funds.

Mr. Sarwar: I join my colleagues in congratulating my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland and my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Scotland Office on their appointments. I pay tribute to their predecessors, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid), now the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and my hon. Friend the Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson), now the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, for their support in securing Govan shipyard and the shipbuilding industry on the River Clyde. They will always be welcome in my Govan constituency.

As my hon. Friend the Minister points out, the Glasgow science centre received £20 million from EU development funds. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State visit the centre at the earliest opportunity?

Mr. Foulkes: The Secretary of State and I will both be happy to do so. My hon. Friend offered congratulations on the work of our predecessors—and rightly so—but he, above all, deserves a great tribute for his excellent work as a constituency Member. During my 21 years as a Member of the House—do not say that it is too long—I have rarely seen such an active and well organised campaign as that run by my hon. Friend. He deserves great tribute. It is thanks to such campaigns that unemployment is the lowest it has been for 25 years and employment is the highest it has been for 40 years. That bears constant repetition to Opposition Members.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

The Parliamentary Secretary was asked—

Magistrates Courts (Derbyshire)

26. **Mr. Mark Todd** (South Derbyshire): What the *(a)* original estimate was and *(b)* latest estimated cost is of modernising Derbyshire's magistrates courts. [146207]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): I understand that my hon. Friend is referring to the private finance initiative contract for new courthouses in Derbyshire that is currently being negotiated. The original estimate of the procurement costs in 1997 was £500,000. It is now £1.5 million.

Mr. Todd: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. The cost of that bloated project will increasingly be levied on the council tax payers of Derbyshire. Those in my constituency will measure up the increased bill that they receive against the fact that the local courthouse in Swadlincote will be closed and they will face a bus journey of more than an hour to reach the new super-court in Derby. How does my hon. Friend suggest that that should be explained to them?

Jane Kennedy: As my hon. Friend is aware, the Derbyshire magistrates courts committee made a determination to close the courthouse at Swadlincote and to transfer the work to Derby. As for work on the new court in Derby and the cost of the project, neither officials of the Department nor those of Derbyshire county council or Derby city council believe that work on the shire hall, which is to be brought back into use, could have been undertaken at a lesser—or no—cost. It is a grade 1 listed building of great antiquity. English Heritage strongly advocates its re-use for courts. On occasions, Mr. Speaker, I feel that I cannot win on any account.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): I am sure that you, Mr. Speaker, will agree that the hon. Lady brings tremendous diligence and skill to her brief. Some of us believe that she wins every time. Will she assure the House that she will bring to the administration of the magistrates courts of West Sussex the same diligence and skill that she applies in Derbyshire?

Jane Kennedy: I thank the hon. Gentleman and can give him that assurance.

Sentencing Standards

27. **Mr. Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): If he will make a statement on the application of common sentencing standards in England. [146208]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): Sentencing is a matter for the courts. Parliament lays down the parameters within which sentencers must work, but it is then for the courts to decide on the sentence in individual cases. Sentencing guidelines are laid down by the Court of Appeal and the Government have set up the sentencing advisory panel to provide advice for the Court of Appeal when it proposes

to lay down such guidelines. Additionally, the Magistrates Association publishes guidance to assist magistrates with sentencing.

Mr. Brake: I listened carefully to that response. The hon. Gentleman may be aware of a case in my constituency in which someone was found guilty of indecently assaulting a young girl but received no prison sentence. In considering those guidelines, will he look again at common sentencing standards across England to ensure that such crimes receive suitable punishment?

Mr. Lock: I am not aware of the individual case to which the hon. Gentleman refers. It would clearly be inappropriate to comment on the sentence imposed and, if there is an appeal, the matter must be referred to the Attorney-General. However, the Home Office is assisting the Magistrates Association to achieve greater consistency by supplying it with figures for each bench showing the sentencing patterns for selected offences and how they vary by petty sessional area. It is hoped that that will be a further inducement to magistrates to maintain consistency—while, of course, recognising the features of the individual cases that come before them.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Is not it a fact that a large proportion of crimes is committed by a small number of people who commit crimes over and again, yet the "three strikes and you're out" legislation that the Government enacted has not been applied in a single case? If the judges will not apply the law, will the Government reconsider it? What is the point of passing laws when judges are so evidently out of touch with what is required?

Mr. Lock: It does not come well from the hon. Gentleman's lips to criticise judges, who, by and large, do an extremely good job. Neither is it fair to say that the courts are too lenient in sentencing. Most people base such comments on what appears in the press; they do not have the benefit of hearing all the evidence or reading the reports. It is interesting to note that, when members of the press were asked to look at a case study and reach a sentence in a recent exercise, they arrived at a range of sentences somewhat more lenient than the courts would have imposed in those cases. I invite the hon. Gentleman to be extremely careful when criticising judges for being too lenient.

Human Rights Act

28. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): What assessment he has made of the impact of the Human Rights Act 1998 on the operation of the court system in England and Wales. [146209]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): The courts are responding very well to the requirements of the Human Rights Act. In a majority of cases, human rights points are being raised alongside other arguments in cases that would have come before the courts in any event. Court work loads have been stable since 2 October.

Sir Sydney Chapman: Does the Minister accept that the implementation of the various articles of the European convention on human rights incorporated into British law will have a devilish impact on the whole legal system in our country? Did he assess the impact before the Human Rights Act was introduced? If so, what estimate did the Government make of the extra cost that would fall on the courts?

Mr. Lock: Promoting a culture of respect for human rights and responsibilities throughout society and enabling British citizens to exercise the same human rights in British courts as those that they can exercise in any part of the European Union is not something that I would describe as "devilish".

I was asked whether there is chaos. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that there is no chaos. In fact, the average length of a hearing was shorter in November 2000 than in November 1999. He also asks about the provision that has been made for additional costs. We plan to spend an extra £21 million on running the courts this year—4.7 per cent. more than the existing provision. We also plan to spend up to an extra £39 million in legal aid payments—a possible addition of 2.3 per cent. It is far too early to say whether those additional provisions will be required. At present, court work loads are stable and the time taken to hear cases is decreasing, so perhaps the predictions of chaos were a little exaggerated.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My hon. Friend refers to a £39 million provision for the legal aid budget. In the light of the debate on legal aid in Committee last week, to what extent does he think that that budget is protected against all future contingencies?

Mr. Lock: My hon. Friend raises an important point, because £39 million extra in the legal aid budget to protect our human rights are one thing, but I understand that the Conservative party's proposals are to take £525 million out of civil legal aid, which would completely remove the ability of people in this country to exercise their civil rights. That proposal would certainly provide no money at all, for example, for the victims of domestic violence who want to get injunctions to prevent them from being repeatedly abused. It clearly shows the value that the Conservative party places on the human rights of such people.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): May I draw the Minister's attention to the fact that the Human Rights Act is being used as an excuse to close many rural magistrates courts, including the one in Lampeter? Will he comment on the case of a defendant last week who got up at 4.30 in the morning, walked 60 miles to a court case in Aberystwyth and arrived at 4.30 in the afternoon? The magistrates took pity on him and he was discharged. Had the court at Lampeter still been open, he could have gone 15 miles up the road and attended the local magistrates court. How can we deal with human rights when we are forcing defendants to walk 60 miles in rural areas?

Mr. Lock: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman's constituents are fit enough to walk that far. Decisions on whether individual magistrates courts are to close are matters for individual magistrates courts committees. I would not expect any magistrates courts closures to arise directly as a result of the Human Rights Act. That is a smokescreen. Other issues are involved and the quality of

court houses, including their facilities for disabled access, is also important. I am sure that he would want to ensure that every court house has proper access for disabled people.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does the Minister recognise that people throughout the country will regard his answers as astonishingly complacent? On the case raised by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) and other matters that have been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson), campaigners in the Borders and mid-Wales recognise that licensees have to travel 74 miles on a round trip for a five-minute hearing because of court closures such as the one at Machynlleth. It is unacceptable for the Minister to wash his hands of the problem and say that it is all a matter for magistrates courts committees, as he and his colleagues have repeatedly done. This mismanaged, bungled introduction of the Human Rights Act has taken place at vast cost. We no longer have local justice in rural areas, and that is the Government's fault. The Minister cannot escape responsibility.

Mr. Lock: Is not it interesting that the framework under which these decisions are rightly taken locally was not passed by this Government, but by the previous one? It was their decision to allow magistrates courts committees to take such decisions, and they must be taken locally. *[Interruption.]* If Conservatives Members do not like it, they can complain from a sedentary position, but it was their legislation. We believe that these decisions should be taken locally, and they have nothing whatever to do with the Human Rights Act.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): If the Tories are against this human rights thing, should not they be happy that people cannot get to court on time?

Mr. Lock: I often wonder why we have copious briefings from civil servants when, as always, my hon. Friend makes the point far more effectively and succinctly.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): The Minister's Department is currently considering various appeals against the unwarranted closures of magistrates courts, particularly in Devon and Cornwall. Despite the fact that no appeal decisions have been taken by the Minister, magistrates courts committees have usurped his function and gone ahead and closed those courts, thus undermining not only him but the lay magistrates who strongly believe that the courts should stay open. Will he immediately order the reopening of the closed courts?

Mr. Lock: I understand the hon. Gentleman's passion on such matters, but where cases are allocated and which courts sit on which days are not decisions for me or for my colleagues as Ministers in the Lord Chancellor's Department. They are decisions for local magistrates courts committees. I understand his point about the position in Devon and Cornwall, but he will appreciate that no decision has yet been made. It would be inappropriate for me to pre-empt it by making an announcement this afternoon.

Lay Magistracy

29. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): If he will make a statement about the future of the lay magistracy. [146210]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his elevation—if I may call it that—to the Opposition Front Bench as junior health spokesman.

As for the question, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply that I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) and the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) on 14 November 2000, and to my reply to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) on 19 December—they are nothing if not persistent. My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor gave evidence before the Home Affairs Select Committee last Tuesday and said that he had a very high regard for members of the lay magistracy. They give their time for no reward, reflect the community that they serve and typify the quite remarkable lay involvement in this country's system of justice, and our justice system is better for it.

Mr. Swayne: The Minister is kind, but does she agree that the lay magistracy affords a welcome measure of common sense to the criminal justice system? What thought has she given to increasing the number of lay magistrates at the expense of stipendiary magistrates? She will, of course, recall that the perverse decision in Abergavenny last summer was taken by a stipendiary magistrate sitting alone.

Jane Kennedy: The number of district judges and magistrates who serve are determined by statute. We constantly seek new recruits to the lay magistracy. It is testament to the Government's efforts to increase civic involvement in our justice system that the number of magistrates has been increasing. Indeed, gender and ethnic balance have also improved.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

The President of the Council was asked—

People's Peers

41. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): How many application packs were sent out to aspiring people's peers; and how many were returned *(a)* complete and *(b)* incomplete. [146222]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I understand that about 13,000 packs were sent out in response to expressions of interest. Some 3,141 nominations were received by 17 November, of which about 300 arrived via the internet. I understand that only two were deliberately incomplete, and that some other people omitted details by oversight, which the Commission has followed up with the nominees.

Mr. Prentice: Those are fascinating figures—30,000 putative people's peers and 3,141 people who actually

replied. Of that number, only eight "outstanding individuals"—in the words of the Appointments Commission—will be selected in the next eight weeks and given ermine. Is it not the case those eight so-called people's peers can never be representative of Britain? We are creating a legislative joke. Is it not possible, even at this late stage, to join forces with the Liberal Democrats and some Conservative Members to create a legislature that is fit for the 21st century so that we do not persist with this Gormenghast creation?

Mr. Tipping: Those are fascinating comments. I am delighted to hear calls from Pendle—of all places—to work in co-operation with the Liberal Democrats. It has really changed up there.

I know that my hon. Friend is a contender for parliamentarian of the year, but I must gently correct his figures: 13,000 people applied for packs. I am not confident that there will be eight nominees—that is yet to be decided—but I am confident that the new procedure will create an Upper House that is more balanced and representative of the community in which we live.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): If the system is so good and there are so many applicants, why do we not simply select all the people to serve in the other place and get rid of the lot who are there right now—or would that reduce the income of the Labour party?

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman needs to remember that 29 per cent. of Members of the Upper House are from the Labour party. He should reflect on his party's record because other people have not forgotten it.

Select Committees

42. **Mr. John Healey** (Wentworth): What representations she has received following the publication of the Government's response to the first report of the Liaison Committee, Session 1999–2000, HC 300, on Shifting the Balance: Select Committees and the Executive. [146223]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I have received a number of representations, some in support of, and some in opposition to, the Liaison Committee's proposals.

Mr. Healey: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. The Liaison Committee's report is certainly a mixed bag. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the half hour that the report recommends be used for a debate after questions each week is too short for a decent debate, and that such a debate is the wrong format for holding Ministers to account more effectively? Will she acknowledge the case for devoting more time on the Floor of the House to major reports? Will she consider a slot for tabled oral questions, which could give priority to members of Committees, but would also allow the whole House to exercise its scrutiny function?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an interesting proposal. He will know that the Government were unattracted by the suggestion that there should be a special half hour for those debates, and he makes a different point that the time would be too short and the format wrong. I wholeheartedly share the view that it is important that we scrutinise and discuss more Select Committee reports. He will know that successive Governments have always found it difficult to find more time to do so on the Floor of the House, by whatever means.

I know that my hon. Friend, and I hope the whole House, will be pleased to learn that whereas in the whole of the previous Parliament we debated only about 50 of the nearly 600 Select Committee reports produced, in the previous Session we discussed 22. That is a good way not only to hold the Government to account but to reflect the worth of Select Committees' work.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Will the right hon. Lady give the House the opportunity to vote on the proposals before the end of the Parliament?

Mrs. Beckett: That is very unlikely.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is it not precisely because previous Governments have always run away from the problems of Select Committees that it would be in the Government's interests to set a new and good example to parliamentarians everywhere by accepting that Select Committees' work is best not only debated but questioned? The response of Ministers, which at the moment is given in written form, would not only enliven but assist the House if it were debated for half an hour as suggested by the Liaison Committee.

Mrs. Beckett: As my hon. Friend knows, I think that the idea is perfectly legitimate and worthy of discussion. Indeed, it has been discussed. She invites us to set a new and good example, and I believe that we have done so by providing far greater opportunities to debate Select Committee reports. However, the Government are not of the view that it would assist the House, irrespective of any impact in Government, for Ministers to be invited or pressed to give an off-the-cuff response, which is in effect what we are talking about, to what may be weighty Select Committee reports. There is genuine creative tension on that point. Surely, the more serious and the more in-depth the work of Select Committees, the more Select Committees want the Government to consider their work fully and give an in-depth response, rather than reacting in the relatively short term.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The right hon. Lady will recall that the Prime Minister gave an undertaking that there would be a free vote on the Liaison Committee's report, and she has just told my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) that there will be no occasion to have that vote. Is not that a demonstration of the way in which this Executive treat the legislature and of how the right hon. Lady has betrayed her position as Leader of the House?

Mrs. Beckett: No, it is a demonstration of how difficult the Opposition find it to pay attention to what is said. When my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was asked whether there would be a vote on the matter and whether

it would be a free vote, he correctly said yes, because it is a House matter and House matters always have a free vote.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): May I invite my right hon. Friend to read column 1100 of the *Hansard* of 13 July 2000, where the Prime Minister explicitly gave the undertaking that there would be a free vote?

Secondly, will my right hon. Friend bear it in mind that, in 1992 and 1997, the Select Committees were constituted almost in the last week before the summer recess, and they were not operational until the October? One reason why the House wants to have a free vote on the matter, which is our property, is that the Select Committees can be set up and operational soon after the general election, and not six months later, with Government unscrutinised in the meantime.

Mrs. Beckett: I am entirely familiar with the *Hansard* reference that my hon. Friend quotes. I am familiar also with what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said because I was sitting two places away from him at the time. I understand my hon. Friend's concern about delays in appointments. I hope that he will appreciate that, whatever may have been the position in 1992, in 1997 there was a substantial change in the membership of the House. He will know that, at least in the Labour party, Members were invited to indicate on which Select Committees they would prefer to serve, and an attempt was made to meet as many of those requests as possible. That process takes time. I hope that he will acknowledge that the Government proceeded as expeditiously as we reasonably could in perhaps somewhat exceptional circumstances.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Paragraph 28 of the Government's response to the Liaison Committee's report, which recommends a debate on a substantive motion, says:

"The Government also see little advantage in debates on a substantive motion since this would be likely to lead to more pressure on members to take a party political stance not less. This is unlikely to be conducive to a respect for the independence Committees rightly value. Moreover, the more substantial reports often contain a complex set of comments and proposals. It is hard to see how a considered decision could be made purely on the outcome of a substantive motion."

Why, then, are the Modernisation Committee's proposals put to a substantive motion in, for example, introducing deferred votes to our Standing Orders? Could it be that, unlike other Select Committees that are chaired by Back-Bench Members, the Modernisation Committee is chaired by the right hon. Lady and is really a tool of government to force on the House changes in our Standing Orders?

Mrs. Beckett: As I am sure the hon. Lady is aware, because she has raised the issue before, the decision to set up a Select Committee on Modernisation and to have it chaired by the Leader of the House was a manifesto pledge made on behalf of the Labour party.

The hon. Lady makes a rather separate point, as was made in the Liaison Committee's report, about the suggestion that there should be substantive motions on Select Committee reports in general. She is correct to say that the Government expressed reservations about that for exactly the reason that she quotes, namely that it would be much more likely to introduce a decision to have whipped votes than to leave the House to deal freely with Select Committee reports.

If I recall correctly—I am sure that if I am wrong, someone will correct me—it was for precisely that reason that the previous Government abandoned the notion of private Members' motions. It had become an issue where there was whipping on both sides of the House, and it was thought to be counter-productive.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

The President of the Council was asked—

Programming Sub-Committees

43. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): If she will make a statement on the operation of Programming Sub-Committees. [146224]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising this issue.

There have been some teething problems. I understand that the procedures adopted were at first significantly more prescriptive than the Modernisation Committee had envisaged, but experience seems to suggest that things are settling down.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for confirming her reputation as the mistress of understatement. Given the widespread concern that programming sub-committees are meeting in private and holding unminuted discussions, that there has already been unresolved disputes about who said what to whom and when, and that nothing in the Sessional Orders requires the continued adoption of this secretive format, why do not the right hon. Lady and the Modernisation Committee strike a blow for glasnost by recommending that, in future, such committees be conducted in public and that a proper minute be kept, so that right hon. and hon. Members can make their own judgment as to whether everything is fair and above board?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman may or may not have had experience of business committees that meet from time to time when legislation is before the House. To a certain extent, it is a matter for Mr. Speaker's ruling. It has always been the case that such business committees meet in private. As for whether there is merit in a note being kept of their decisions, I should always be sorry if disputes arose about such matters. No doubt these are issues that we can continue to discuss. After all, we are engaged in an experiment. I hope—I say this in all seriousness to the hon. Gentleman, who I know has played a distinctive and constructive part in dealing with some legislation already during the Session—

Mr. Bercow: Do not ruin me.

Mrs. Beckett: I am sorry about that.

It is the Government's hope that this will cease to be a matter of such party controversy, and will begin to be a way in which the House can better manage its business and its time. I think that there is scope for such a development, and I very much hope that that will occur.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Clerk of the House

44. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, on how many occasions since 1998 the Clerk of the House of Commons has been sued in legal action; by whom; and what the cost was to public funds in each case. [146225]

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (on behalf of the House of Commons Commission): The Clerk of the House, in his role as Corporate Officer, has been involved in no litigation since 1998. In 1996, action was taken against him as Corporate Officer by Harman (CFEM) Facades (UK) Ltd. That case was settled, as set out in a written answer in my name in the *Official Report* on 2 November last year. In addition, the hon. Gentleman may wish to know that several civil actions have been brought against the commission as an employer during that period.

Mr. Dalyell: Are we sure, as the House of Commons, that the Clerk should, through the system, be dragged through the courts?

Mr. Kirkwood: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about the involvement of Officers of the House in litigation in the courts of the land. The hon. Gentleman may know that the Parliamentary Corporate Bodies Act 1992 made the Clerk the Corporate Officer of the House. Under that Act, he is given managerial responsibilities for the heritable property of the House and, in that capacity, is enabled to enter into contracts.

Royal Liverpool Children's Inquiry

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): I wish to make a statement about the inquiry into events at Alder Hey hospital, Liverpool.

I am today publishing the report of the inquiry into the Royal Liverpool Children's NHS Trust, known as the Alder Hey Hospital. I am publishing alongside it two further documents. First, the chief medical officer's census into the extent of organ retention in the NHS in England. Secondly, the chief medical officer's recommendations for reform of organ retention procedures. All three documents are now available in the Vote Office. I am grateful, Mr. Speaker, for your agreement that the parents affected at Alder Hey should also have access to copies of the report.

I would like to record my thanks to the chairman of the Alder Hey inquiry, Mr. Michael Redfern QC, and his fellow panel members Dr. Jean Keeling and Mrs. Elizabeth Powell, for conducting what has proved to be an extremely difficult inquiry. The inquiry was established in December 1999, following evidence to the Bristol inquiry that a large number of hearts from deceased children had been retained at hospitals in the NHS. Alder Hey was one such hospital. It is a world-renowned hospital treating 200,000 children a year. For many years, the hospital has made use of human hearts for research and teaching. The Redfern Report says:

"there are now more than 1,600 living children who would have died in infancy or childhood without the improvements in surgical techniques and care which were pioneered in Liverpool."

As the inquiry report makes perfectly clear, however, many of those hearts were obtained without consent. According to the report, in addition to over 2,000 children's hearts, there are a large number of brain parts, eyes taken from foetuses, over 1,500 stillbirths or foetuses and, perhaps most disturbingly of all, a number of children's heads and bodies. The Redfern report reveals

"a lack of respect and a failure to appreciate the circumstances which led to the . . . taking of human material."

For example, the report cites entries about foetal material labelled with the words:

"Neck deeply lacerated. Pull it to pieces some time and reject."

Some of those entries date back very many years. However, the number of organs retained by Alder Hey increased dramatically in the seven years following the appointment by the hospital and the university of Liverpool of Professor van Velzen in 1988 as chair of foetal and infant pathology in the department of pathology.

During van Velzen's time at Alder Hey between 1988 and 1995, he systematically ordered the unethical and illegal stripping of every organ from every child who had had a post-mortem. He ignored parent's wishes, even when they told him explicitly that they did not want a full post-mortem, let alone the retention of any of their child's organs.

According to the report, van Velzen lied to parents. He lied to other doctors. He lied to hospital managers. He stole medical records. He falsified statistics and reports, and he encouraged other staff to do the same.

For any parent, the death of their child is a tragedy. To bury that child, to grieve, to hold precious their memory over the years is how many families gradually come to terms with their loss. It is hard to imagine the trauma and anguish that each of the Alder Hey parents faced when, many years later, they discovered that their child's body had not been buried intact, as they believed, but had been stripped of its entire internal organs, leaving the body as a shell.

That happened not to one set of parents in Liverpool, but to several hundred. The hospital and the university now admit that they will never be able accurately to tell parents what happened to every organ of every child between 1988 and 1995.

What we do now know is that the vast majority of organs that were taken were never used for medical research. Parents cannot even take comfort in the knowledge that their children's organs were used to help other children. It is clear from the report that the understanding of cot death—for which van Velzen was funded—was not advanced one iota by his practice of stripping organs from the bodies of children.

The question in the minds of parents and others is how van Velzen got away with it for so long. The answer is that the hospital authorities and the university of Liverpool failed to monitor his practices and failed to take action to stop them. Numerous complaints were made. Problems were not properly investigated. Action was not taken.

These failures were compounded by the incompetence and the insensitivity of both the hospital and the university authorities, once the truth did begin to emerge. The hospital seemed overwhelmed by events. The university seemed simply to have turned its back on parents. Some parents faced up to four funerals, as different organs from their children were returned to them at different times. The pain caused to the parents by this dreadful sequence of events is, in my view, unforgivable. I am deeply sorry for the wrong that was done to them, their families and their children. Those who did wrong will now be held to account.

The inquiry report says that Professor van Velzen must never be allowed to practise again in this country. I can tell the House today that he has been referred to the General Medical Council for disciplinary action. I understand that he has been summoned to appear before the GMC later this week. I can also tell the House that the inquiry report has been referred to the Merseyside police and passed to the Director of Public Prosecutions. They will determine whether criminal prosecutions should now proceed.

Four NHS staff, including the current chief executive of the trust, have today been suspended. Their employers will consider appropriate disciplinary action. The role of other NHS staff will be examined by their employers. The doctors criticised in the report have been referred to the General Medical Council. Other staff have been referred to the Council for Professions Supplementary to Medicine.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has asked the president of the council of the university of Liverpool to review the evidence in the report and to take appropriate disciplinary action. The current acting chairman of the trust board is today leaving the trust, along with two non-executive directors whose resignations I have today accepted. Also today, I have appointed Angela Jones as the new chair. It is right that the trust should have a fresh start.

Alder Hey hospital relies on its dedicated staff, who have been as shocked as we all are by these events. I want to thank those staff, who have continued through these

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difficult times to provide treatment and care for children from Liverpool and elsewhere. The action that I have taken today should help them to re-establish the hospital's relationships with the community that it serves. I am confident that Alder Hey can recover and rebuild its reputation as a leading national and international centre for specialist paediatric care.

What the report describes as

"the exceptional practice of van Velzen"

between 1988 and 1995 made Alder Hey unique. However, elsewhere in the NHS it is clear that organ retention without relatives' full knowledge and agreement was widespread. The recent national summit on organ retention, which was organised by the chief medical officer, Professor Liam Donaldson, confirmed that that was also the experience of parents in many other parts of the country.

Professor Donaldson's census shows that 105,000 organs are retained throughout the country. Poor standards of cataloguing and record keeping mean that those figures may not be wholly accurate. Twenty-five hospitals account for 88 per cent. of the organs. At least 16,500 of the organs and tissues have been retained in apparent contravention of the law, as they were used for coroners' post-mortems and should not have been kept beyond the time needed to establish cause of death. As at Alder Hey and Bristol, the coroner system throughout the country has proved ineffective in that respect. The current law and post-mortem consent forms are both ambiguous. They talk of taking tissues when they often mean taking organs and they record lack of objection rather than informed consent.

In the past four years, the Government have made an unprecedented effort to protect patients better. The changes that we have already made and the reforms that are still to be introduced enjoy widespread support among both patients and doctors. The NHS is full of good doctors, not bad ones. Our reforms are aimed at supporting them to become even better. They include a new statutory duty on quality for every NHS trust, independent inspection through the Commission for Health Improvement, annual appraisal of doctors that is linked to periodic revalidation, and reform to make self-regulation faster, more open and more accountable.

Now we need to go further. The chief medical officer's census, our consultation with parents and the medical profession, and the reports from Bristol and Alder Hey have formed the basis for Professor Donaldson's recommendations for reform. I am accepting them in full. The major proposals are as follows. First, I am establishing a special commission under the chairmanship of Margot Brazier, professor of law at Manchester university, to oversee the return to families of organs and tissues from around the country, should those families wish to have them. We have ensured that parents who are seeking more information today can obtain it by contacting the NHS Direct telephone helpline.

Secondly, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has set in train a review of the coroner system so that we can learn the lessons of what went wrong at Alder Hey and elsewhere.

Thirdly, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will establish a review of the accountability and management arrangements between NHS trusts and universities where senior staff are employed on joint contracts. Fourthly, we will ensure that all NHS trusts provide support and advice to families at the time of bereavement. I expect that arrangement to be in place throughout the NHS later this year.

Finally, the law will be changed to enshrine the concept of informed consent. The existing law in this area has become outdated. The Human Tissue Act 1961 does not even contain penalties for breaches of its provisions. The law has ill served bereaved parents in our country and causes confusion for staff. It must now be changed.

I will therefore bring forward measures urgently to amend the Act to clarify that informed consent must be given, that organs and tissues must be specified and to make it a criminal offence to ignore informed consent.

We will also undertake a wider review of existing laws on all aspects of taking, storing and using tissue and organs from both the living and the dead. When the review is completed, we will seek to legislate to introduce the necessary changes.

The changes in the law will be supported by a new statutory code of practice, which will be issued to the national health service. It will cover organs that are used by the pharmaceutical industry, and it will be accompanied by a new standardised consent form, which will be introduced throughout the health service.

There is one other important point. Informed consent does not need to be at the expense of medical research. Proper post-mortem procedures and archived tissues and organs hold the key to many medical advances, such as discovering the effects and causes of disease, and finding cures for illnesses that disable or kill. However, retaining public confidence in those procedures requires public consent. Members of the medical profession share that view. Indeed, it is reflected in the recent guidance issued by the Royal College of Pathologists.

When I met families from Alder Hey, Bristol and elsewhere, many told me that if they had been asked properly, they would have been only too willing to allow their child's death to help another child live.

Doctors and pathologists have an incredibly difficult job. They have usually acted with the best intentions to create greater understanding of disease and to improve standards of care in a way that avoids causing further anguish to grieving families. Those are laudable aims and honourable intentions. However, as the events at Alder Hey show, modern patient expectations and traditional clinical practices have grown apart. The national health service can no longer assume that the benefits of science, medicine or research are somehow self-evident, regardless of the wishes of patients or their families.

The relationship between patients and the service today has to be based on informed consent. That will require changes in practice, policy and medical education. As I have made clear today, it will also require changes in the law.

The parents whom I have met from Alder Hey and elsewhere have acted with great dignity and purpose. I pay tribute to them. I hope that our reforms will provide some comfort for the pain that they have endured. I commend the reforms to the House.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his statement and for his courtesy

in making it available to the Opposition in advance. As he said, the inquiry came about as a result of the Bristol inquiry, which took in many parents in my area. Our thoughts are with them today, because the publication of the report will reawaken many painful memories.

I am grateful to the Secretary of State for the balanced way in which he presented his statement, because there is a need for perspective. Nothing would be worse than blowing up the tragedy and thus creating a general climate of fear and anxiety. That would only make more difficult the complex but necessary work of those engaged in the research from which we may all ultimately benefit. The work is necessarily gruesome and we need to maintain a sense of realism about it. I am therefore grateful for the tone of the statement.

I want to concentrate on two specific issues. The first relates to Professor van Velzen and the second to the wider use of retained tissues and organs. It is clear from the statement and the report that Professor van Velzen lied and broke the law. He must answer for that. Is he being investigated elsewhere for similar reasons? If so, is that happening in the United Kingdom or another country? Our regulations must ensure that no doctor guilty of a disciplinary breach can work in the United Kingdom. It should be a statutory duty for doctors to report to their employers, as a matter of routine, any disciplinary investigation that is being carried out into their work in this country or any other country.

The Secretary of State said that the question in the minds of parents and others was that of how Professor van Velzen had got away with his activities for so long. I would add that a question in the minds of most decent people would be, "Why did he do it?" Most of us completely fail to understand the thought processes or motives of such a man.

The taking of organs or tissue, even with consent, should be accompanied by a clear explanation of the purpose for which they are being taken. I hope that the Secretary of State will include such a provision in his proposed legislative change. The Opposition would fully support such a change in the law. We must also question the role of the universities, which should maintain a proper supervisory brief over those whom they appoint to positions as sensitive as the one held by Professor van Velzen.

The Secretary of State is right to say that it is essential that neither the report nor any exchanges in the House should affect the reputation of Alder Hey hospital or its staff, who carry out dedicated, quality work for which they deserve thanks and praise.

Turning to the wider picture, we fully agree with the concept of informed consent. As the Secretary of State said, most parents would agree, if asked, to allow tissue and organs to be used in research for the benefit of others. Some, of course, would not. In that sense, the special commission under Margot Brazier will have a difficult task that will call for great sensitivity.

It is essential that when parents want organs returned, the organs should be returned all at one time, and not on a number of occasions. We must also accept that some parents will not want organs returned, and that some will not even want to know about the retention of the organs of their children, as that could reopen many painful emotional wounds for them. Their views must be respected.

I welcome the proposed review of the coroner system, especially after the Shipman case, which raised even more questions about the system's operation. I also welcome the proposed code of conduct for the pharmaceutical industry, but I suggest to the Secretary of State that it should go further and cover all third parties to whom organs or tissues may be given, especially if money is to change hands. That should apply whether the third parties work inside or outside the national health service.

We fully agree with the need to reform the Human Tissue Act 1961, and I ask the Secretary of State to consider, first, what parallels there might be with the way that tissues are dealt with when individuals donate their bodies for anatomical dissection for medical education purposes, and secondly, whether those rules also need to be amended.

The Opposition will give every support to any legislative change that the Government intend to introduce. If the Government can achieve those changes by means of the Health and Social Care Bill currently passing through Parliament, they would have every support from the Opposition for its speedy passage. It would be ridiculous for both the main parties to approach a general election promising the same changes to legislation, when we could bring about that legislative change imminently.

This matter concerns treating the living and the dead with dignity and respect. We welcome and encourage research—including that involving the use of organs and tissue from the deceased—because we can all gain from it. However, we all lose if such research is not carried out in a climate of decency and respect.

Mr. Milburn: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) for the tone and content of his speech.

On his specific question about Professor van Velzen, the House is probably aware that van Velzen is under investigation in Canada for his activities there. There is evidence that medical records were taken from this country and that they ended up in Canada. There is also evidence that van Velzen retained animal and human organs, which he stored in a furniture container in Canada. The Canadian authorities are currently investigating that case, and a copy of the report will be passed not only to the regulatory bodies in this country but to the medical regulatory bodies in Canada, Holland and other European Union countries.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the need to ensure clear explanations of post-mortem procedures, and of the real scientific and medical benefits of being able to conduct research on organs and tissue. That is important, and we all have a job of work to do in that regard. We must ensure that the public—particularly relatives faced with horrendous decisions soon after a loved one has died—are better informed of what a post-mortem entails and of what the advantages and disadvantages are. There is a job of public education that we will need to undertake. As I said in my statement, there is also a job of work to do to ensure that medical training procedures and systems are changed.

On the return of organs, it is extremely important that the commission—which, incidentally, is operating in shadow form and will come into full being in April with, I hope, the agreement of the House—learn the lessons of

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the mishandling of events at Alder Hey over recent years. We cannot have parents and relatives facing multiple funerals as a consequence of organs being returned in the way they were.

The hon. Gentleman also made another important point. People have a right to know, should they want to take up that right, whether organs have been retained. They also have a right not to know. The commission must enshrine that principle. I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's offer of support, but, on the feasibility of amending the Health and Social Care Bill, I am advised—we have checked this—that it is not possible to use the Bill to achieve the legislative changes that we want to make to the Human Tissue Act 1961. As soon as possible, however, we shall seek another legislative opportunity to do precisely that.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): Will the Secretary of State allow me to express a couple of views that families on the Wirral have asked me to put forward? First, they stress that parents who lose their children never get over it; the best they can do is live with it. The events that my right hon. Friend described make it much more difficult for them to live with the death of their children as other parents might. Secondly, they do not want to appear to be luddites. They are not against research, but when research might be carried out, they are anxious that parents should be key players in deciding whether it should proceed, so I am sure that they will draw great satisfaction from my right hon. Friend's statement that he intends that parents should not only be involved, but should be the key decision makers.

Mr. Milburn: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for those remarks. He is right. In my dealings with the Pity II organisation, which represents some Alder Hey parents, and the National Committee on Organ Retention, which represents parents throughout the country who have faced such a situation, I have been most impressed by how movingly they say that, had they been given the opportunity, they would of course gladly have donated their child's organs to help another child. Some would not, however, which is the important point. Donation has to be based on the consent of the parent or the relative. Tragically in this case, the opportunity to give or withhold consent was never offered to the parents at Alder Hey.

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): The Secretary of State will be aware that I have been involved in this issue for some time—since parents in my constituency discovered that their children had been victims at Bristol. My constituent Mrs. Michaela Willis became the national chair of the organisation representing parents. On behalf of them all, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his statement, his blunt acknowledgement of the seriousness of these problems, and his apology on behalf of the NHS for the great wrong that has been done and the grief felt as a result of it. That represents a marked contrast with the reaction of hospital authorities when questions were first asked.

The Secretary of State rightly condemned a particular individual, but how widespread has such practice been throughout the country? By today's standards, would we not consider the typical attitude to be arrogance belonging to a different era, not to a modern health service that treats informed patients? I express my appreciation of the fact that both today's reports pull no punches and I welcome the specific proposed changes, including to the law. Although they are significant, it is probably even more important that they should not be rushed.

On two specific points, I urge the Secretary of State to consider whether Professor Brazier's commission ought to be more permanent than he implied and whether an independent body should specifically be charged with on-going consideration of all such issues rather than examining problems that have arisen in the past.

Secondly, if we are to expect doctors—as I am sure we are—to sit down and spend far more time patiently going through the benefits and the issues with parents and other relatives, that will obviously have considerable resource implications. Will there be someone with expertise in each hospital? There is no doubt that if these matters are handled correctly, in the vast majority of cases parents will see the benefits and will want to feel that something can be learned from the deaths of their children.

Mr. Milburn: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to Mrs. Willis and all the work done by her national committee. I have had the pleasure of meeting her and her fellow committee members, and she and others have helped to contribute to the chief medical officer's recommendations which I announced to the House today.

The hon. Gentleman is broadly right in what he says about practices generally. Practices that might have been considered acceptable in the 1950s or 1960s are not considered acceptable nowadays, for the simple reason that we live in a very different era. Public and patient expectations are very different. Systems, ways of working and, I think, the whole culture of the health service have lagged behind; it needs to catch up, and it needs to catch up quickly.

I think that we should be optimistic. Discussions with the medical profession—whether with the British Medical Association, which welcomes some of the changes that we seek, or the Royal College of Pathologists—have shown an enormous willingness on the profession's part to adapt to the new environment in which we all find ourselves. In many ways, doctors in some parts of the country have been leading the changes, and I pay tribute to them. We must build on that, and ensure that the appalling practices that took place at Alder Hey are not repeated.

I will gladly consider the basis for the commission. We need to think about that. I think it right for the commission to be given a specific job to do in the first place—and it will be an extremely difficult job: make no mistake about it. We shall then need to think about whether the commission should continue in a permanent form thereafter.

Some trusts—well over half, I believe—already provide specialist bereavement advisers. We need to ensure that in the future not just some but all trusts take the issue extremely seriously.

Mr. Robert N. Wareing (Liverpool, West Derby): I understand that at present no criminal sanctions can be used against those who have perpetrated what most of us would regard as crimes. Would my right hon. Friend ensure that any legislation that is introduced—before the

general election, I hope—will make it unlawful, indeed a criminal offence, either to possess or to dispose of a human body or its parts?

How does my right hon. Friend think that the injustices done to bereaved parents can be addressed? Is his Department floating any ideas for a compensation scheme? May I impress the urgency on him? Often, in cases of emergency, the House has managed to pass legislation in a single day when there has been no opposition. I urge my right hon. Friend to consider the possibility of passing legislation before the election.

Mr. Milburn: In regard to urgent legislation, we shall certainly discuss with the Opposition parties, through the usual channels, how best we can make rapid progress. I take the point made by the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) that it is important for us to get these things right, but there is clearly great urgency in this case.

What my hon. Friend said about criminal sanctions is absolutely right. I understand that, under the Human Tissue Act, the coroner's rules of 1984 and the Coroners Act 1988, although the taking of human tissue or organs is illegal, we have no criminal sanctions. That gap in the law must now be filled, and we shall present proposals in both the short and, as I have said, the medium term to correct those deficiencies.

On the two occasions on which I met parents in my office—and indeed last night, when I spoke to Mr. Ed Bradley, who is the chairman of the Pity II Group of parents—the compensation issue generally was not raised. People will have different views on the issue. Some parents will feel very strongly about it, whereas others will not. However, I think that there is consensus on what the parents really want. They want an apology and an explanation and to know that those who are responsible for what happened to them and their families will be brought to book. Above all, they want to know that it will not happen again, and that action will be taken quickly to prevent it from happening again. We are committed to taking that action.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I am grateful for the chance to contribute because the death of my young daughter some years ago makes me feel very involved in this particular issue.

Although I understand the Secretary of State's anger, may I ask him to reflect on three matters? I should like, first, to underline a point that has already been made. Probably because I am a coward at heart, I do not want someone knocking at my door to discuss parts of my daughter. I simply do not want wounds to be reopened.

Secondly, will the Secretary of State keep in mind the difference between the use of parts of a dead child and the way in which they are obtained? In the anguish of the moment, I forgot to ask whether any parts of my daughter could be used to help others. I can only say that I wish that someone had asked me.

Thirdly, will the Secretary of State think very carefully about the compensation issue? The bottom line is that the only thing that every bereaved parent really wants is his or her child back. To maintain one's sanity, one has to accept that that cannot be. I speak with some feeling when I say that the pursuit of compensation can all too easily prolong the grief.

Mr. Milburn: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He understands these issues better than most of us because he has faced precisely the type of situation we are discussing. I give him a very clear assurance that we will not have the situation that we had at Alder Hey, where hospital authorities were ringing up parents out of the blue to inform them that they had found yet another organ from their child. We will not have that.

As I said to the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), parents absolutely have a right to know, if that is what they want. Equally, they have a right not to know. We have to respect the views of the individual parent. I certainly intend that the commission should operate in such a manner that it enshrines respect for parents and for relatives as I have described, precisely to avoid the type of situation that we had at Alder Hey not only once, but, sadly, on very many occasions.

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): Not only as a Liverpool MP, but, more important, as the uncle of one of the mothers who has been traumatised by these events, may I tell my right hon. Friend how welcome his statement has been—not only for the openness of his account and the range of his conclusions; but for the expedition with which he is seeking to implement the necessary action? In the course of his inquiries, has he been given any reason to be concerned about allegations that the hospital sold live tissue to pharmaceutical companies? If so, could he elaborate on that?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. On the issue of the sale of organs taken from live children at Alder Hey, it is our understanding that there was such a practice at the hospital in the early 1990s. We suspect that there was such a practice also at other hospitals across the country. Thymus glands were taken without the consent of parents and handed to a particular pharmaceutical company, to produce drugs that help to avoid the rejection of transplanted organs. It therefore clearly had medical and clinical benefits, but the central issue for the House and for parents is that the organs were sold without consent.

In my view, the principle and issue of consent must come first. I assure my hon. Friend that we will issue very clear guidance to the national health service about the matter, and the statutory code of practice that I mentioned in my statement will cover precisely the set of circumstances that he described.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): The Secretary of State's emphasis on informed consent is entirely welcome, but will he accept that it is likely to require NHS hospital trusts to invest a great deal of time and effort in handling individual cases sensitively? Will he give attention to two particular matters? First, if a mother is recovering from a difficult confinement or emergency procedures, will he ensure that no consent is sought from her at that time? Secondly, would it not be highly desirable if both parents involved had to give consent jointly and subscribe to it together? I recognise that it may be difficult to make that a legal requirement, but it would remove any question of subsequent recrimination.

Mr. Milburn: In respect of matters of timing and pressure on hospitals, it is true that changes in practice will be needed. Many hospitals have changed their practice, and the chief medical officer issued interim guidance to the national health service in March last year

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on some of these issues. I am pleased to say that it has produced some changes and improvements, and has led to issues such as this being handled more sensitively in many parts of the NHS—although, sadly, not in all parts. It is true that there will be challenges in that regard.

The NHS faces a choice. We can go on as before, pretending that we can live in the previous century; or we can bring practices up to date, so that they are more relevant for this century. That is no choice at all: the national health service has to change.

On the specific issue of consent, there are profoundly difficult issues that we must get right. That is why the code of practice will involve consultation—with the medical profession, parents' organisations and bereaved parents—so that we can get right the practicalities of informed consent, and avoid some of the problems that the hon. Gentleman described.

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (Knowsley, South): I, too, thank my right hon. Friend for the openness and feeling with which he confronted the issues in the awful report that has been presented to us. Will he say whether Professor van Velzen, as distinct from the hospital, is being investigated over the sale of organs? The professor has damaged the high and hard-earned reputation of a fine hospital. Will my right hon. Friend assure people on Merseyside that he will give special support to Alder Hey hospital to help it win back its reputation?

The parents are the ones who have suffered most. Will my right hon. Friend consider carefully the question of compensation, and respect the parents' wishes? Will he bear in mind also that a number of parents have incurred great expense, on top of the grief that they have suffered? Finally, will he assure me that they will receive a personal apology—as distinct from an impersonal apology—for all that they have suffered?

Mr. Milburn: On the latter point, my hon. Friend is right. He is as aware as I am that the events described by the Redfern report could not have been handled in a more insensitive fashion. What happened, and how it was handled subsequently, could not have been more appalling. We must learn from that.

I am not aware that van Velzen was implicated in the sale of organs. He may well have been; that is something which we will have to ascertain.

Let me repeat what I said earlier about Alder Hey. It is a fine hospital, staffed by fine people. The doctors, nurses and others who work there have been through thick and thin over the past few years. Yes, they will need specialist support. Strenuous efforts will have to be made by the community and the hospital authorities to rebuild the bond of trust which I know so many people in the hospital are desperate to do. I hope that, before too long, I will be able to visit the hospital and meet some of the parents to discuss these issues.

Mr. Ronnie Fearn (Southport): Bereaved parents in my constituency of Southport on Merseyside were probably the first to ring the bells about Alder Hey. They were not necessarily alarm bells but they certainly brought the matter to the attention of the House.

What is happening with consent forms? The old ones are still being signed. Is the consent form to be changed immediately, and what will happen thereafter? Can the word "disposal" please be explained? It could mean that the hospital, or Liverpool university—which is not blameless by a long way—could dispose of organs by sale. They are saying that the disposal was not by way of a sale but had a "transaction fee" attached. Does the right hon. Gentleman go along with that?

Mr. Milburn: It is true that there are many different consent forms within the national health service. Myriad advice is available from a host of organisations such as the Child Bereavement Trust, the Royal College of Pathologists and, indeed, the Department of Health. My view, which is also the recommendation of the chief medical officer, is that we must end that nonsense. We must have a single, standardised consent form, used in all parts of the national health service, so that parents, relatives and patients know what their rights are. We will consult on that; we need to get it right and ensure that the new consent form does not replicate some of the disadvantages of previous consent forms. That is precisely what we are committed to doing, and we will try to do it as quickly as possibly. However, as the events at Alder Hey have shown, sometimes when things are rushed, people get them wrong. I am determined that we learn the lessons from that and get the consent form right.

As for the disposal of organs, particularly the selling of organs, we need to look at the issue in detail. We need to ascertain the facts. We will enshrine in the code of practice precisely the arrangements that the national health service needs to undertake in the future.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): This is a truly awful situation, with echoes of the grave robberies of the 19th century. Listening to my right hon. Friend's statement, I was struck by the fact that the commercial pressure to sell organs needs to be looked at. Does the report contain any reference to the pressure on hospitals to generate income at a local level?

In looking at where we go from here, in particular at the reforms now going through the House and the emphasis on the role of the patient, is it possible to bring forward proposals to involve patients at a local level in the ethical decisions that are made in this context?

Mr. Milburn: When these events were taking place at Alder Hey it was, as the report makes clear, a time of huge change in the national health service. The internal market was being introduced into the health service, although I do not particularly want to go into that today because I do not think it appropriate. However, there were very real financial pressures, and from the outset questions were raised over the way in which van Velzen was appointed and whether appropriate funding had been made available for his post and his department. That is what the report states—clearly we must learn from that too.

Apart from the specific changes that we have to make in response to the report and to other evidence, we need to effect a wider set of changes in the NHS. Although they are extremely simple on one level, they are extremely complex on another. We need to ensure that our interests—those of the people who use the service; namely, the patients—always come first. It is the vested

interest of the patient that counts. That means that, in future, some of the decisions that used to be made behind closed doors must be brought out into the open.

I believe profoundly that some of our proposed changes—for example, the appointment of patients to trust boards and patients forums, with patients on the spot in the hospital—will make a profound difference.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I thank the Secretary of State for the way he dealt with the statement. One of the new facts that emerged is the information about the number of hospitals that are holding organs. I realise that the right hon. Gentleman must be in a dilemma; tomorrow, the newspapers and the media will try to find out which hospitals are involved. Clearly, on the one hand, the sooner we can give that information, the better—at least perhaps people will know that their hospital did not retain organs. However, on the other hand, hospitals will have to be ready to provide the information. Will the Secretary of State help the House by telling us how that will be handled? He might also help the media, by asking them to be careful how they deal with the matter.

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. Yes, those are real dilemmas—we should be clear about that. I believe profoundly in one important principle—it is a question that I, as Secretary of State, and all my colleagues have to be able to answer: in the end, does the patient have the right to know? The answer must be yes. However, that brings downsides as well as upsides. Risks are attached to that principle—not least because, sometimes, the information is not handled as responsibly as it should be. In this case, we should put the information into the public domain and that is precisely what we will do.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): I thank my right hon. Friend for his steadfast determination from the beginning to ensure that the full truth of what happened at Alder Hey hospital was published. I also thank him for his acknowledgement that the Royal Liverpool children's hospital is a fine one, staffed by many dedicated employees, who have had a difficult time during this period. Every day, the hospital saves and improves the lives of children and it will continue to do so.

For 15 months, many of my constituents from bereaved families have been trying to get at the full truth of what happened to their child. How long will it be before we can tell those families that they have the fullest possible information—even if it is incomplete? How long before we can say, "That's it, you know everything that there is to know"?

Mr. Milburn: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for the role that she has played both in liaising with the parents and in supporting those who were working at the hospital through extremely difficult times. In some ways, we shall never know the full truth about what happened at Alder Hey. Certainly, the lack of accurate records and the appalling record keeping mean that some parents will never know the truth about what happened to their child—I regret that deeply, but, sadly, little can be done about it now.

The Redfern report offers the best insight that we can have into what actually happened and into the number of children and other people who were affected. However, I hesitate to say that that is the end of the story. Every time that I think we have reached the end of the story of Alder Hey, a new piece of information comes into the public domain—as we saw on Friday, in respect of the issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) on thymus glands. The work of Michael Redfern and his panel has given us as comprehensive a picture of what happened at Alder Hey and of the subsequent events as we are likely to get.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I join others in thanking the Secretary of State for his frankness. He mentioned that other hospitals were involved. Although the report dealt specifically with England and Wales, I am aware of the situation in Northern Ireland. Is the right hon. Gentleman consulting Ministers in the devolved regions to ensure that the same regulations are carried through?

Earlier, the Secretary of State referred to coroners courts. It is my understanding that consent is not needed for a coroners court order, so, as we have discovered, the coroners court has failed actively to uphold its own legal system. Therefore, how do we encourage those in executive positions—whether medical practitioners or administrative staff—to be less concerned about defending the record of the institutions and to come clean when there are faults in them? May I press the Secretary of State at least to communicate with the World Health Organisation about the introduction of a world health regime in which those with black records cannot move from one country to another, which happened so often in the last century?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. Indeed, I agree with many of them. As he rightly says, the chief medical officer's report does not apply to Northern Ireland, but discussions with colleagues in Northern Ireland on how best to make progress will be necessary.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that coroners' post-mortems do not require consent, for the good reason that they take place in cases involving unusual circumstances—perhaps murder or death during surgery. However, it is now painfully clear that the coroners rules have not been applied as they should have been; they have been broken. For example, hospitals have no right to retain organs beyond the point necessary to establish the cause of death, yet that has happened.

As the Alder Hey report makes graphically clear, there will be patients who have been promised a decent burial for their children when the investigation has taken place, but that has not happened. We must learn the lessons of those events. We must therefore review not just hospital post-mortem procedures, but how the coroner system operates in tandem.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): I thank the Secretary of State for commissioning these very important reports and for his clear commitment to change. Has he any further information on how the parents and their families will be helped to cope with new and traumatic information? What progress has he made in improving accountability at Alder Hey hospital itself and at the university?

Mr. Milburn: Accountability issues have to be addressed not only in the NHS, but in the education

[Mr. Milburn]

system. Inevitably, many colleagues' questions have dwelt on the role of the Royal Liverpool Children's NHS trust, but the university of Liverpool authorities need to answer some profound questions, and the NHS and higher education will need to answer some joint questions, too.

We have tried to make support available today for those parents who wish to read the report and to ensure that counselling, and so on, is available. I believe that if a properly informed consent regime is to operate in all parts of the NHS, it will be necessary for hospitals throughout the country to invest appropriately in bereavement services. Some do, some do not; but all will have to in future.

Mr. David Watts (St. Helens, North): Does my right hon. Friend agree that two parties are responsible for this tragedy—the hospital trust and the university? Given that he has described how he will hold the health service accountable today, is it the intention that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will make a further statement to deal with the other issues that have arisen?

Mr. Milburn: No, it is not—at least, not so far as I am aware—but I have held discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, and I can assure my hon. Friend that he and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary—who is responsible for the coroner system—take very seriously indeed the fault lines that have appeared not just in the NHS, but in the coroner system and, indeed, the university system in relation to Alder Hey.

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): May I reinforce the point that was made earlier about information being passed to parents? On Friday, I was approached by two parents who had lost baby girls in the early 1980s. They have not yet received a reply to a letter sent in July last year asking for information about what had happened to their babies. They know that organs disappeared, but they do not know what, they do not know why and they do not know how. Will my right hon. Friend please ensure that those parents who are still waiting—some others have waited for as long as my constituents—get some form of reply? It might not be in the detail that they want, but they deserve at least the courtesy of being given some information.

Mr. Milburn: I very much agree with that sentiment. I shall certainly take what steps I can to ensure that those parents receive information. People should not wait that long; they should receive replies. As my hon. Friend will be aware, the information has not always been available in the way it should have been, so the authorities have not been able to reply to parents in the way they should have done. However, I hope that the advent of the new commission will help to cut through some of that bureaucracy and to provide a streamlined system so that parents and other relatives receive the information that they require.

Mr. Ivan Lewis (Bury, South): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the way he is bringing this tragic and scandalous cover-up to some kind of conclusion. I know that several of my constituents have been victims of the Alder Hey case and they will be grateful for the apology that he has made today on behalf of the national health service and, more important, for my right hon. Friend's determination that similar events should never happen again.

Is my right hon. Friend aware of the case of my constituent Mrs. Elaine Isaacs, who, 12 years after the tragic suicide of her husband, Cyril, by chance discovered that his brain had been retained without the consent of the family? That fact was confirmed by a message left on her answering machine by a doctor. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that he will insist that that case is investigated thoroughly and that the whole issue of the retention of brains in cases where the cause of death may have been related to mental illness will be considered specifically? Many fear that what happened in this case has been common practice in the NHS for many years.

Mr. Milburn: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. I will look into the specific case that he mentioned. He is right to suggest that it has broader implications, and we have to ensure that the new informed consent regime applies across the piece. It should apply not only to the relatives of children, but to the relatives of adults who suffered from mental or physical illness. Over the next few weeks and months, there will be an opportunity to explore how best we can put in place an informed consent regime that will apply to all parts of the national health service.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): This morning I had a meeting with a representative of the National Kidney Research Fund. Both he and I are a bit concerned that the Alder Hey findings could have a negative impact on the donation of organs. According to my colleague, the shortage of kidneys already means that 5,000 would-be recipients, many of them children, wait an average of nine years for a kidney transplant. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the media could play a positive role by encouraging the carrying of organ donor cards at all times, particularly in our ethnic minority communities where the shortage of organs is even more acute than among the rest of the population?

Mr. Milburn: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for her extremely sensible remarks. It is important that the results of the Alder Hey case do not have an adverse impact on organ donation. My hon. Friend is right to say that we face a shortage of organs, and there are a variety of reasons for that—some good and some bad. The fact that there are fewer road traffic accidents and the great advances in neurosurgery in recent years mean that we do not have the number or quality of organs that are required for transplant purposes.

A vigorous campaign is encouraging more and more people to carry organ donor cards, and many people—about 8 million or about 14 per cent. of the population—already do. My hon. Friend conveys an important message, and I hope that those who cover these events will act responsibly and ensure that the messages that are imparted to the public do not do lasting damage to the number of organ donations.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): My right hon. Friend said that there had been many complaints. It is clear that they were not taken seriously; otherwise the extreme practices that are described in the report would

not have taken place for so long. That revelation and my casework lead me to conclude that hospital authorities in the NHS fail to investigate complaints properly, especially when they are against senior staff who are able to influence the promotion prospects of their colleagues. Is he confident that the changes that are being implemented in the NHS complaints procedure and other arrangements will deal with the problem of how such matters are investigated?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend makes a cogent point. The existing complaints procedure is inadequate. It must be changed and made more independent. However, we should not use the failures in the system to excuse the failures of individuals at Alder Hey. The complaints were clear and consistent, and did not come just from patients. Ironically, many of the complaints about van Velzen's procedures came from other doctors. For example, there was a huge backlog in the number of post-mortem cases and he did not undertake the appropriate histological examination. Doctors in the trust complained about that to van Velzen, to the pathology department and, as the report makes clear, to managers. Sadly, the appropriate action was not taken. We must learn the lesson of that and ensure that internal procedures work. We need checks and safeguards but, more important, we must use external complaints from patients to introduce change rather than to cover up problems.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Did any of the complaints lead to internal inquiries at Alder Hey? Untoward incident procedures are dealt with internally. If there were internal inquiries, what were their substance? Were they anything more than a cover-up and whitewash of those unhappy events?

Mr. Milburn: When my hon. Friend gets an opportunity to read the report, he will see that an endless succession of inquiries was conducted by the university, the hospital authorities and senior clinicians, but they came to nought. Is not that precisely the series of events that we see all too often in the NHS? Everyone knows that there is a problem, but no one does anything about it and the patients suffer. That is why we need not only a new culture and way of working in the NHS, but new systems. That is why clinical governance, a statutory duty of quality, a patient advocacy service and a patients forum that is independent of the hospital are needed in every trust. Those will make a profound difference because they will break down the barriers that have often meant that serious complaints have not been dealt with as they should have been.

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): The dismay expressed by all hon. Members will be shared by the many people who work in the NHS who will feel extremely let down by what has happened. How can we ensure that such tragic events, from which we must learn great lessons, will not massively undermine public confidence in the NHS, which would be detrimental to patient care in the long term?

Mr. Milburn: I very much agree with my hon. Friend's comments. It is important that the trenchant criticisms of the Redfern report and the chief medical officer do not allow us to lose sight of the truism that the overwhelming majority of people who work in the NHS—the doctors, nurses, managers and so on—are doing their best for patients. They are good—not bad—people. We cannot allow a few bad apples to damage the reputation of the health service as a whole. It is true that profound cultural changes must take place.

Public confidence will be most undermined if problems are covered up—we will not be able to deal with them unless we can get them out in the open. By dealing with them, we will rebuild public confidence in Alder Hey and in the health service as a whole.

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer), when my right hon. Friend reviews the law will he take the opportunity to examine some of the areas of legal uncertainty that currently surround the taking of organs for donation, such as issues pertaining to elective ventilation? With the informed consent of patients and their relatives, we might be able to increase the number of organs for donation.

Mr. Milburn: Those are hugely important and sensitive issues, and we will of course have to consider them. There is a more general point that we have to view informed consent as something that applies not only to a narrow group of patients but to every single patient in the NHS. We have a long way to go, but I believe that the changes in law, training and practice recommended by the chief medical officer, which I have outlined this afternoon, will produce the right results.

NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 114 (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (legislative proposals and other matters relating exclusively to Northern Ireland)) and Standing Order No. 116 (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (sittings)),

That—

1. The matter of human rights and equality in Northern Ireland, being a matter relating exclusively to Northern Ireland, be referred to the Northern Ireland Grand Committee;

2. The Committee shall meet at Westminster on Thursday 8th February at 2.30 p.m.; and

3. At that meeting—

(a) the Committee shall take questions for oral answer; and shall then consider the matter of human rights and equality in Northern Ireland, referred to it under paragraph (1) above;

(b) the Chairman shall interrupt proceedings at 5 p.m.; and

(c) at the conclusion of those proceedings a Motion for the adjournment of the Committee may be moved by a Minister of the Crown pursuant to Standing Order No. 116(5) (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (sittings)).—[*Mr. Pope.*]

Question agreed to.

Licensed Victualling (Regulation of Hours)

4.41 pm

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to permit licensing authorities to regulate the sale of alcohol from licensed premises after 11 o'clock at night in prescribed circumstances, in prescribed locations and on prescribed days.

It is estimated that some 40 per cent. of violent crimes, 78 per cent. of assaults and 88 per cent. of criminal damage cases are committed while the offender is under the influence of alcohol. The Government's White Paper, "Time for Reform", contains proposals for the modernisation of our licensing laws which would help to reduce the levels of alcohol-related crime in this country.

One key proposal is for flexible opening hours for pubs and clubs, with the potential for 24-hour opening. The aim of that proposal is to discourage binge drinking before closing time and to avoid the mass exodus on to the streets of drinkers from town centre pubs after 11 o'clock. Research indicates that over 50 per cent. of all arrests for drink-related crimes occur at that time, while 47 per cent. of all incidents of violence and disorder take place at closing time on Friday and Saturday evenings.

Fear of alcohol-related violence and intimidation has also meant that large numbers of people avoid town centres on weekend evenings, and that has had a significant effect on many town centre economies. It is hoped that the introduction of flexible opening hours would lead to a significant reduction in reports of drink-related offences and arrests, a reduction in the incidence of bingeing and drunkenness, the increased availability of transport facilities and fewer reports of noise nuisances.

Flexible hours have the potential to create a new generation of more responsible, socially aware drinkers, who are less likely to get drunk and less tolerant of drunkenness and drunken behaviour. Longer opening hours would help to place greater emphasis on the social function of pubs, and encourage people to drink less, or at least more slowly and responsibly. However, any relaxation of licensing regulations in favour of prolonged opening must proceed with caution.

Under the proposals in the White Paper, the courts would consider reasonable objections to an application for extended hours based on crime and disorder issues, public safety and public nuisance considerations, but the burden of proof would fall on the objector, not the applicant. It would be far from easy, in advance of the licence being granted, to provide substantive evidence that the extension of premises' opening hours would lead to an increase in crime and disorder or cause unreasonable public nuisance.

If local authorities possessed a town centre strategy, clearly defining what is and what is not acceptable in licensing and planning terms, it would be possible to provide the substantive evidence needed. Unfortunately, few local authorities possess such a strategy. In the light of the White Paper and the Human Rights Act 1998, many local authorities face the problem that, having raised no objection to one application for extended opening hours, they find it extremely difficult to object to a second application for a similar extension of opening hours, even if they have strong grounds for believing that the presence of two venues with extended hours in the same town centre would be unsustainable. The powers of local authorities to control and regulate the night-time economy are therefore in urgent need of review.

The assumption made in the White Paper is that if more pubs and clubs are allowed to open for longer, there will be both a gradual drift from premises and lower densities of people in each place. There is a case in Dartford for allowing certain premises to open for longer to reduce the number of people on the street at any one time, but there is a feeling that allowing a significant number to be open for longer would lead to a greater and potentially unsustainable influx of people into the town centre to fill any spare capacity that would be created.

We need not simply flexible opening hours but staggered opening hours in our town centres. Given, though, that a system of staggered opening hours is unlikely to be achieved through a voluntary agreement between licensees and the licensing authority, there is a clear need for a new regulatory framework to be introduced.

If a town centre management strategy framework existed with a clearly defined town centre strategy and guidelines for the development of a night-time economy, local authorities would be able better to assess the impact of each application for extended hours, and would be able to point to the framework if it felt that a particular application was unsustainable.

I would like to see local authorities placed under a legal duty to produce such a town centre strategy management framework. Authorities would also have a duty to consult local residents, the police, the emergency services and licensees on its contents to ensure that it fully reflected the needs, rights and responsibilities of each section of the community.

Though the local authority would still have to accept the burden of proof should it decide to object to an application, it would be able legitimately to object if it deemed it not to meet the development criteria set out in its framework.

Officers of my local council tell me that the lack of an effective consultation mechanism between the council, the police, licensees, residents and emergency services has undermined any attempts to establish an effective town centre strategy.

A town centre management framework would not only enable more joined-up thinking to take place but would allow local people to have a genuine say in how they want their town centre to develop. It would also require the local authority to evaluate what expansion of the local night-time economy could be tolerated within the existing service infrastructure, and require it to establish a set of clear long-term objectives for the development of the town centre. As such, it would make the licensing procedure more open, more transparent and more accountable. Having been involved in the consultation process, local people would have a clearer understanding of how the licensing system operated and how their town centre was being managed, and would be more inclined to make representations to the local authority and so play an active role in shaping the future of their own community.

In short, a legally enshrined town centre management framework would provide local authorities, working in partnership with local agencies and residents, with the

opportunity to forge a joint strategy and better manage and regulate the night-time economy. If local councils are prevented from exercising adequate control of the night-time economy, it is likely that further fissures will appear in the fabric of urban society; disenchantment with the ability of the local authority to manage the town centre will grow; and urban residents will become increasingly disinclined to use their town centres. For those reasons, I recommend placing on local authorities a legal duty to establish a town centre management framework.

In conclusion, I shall read a letter of support that I have received from the divisional commander of part of the Kent police, Superintendent David Ainsworth:

"In respect of the evening economy there is a need to achieve the right balance for all town centre users taking full cognisance of issues such as housing policy, access to transportation, food and liquor licensing, lighting, CCTV schemes, entertainment licensing, parking, emergency service provision and pedestrianisation . . . I very much support this initiative by Dr Stoate, the Member for Dartford. As Chair of the Dartford Community Safety Partnership, I see the management framework he calls for as representing a major step forward in terms of establishing the basis for positive engagement by both public service and private sector partners to the benefit of everyone in Dartford."

4.44 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Initially, I thought that I could wholeheartedly support the Bill proposed by the hon. Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate). However, having listened to his speech, I have been dissuaded. I frequently argue that there should be staggered licensing laws. We see a huge number of people turned on to our village streets, town streets and city streets, in the case of Lichfield, at 11 o'clock at night. They often cause disturbance on a Friday and Saturday night. However, I do not think that the hon. Gentleman's tone is completely right. What put me off what was not the hon. Gentleman's excellent preamble, in which he stated the reasons for having staggered licensing hours, but his subsequent proposal that the burden of proof should be shifted. He argued that it should be shifted to those who oppose staggered licensing hours, not to pubs applying for licensing hours to be extended.

The hon. Gentleman then used a series of phrases that are anathema to me. He said that an objection should be valid if it relates to a proposal not within the development criteria. He said that there should be better management and regulation, and talked about needs, rights and responsibilities in a town centre strategy. That sounded rather like new Labour speak. I support anything that would reduce the burden on town centre policing. Heaven knows, the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), who is listening patiently on the Front Bench has heard me speak about that on several occasions, and knows that I think that it is wrong that there are only three or four police officers available in the city of Lichfield on a Friday or Saturday night.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke) *rose—*

Mr. Fabricant: Although the Minister wishes to intervene now, there will be many opportunities for him to do so in a later debate on this very subject. I promise him that I will raise this issue again and give way to him then.

The sort of regulation that proposes controls and states that businesses should not be free to decide for themselves whether or not they should be open after 11 o'clock is patently wrong. If a pub were next door to housing and might cause a disturbance to elderly people late at night, of course it would be right for a local authority to say that it would be inappropriate for it to remain open. That is right and proper. However, the idea that there should be a town centre strategy has great dangers. For example, what if Dartford took one view and Sevenoaks a different one? What would be the result? Far from there being drift into a town centre—which, at least, would be a pedestrian drift—people might get into their cars at 11 o'clock at night and drive from Sevenoaks to Dartford, if Dartford took a liberal view, or vice versa, if Sevenoaks took a liberal view. That could lead to situations in which there was more drink-driving, which the whole House and every Member would deplore.

The Bill is well intentioned—as much new Labour legislation is well intentioned. However, when we get into the detail and start to read the fine print, we realise that it is impractical and destroys that which it is our main cause to preserve, namely the tranquillity and safety of our streets and cities late on Friday and Saturday nights. For that reason, I oppose the Bill.

Question put, pursuant to Standing Order No. 23 (Motions for leave to bring in Bills and nomination of Select Committees at commencement of public business), and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Dr. Howard Stoate, Mr. Gordon Marsden, Dr. Phyllis Starkey, Ms Karen Buck, Mrs. Diana Organ and Dr. Desmond Turner.

LICENSED VICTUALLING (REGULATION OF HOURS)

Dr. Howard Stoate accordingly presented a Bill to permit licensing authorities to regulate the sale of alcohol from licensed premises after 11 o'clock at night in prescribed circumstances, in prescribed locations and on prescribed days: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March, and to be printed [Bill 35].

Vehicles (Crime) Bill (Programme) (No. 2)

4.55 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I beg to move,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Vehicles (Crime) Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 18th December 2000:

Consideration and Third Reading

1. Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading shall be completed at today's sitting.

2. Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at half past Eight o'clock.

3. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Ten o'clock.

4. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Consideration of Lords Amendments and further messages from the Lords

5. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any programme motion to supplement this order or to vary it in relation to—

(a) proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments; or

(b) proceedings on any further messages from the Lords,

and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

The motion proposes that the remaining stages of the Bill should be completed this evening. The programme is supplemental to the one approved for the Committee stage, which finished, as planned, on 23 January.

In Committee, we generally had a serious debate. There was a good deal of constructive comment from the official Opposition and the Liberal Democrats. It is true that there were some contributions that I would regard as entirely self-indulgent, but it was a good Committee stage none the less. There was full discussion of all the relevant matters and the debates were completed within the time set by the previous programme motion.

There was only one occasion in Committee when time presented some difficulty. That arose from a filibuster by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) and his hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), which led to the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) being kept out of his debate.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I seek clarification from you. If my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) or I had been filibustering, would not that have been out of order, and would not the Chairman of the Committee have ruled it so?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I think that I can help the hon. Gentleman. It is perfectly possible for hon. Members to seek to take extra time in dealing with a particular matter, and provided that what they say is not in breach of the Standing Orders of the House, they are entitled to do so. Only when hon. Members stray out of order will they be corrected by the occupant of the Chair.

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful for that ruling, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I withdraw the word "filibuster" if it is offensive to you.

A large number of contributions from the hon. Members for Buckingham, for Lichfield and for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) and others were constructive and to the point, and helped to clarify matters in Committee. I observed that there were other contributions, particularly from the hon. Members for Buckingham and for Lichfield, that were less constructive and more time-passing in their approach. The effect of such exchanges was that, after one of our Committee sittings, the hon. Member for Colchester was full of ire, because he felt that he had not been able to make the points of substance that he had wanted to make in the debate.

With that one exception, it is fair to note that the debate in Committee took place within the time set by the programme motion; that in general it was positive; and that there were no divisions on issues of substance, although there were divisions on matters of process and procedure.

That has reinforced the view that programming is a good idea and has benefits for both Government and Opposition. For Bills of this size, with 45 clauses, it is particularly suitable. However, I acknowledge that there is an issue of principle across the House about whether programming is desirable.

If we had been confident that all hon. Members would honour the conventions and move the Bill forward, the programme motion might not have been necessary today. There are no outstanding matters of great substance. It is important that the new clauses, some tabled by the Opposition and some by the Government, should be debated. Those debates could be conducted in a positive spirit if we could rely on all hon. Members behaving as the House would expect, but we cannot. That is why the programme motion has been tabled.

In Committee, we focused on the clauses of greatest interest, which related to the substantial parts of the Bill and ensured that there was thorough scrutiny. That applied to the parts relating to regulation of the motor salvage industry and control of the supply of number plates, and also to the clauses that had already raised questions on Second Reading and in the media, such as the hypothecation of magistrates courts receipts to fund an increased number of safety cameras, and police access to motor insurance information.

I am delighted to say that although no amendments were passed in Committee, the Government have tried to address the Opposition's concerns by tabling a number of amendments to insert additional offence provisions in the Bill. Those concern the supplying of false information when a person applies to be registered as a motor salvage operator or number plate supplier. We have tabled those amendments in response to the debate in Committee. That demonstrates the consensual spirit that informed our debate there.

There are a number of drafting amendments as well, and some lesser amendments, mainly of a technical nature, but we are not introducing by way of Government amendment any major new issue of principle. One day

should therefore give us ample time to debate the remaining stages of the Bill. For those reasons, I commend the motion to the House.

5 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am sorry to have to begin my remarks on a note of discord with the Government, but I am afraid that the position is simply stated. The tone of the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), is mellifluous, but his message is sadly one of menace. I am bound to say that he has a brass neck to hold Conservative Members—he referred specifically my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) and I—responsible for the tantrum in which the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) engaged towards the end of the Committee's proceedings.

I was saddened by the inability of the hon. Member for Colchester to speak for any significant time on an important occasion when there was material business to discuss, but Conservative Members were not responsible for that. Indeed, the record shows that we spoke for only six or seven minutes. The Minister of State should check his records if he doubts the veracity of my remarks. The inability of the hon. Member for Colchester to speak is attributable rather to the fact that the Government provided a wholly inadequate time scale within which we struggled, through our best endeavours, to satisfy our responsibility and the interests of our constituents.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that I did not use the word "tantrum", which is his word? When I described the behaviour of the hon. Member for Colchester, I said that I considered his position to be justified. I should like it to be clarified that the word "tantrum" is the hon. Gentleman's word and not mine.

Mr. Bercow: The Minister is notoriously sensitive about being misrepresented in any way, as we saw in Committee. Of course I am happy to confirm that he used the word "ire" and that, in accordance with the principles of the Lib-Lab pact, he said that the hon. Member for Colchester was justified in his outburst. He also said that the remarks of Opposition Members were not justified, although he rightly said that constructive debate occurred in Committee. I am happy to concede that he and the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), have tabled a number of amendments that reflect the spirit and intention of those that the Opposition originally recommended.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend is right to commend the Government for drafting amendments to reflect some of the aspects that the Opposition said were missing from the Bill. However, does he agree that although the amendments reflect our suggestions in principle, their detail is not precise and that we must oppose some of it?

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is right. He will have an opportunity to develop that argument further later in our proceedings.

The fact remains that it was palpably inadequate for the Bill to be considered for a time that fell just short of 23 hours. If I remember rightly, the deliberations occurred between 9 and 23 January, in only 10 Standing Committee sittings, in which time the Committee had to consider no fewer than 45 clauses, 84 amendments and nine new clauses. If my arithmetic serves me correctly—for all his other failings, the Minister of State is a distinguished mathematician—that works out at roughly 10 minutes per issue; in other words, there were 10 minutes for each amendment, new clause and clause. That was unsatisfactory, but the current circumstances are even worse. With no fewer than 61 new clauses and amendments to consider, the Government now suggest that hon. Members should be expected to wrap up business before Third Reading commences at 8.30 pm. Frankly, that is unsatisfactory.

The argument has a number of strands that I want to develop. It is important that it should not be regarded as a dry, arid and irrelevant constitutional argument that is of no interest or relevance to the people whom hon. Members are elected to serve. On the contrary, it is profoundly significant, as it tells us much about the way in which the Government treat Parliament and the methods by which the Executive seek to downgrade and relegate the role of the legislature. Ultimately, it affects the capacity of the House to discharge its obligations effectively.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, if time is limited, it is vital to maximise it to good effect?

Mr. Bercow: I agree, but that argument is sometimes used to justify not having a proper debate on a programme motion. The hon. Gentleman's argument is honourable but mistaken, and it plays into the Government's hands. It is important to set out exactly what is wrong with the procedure.

First, I want to point to a sign of, at the very least, Government discourtesy. Paragraph 4 of the motion states:

> Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

As I was not familiar with that aspect of the Sessional Orders, I made inquiries about it and discussed the matter with the Clerks. The Sessional Orders do not merely provide for, but are supposed to insist on, the creation of a Programming Committee, which comprises several individuals almost as of right and meets explicitly and exclusively to determine the allocation of time when considering a Bill on Report and on Third Reading.

The Government are inviting the House to disapply the Sessional Order and to substitute for a Committee and proper cross-party discussion a brief motion, which the Government intend to ram through on the payroll vote. If the Minister was sincere in being open minded about how the new procedure works, it is extraordinary that he, the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Mr. Pope)—who, as a Whip, is currently silent, as he should be—made no attempt to communicate with my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson), who was the Opposition Whip on the Standing Committee, with me or with any of my hon. Friends who served on the Committee about the time allocation for Report. Instead, they ignore the Sessional Orders and

[Mr. Bercow]

devise a cheeky ruse whereby they can insist, through the payroll vote, on only a day's consideration of the remainder of the Bill.

We are witnessing as clear a demonstration as we could wish for of the arrogance, temerity and wilful disregard of the rights of the House, which are the hallmark of this overweening Labour Government. It is unacceptable to behave in that way and then to expect us to provide results.

Secondly, as the Minister knows, the Secretary of State for Health made an important statement today. I do not detract from its significance or underestimate hon. Members' interest in its contents. I accept that it was important. However, the Minister and the Government Whip knew that we were due to consider 61 new clauses and amendments today, yet the Government decided to make the statement, thus deliberately and calculatedly limiting the time available for debate on Report. I therefore appeal to hon. Members—even those who might be described as part-time opponents of the Government, namely Liberal Democrat Members—to recognise that such behaviour is unfair and militates against the effective discharge by the House of its duty as the proper body for scrutinising Bills.

I have mentioned the 61 new clauses and amendments. I emphasise that number so that hon. Members and those listening to our proceedings are aware that they have not all been tabled by the Opposition. Partly in response to our representations in Committee, and partly through initiatives taken on their own account, the Government have tabled no fewer than 39 of the 61 new clauses and amendments. A large proportion of the new proposals has, therefore, come from the Government.

Mr. Charles Clarke: I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman would formally concede that many of the amendments and new clauses directly respond to matters raised in Committee, in pursuit of commitments that I and the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions my hon. Friend the member for Streatham (Mr. Hill) made to the Committee following the good, constructive points raised in debates there.

Mr. Bercow: I certainly accept that the amendments and new clauses have been tabled in response to concerns that we have expressed, but I fear what the Minister seems to regard as the corollary of his own point. He seems to think that the corollary of the fact that the Government's intentions in tabling the new clauses and amendments are good is that it is somehow less incumbent on the rest of the House to make a judgment on the validity of those new clauses and amendments.

I hope that I shall not hear such a response from the Minister's lips, but I recall a number of debates on Report in which a Minister has had the audacity to say to an interested Back Bencher seeking to intervene, "No, I shall not give way to the hon. Member because he"—or she—"did not serve on the Standing Committee." It is incumbent on Ministers to recognise that the purpose of this exercise is for the Standing Committee's deliberations to be reported to, and subjected to the assessment of, this House. That is what it is all about.

Of course, the Minister is justified in tabling new clauses and amendments and he has done so at least partly in response to the representations and advocacy of the Opposition in Committee. However, that does not divest us of our responsibility fully to consider their contents. Although the Minister's intentions are good, it is not clear that the precise wording, form and likely effect of the new clauses and amendments will necessarily commend themselves to all hon. Members.

Mr. Clarke: I entirely accept the hon. Gentleman's point about the need for debate on the proposals—indeed, for debate by hon. Members who were not members of the Standing Committee. I am grateful to him for accepting my intervention, and I want to ensure that he does not feel that the Government are in some way behaving wrongly in tabling amendments for consideration by the House. The reason that we tabled them was precisely to respond to concerns raised by hon. Members on both sides of the Committee.

Mr. Bercow: That is true. However, so far I have—in characteristic fashion, as my hon. Friends will understand—been a bit soft and a bit generous towards the Minister. I am very lucky indeed—I count my blessings—that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) has not yet joined us. If he were to do so, I would probably be chastised severely for the rather wimpish approach that I have hitherto adopted.

Although the Minister's intentions are good, some of the amendments should never have been necessary in the first place. It beggars belief that a distinguished mathematician, described by Mr. John Kampfner in *The Guardian* newspaper—where else?—as a likely future leader of the Labour party, could be the Minister in charge of a Bill that came before the Committee with no provisions for an offence of falsely seeking to register as a motor salvage operator or a registration plate supplier.

Those omissions seem to be an example of the most extraordinary negligence on the part of the Government. Those were simple points that they should have anticipated. Indeed, they were simple and obvious points that would probably have been described by the late Enoch Powell as so blindingly obvious that only an extraordinarily clever person could have failed to see them. It is no good the Minister pleading for brownie points from me and asking for a belated Christmas present. It is no good his saying what a good, democratic fellow he has been because he has tabled amendments that should satisfy the appetite of Conservative Members.

The Minister is a very important, very distinguished, very senior and very respected fellow with very many commitments. He is very ambitious and has a very full diary. We should not need to be considering the amendments now. Had he been willing to lose a bit of face—and to pay a genuine and deserved tribute to my hon. Friends and me—by accepting the original wording of our amendments, which pointed up the lacunae in the Bill and remedied its deficiencies, it would not now be necessary for him to expect us to take an average of four minutes to debate each amendment while we go at a whistle-stop pace through the Report stage of the Bill.

I do not know what the Minister's commitments are. When we were in the Programming Sub-Committee, he got very testy and started looking at what looked like a little diary card in front of him because I had developed a couple of points at reasonable length and asked some

questions. It turned out that he was in danger of missing his pre-prandial drink. That was not a matter of concern to me.

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman is wrong on that point. I shall take this opportunity to ask him whether he would concede that, in the Programming Sub-Committee, he proposed no changes of substance to the order of consideration of the Bill, or to the amount of time for debate within the time available. The only changes that he suggested related to the total length of consideration. He proposed none at all on the detailed proceedings.

Mr. Bercow: The Minister makes a point that is both right and staggeringly irrelevant. This is where he and I disagree. He is absolutely right to say that I was not remotely concerned to propose a change to the order of consideration of the clauses. He has in mind such monumental, nationwide issues of great popular moment as whether we should consider clauses 16 to 30 first, as the Government proposed, or whether we should follow the chronological sequence of the Bill. I admit that I did not, and do not, give a tinker's cuss about the order in which those matters were considered in Standing Committee.

My point is that it is no good the Minister arguing about the order in which we eat our meal, if the meal itself is not large enough. I am a little chap, but that does not mean that I do not have a reasonable appetite. When I was elected as the Member of Parliament for Buckingham, I took it as my responsibility to subject the Government to scrutiny regularly, consistently and in detail. That is what my constituents expect me and my hon. Friends to accomplish. The fact is that 23 hours were not sufficient.

I hope that the Minister will not dispute that, on the occasion to which he has just referred, I proposed that there should have been 32 hours' consideration in Committee rather than 23 hours. That was a modest proposal, and I am glad that he is not disputing that I made it. One of our objections—as you will be aware, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as a keen student of these matters—is that the conduct of the Programming Sub-Committee was disgraceful. It took place in private; no minute was taken; nor was a verbatim account provided. Subsequently, as I pointed out in a question earlier this afternoon to the President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons, there was an unresolved dispute between us as to who said what, when and to whom. That dispute will never be resolved, however long we pursue it, because there is no account of it.

Mr. Clarke: I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman would acknowledge here in the House—as he did in Committee—that the responsibility for the conduct of the Committee and the rules under which it takes place are a matter for the Chair, not for the Government of the day. We honoured and supported the decisions of the Chairman at that time.

Mr. Bercow: There are two very unattractive features about the Government, and they necessitate the House taking the maximum time for consideration and on Report. One is the tendency to hide behind public servants—that is, Departmental officials. I shall not dilate on that subject, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because if I were to do so I might incur your wrath, and that is not something that any self-respecting Member of Parliament would willingly countenance.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): The hon. Gentleman has done so once or twice before.

Mr. Bercow: I may have done so inadvertently.

I have said that the Minister tends to take refuge behind civil servants. *[Interruption.]* The Minister asks me to withdraw that comment, and of course I do so. He is getting very excited. I know that he is very ambitious, has many commitments and wants to fulfil all kinds of future desires. I do not want to embarrass him by going into too much detail about that.

The Minister may not seek to hide behind the cloak of official approval, but many Ministers seek the imprimatur of public servants for decisions that are ultimately their own responsibility—decisions that it is their job to defend before Parliament.

Ministers often say, "Ah, that is a matter for the Chair." I have repeatedly made the point to the Minister that it would have been perfectly possible for him specifically to recommend that the Programming Sub-Committee meet in public and that minutes be taken. It would also have been possible for him either to recommend or to agree to recommend lengthier consideration. That is the significant point.

We have many important issues to discuss, such as penalties and offences. I have referred to one example of an offence that the Government had not apparently considered in the first place, which they now propose to introduce—an attempt falsely to register as a motor salvage operator or registration plate supplier—and it is necessary to scrutinise and debate that properly this evening. There is also the important but vexed question of the use of court receipts to finance a major roll-out of speed cameras across the country.

Whatever the politically correct prejudices of Ministers and their Back Benchers, that issue causes considerable disquiet in my constituency and in the constituencies of a number of my hon. Friends. Such matters need to be debated not only by members of the Committee, although I am delighted that they have faithfully turned out today, but by other Members of the House. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), who might seek to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the epitome of the traditional parliamentarian. He believes in debate, scrutiny and holding Ministers responsible for their decisions. While the Minister is busily preoccupied with his ascent of the greasy pole, my hon. Friend is busily preoccupied with the effective and persistent representation of the people of Aldridge-Brownhills. He does that by contributing on issues of public importance that will have an on-going impact on the people whom he is elected to represent.

The crucial issue of police powers is of no apparent interest to the new Stalinists on the Labour Benches. As a Conservative libertarian—I am proud of that description or epithet—I happen to be concerned about the number of occasions on which police officers or other representatives of authority can gain access either to business premises or private property to pursue their inquiries. The Government suggest that registered motor salvage operators or registered registration plate suppliers should be susceptible to unannounced visits—without even the decency of a warrant—by police constables or other representatives of authority. However, the premises of those who are not registered plate suppliers or salvage

[Mr. Bercow]

operators, but who are suspected of unlawful or even criminal activity, can be entered and inspected only if the police or other representatives of authority have secured a warrant.

My hon. Friends and I have argued on several occasions that that inequality of treatment and lack of symmetry—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman seems to have strayed from the terms of the motion. He has discussed the respective merits of hon. Members and their perspicacity and is now discussing the substance of the Bill. However, the time for that has not yet arrived, so he should confine himself strictly to the terms of the motion. I hope that he will not engage in further repetition.

Mr. Bercow: I certainly will not engage in repetition—and far be it from me ever to disobey your instructions, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Greg Pope (Hyndburn): Tedious repetition.

Mr. Bercow: I have not engaged in that at all and I challenge the hon. Gentleman to provide a single example of my making the same point twice. I have not done so and do not intend to do so. As always, I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for returning me to the straight and narrow.

The point that I was trying to make—as a modest fellow, I am happy to concede that I was obviously making it very inadequately—is that precisely because these matters are contentious and precisely because there has not yet been a proper opportunity for Members of the House who were not members of the Committee to debate them, it is important that there should be adequate time to do so.

I give another example—fees and charges—not because I want to dilate on that, but because it is an example of an important subject, which hon. Members should have more time to debate. An extraordinary series of exchanges took place in Committee. My hon. Friends and I proposed an amendment that would have ensured that the Government could not impose stealth taxes, but could levy charges such, and only such, as to recover the administrative costs incurred. The Minister quibbled about the terms and suggested that the clause as it stood was preferable to the wording that we recommended. However, when Ministers were challenged to guarantee beyond doubt that a profit to the Exchequer would never be involved, they retreated into waffle and obfuscation. Those matters need to be properly debated tonight.

The central point is that it is unreasonable—simply and plainly unreasonable—for Ministers to expect 61 new clauses and amendments to be intelligently and comprehensively debated in only three hours. Now, I am not the very distinguished and upmarket mathematician that is the Minister. Nevertheless, I scraped through the O-level. Three hours is 180 minutes, so it is clear what considering 61 new clauses and amendments in 180 minutes means: fewer than three minutes per new clause or—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. To my certain knowledge, the hon. Gentleman has repeated himself twice in half a minute. He has also repeated an argument that he has already used in his 26-minute speech.

Mr. Bercow: Well, you have slapped my wrist, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I bow to your authority and the discipline that you have imposed. I apologise, but my hon. Friends are clear about our objection. The Government are trying to ram through too much in too little time with too few opportunities for hon. Members to voice their concerns. That is not acceptable.

If the Minister is so confident of the robustness of his case and so convinced that the Government are being fair in their proposed allocation of time, why have neither he nor either of his hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench had the courtesy to consult through the usual channels about the apportionment of time? The fact is that they did not consult on either the amount of time that they proposed to allocate or its proposed distribution on Report and Third Reading. I must emphasise that, to me, that is unacceptable.

Mr. Pope: Has the hon. Gentleman forgotten our conversation behind the Speaker's Chair last week?

Mr. Bercow: No, I have not. The hon. Gentleman, who is a diligent Whip, has started to dig his own grave and I am afraid that I must throw the earth in to fill it. It is certainly true that he approached me. He wanted to established whether I was content with a day's consideration and it was pretty clear to him that I was not. My response was twofold. First, it was incumbent on him to go through the usual channels and speak to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk, because that is the way that business is done. Secondly, the time needed—based on the proposals that the Government themselves would produce—was crucial. I must emphasise that.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman is decent and fair-minded enough to acknowledge that I said to him, "It depends how many new clauses and amendments the Government choose to put to the House." At that stage, the hon. Gentleman, who was kept in the dark by his very senior, very distinguished and very ambitious Minister, was not in a position to advise me about what the Government intended.

We face a strange situation as we consider the allocation of time. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk and I were not aware of what the Government would propose for the simple reason that we were not the proposers and they would not tell us what they had in mind. Inevitably, as the Opposition in the dark, we were in a state of ignorance. The situation on the Government side resulted in this pitifully inadequate allocation of time: the Minister apparently knew what he had in mind, but the hon. Member for Hyndburn, the Government Whip, did not.

If the Minister and the hon. Member for Hyndburn do not communicate about these matters, it is their problem, but there is no reason why the rights of the House should be imperilled or, indeed, ultimately trampled, as a result of such a pitiful failure of communication.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: Yes, for the last time.

Mr. Clarke: First, there is no difference relating either to information or to knowledge between my hon. Friend and me. Secondly, I am glad the hon. Gentleman had the grace to concede that there was a consultation, and that a meeting took place. Thirdly, I had a similar conversation with the hon. Gentleman before the Programming Sub-Committee considered the Committee stage, and received a similar response to that described by him. I have to say that I think it very difficult to take him seriously, in terms of the possibility of engaging in a serious discussion of these matters.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am anxious to ensure that a balanced debate takes place. I know that others wish to speak, and I suggest that the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) limit his remarks.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful for your advice, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I shall follow it. In any event, it is difficult to reply to what the Minister said, because it was so vague as to border on the opaque. Whether he meant that I just chuckled at him when he spoke to me, or whether he suggested for a moment that I was guilty of tergiversation—that I said one thing on one occasion, and subsequently changed my mind—I know not. The fact is, however, that there was not proper conversation between the Minister and the hon. Member for Hyndburn. The fact is that either the hon. Member for Hyndburn did not know how many new clauses or amendments the Government intended to table, or, if he did know, he failed to divulge the information to me. And the fact still is that, despite that non-communication, based on either secretiveness or lack of knowledge, the hon. Gentleman had the cheek to expect me to agree to a circumscription of the rights of the Opposition in particular, and of the House in general. That is unacceptable.

No amount of dancing on the head of a pin by the Minister will change the fact that the Government have treated the House with disdain, indifference and contempt. The allocation of time is unsatisfactory: this is not a proper way in which to do business. I am sorry that there are too many part-timers who do not take their legislative responsibilities seriously. My hon. Friends and I do, and I know that, in particular, traditionalist Labour Back Benchers take those responsibilities extremely seriously. The many Members who take them seriously and who share my view that the time allocated is inadequate will doubtless wish to register their concerns.

5.32 pm

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I shall be extremely brief, and perhaps demonstrate to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) that it is possible to make points succinctly, and in a short time.

I have served on a wide range of Standing Committees, and will draw on that experience to illustrate my view not only that there was sufficient time in Committee, but that there is plenty of time for us to deal with substantive arguments—if there are any—this evening.

As you have observed, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there has been an element of repetition. In Committee, I heard the arguments about pieces in *The Guardian* six, eight or even nine times. If the hon. Member for Buckingham were to confine himself to substantive issues, I am sure that the time allocated would be sufficient.

If hon. Members look at the report of the Committee's first sitting, they will see that the hon. Gentleman took up more than half the first 38 columns. If they then go through the record line by line, deleting references to *The Guardian*, spider bites and similar trivia outside the scope of the Bill, they will note that the hon. Gentleman effectively occupied a reasonable proportion of the debate; but it is a different matter when we start to add all the trivia. For instance, the hon. Gentleman takes up eight and a half out of 10 columns in the debate on clause 17.

The Bill deals with important issues. I want adequate time tonight to deal with clause 37, which I sought to amend in Committee. Coincidentally, the hon. Member for Buckingham mentioned the constituency of the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd). There are extremely effective speed cameras throughout the heart of that constituency—at least, I think it must be that constituency—along the A5.

Such issues are important, and we must deal with the substance of them. We can only do so, however, if Members on both sides of the House confine their remarks to what is relevant—although I would point out that the Committee stage ended before the scheduled time.

5.35 pm

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): As only about four minutes remain, I shall keep my remarks as brief as possible so that others can speak if they want to.

The Minister is right to say that the Committee stage was, in the main, even-tempered and intellectually engaged with the issues. Much of the Committee's progress through the clauses before it was due to the fact that he and his colleagues offered to table amendments addressing the points that we had made. It is true that amendments have been tabled, but we now have less than three and a half hours in which to discuss them—significantly less than the three minutes per amendment mentioned by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). Moveover, if Divisions took place we would have even less time.

I must register my concern. A number of important issues were, to a degree, sidelined in Committee while we waited for further information from the Government, and further amendment in recognition of the points we had raised. I fear that in the time available we shall not be able to deal with those issues properly, and shall not have an opportunity to be reassured by the Minister that the amendments are sound.

It is traditional for us to suffer—well, not suffer in this case; but we must recognise that statements from Ministers tend to precede debates such as this. I find it a little strange, however, that an hour and a half of our short time has been allocated to Third Reading, given that Third Reading tends to feature a repetition of what has gone before and to give some Members an opportunity merely to exercise their vocal cords. I would far prefer much of the time to be spent debating amendments and new clauses.

5.37 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The Minister is right to say that Conservative Members dominated the Committee's proceedings. I was not present for the first week because I was unwell—any further talk of spiders and bites and anti-venom is not necessary now—but I was there for most of the time, and I can say that my hon. Friends the Members for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) and for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) and I made powerful points. So powerful were those points that the Government have now adopted them, because they related to glaring omissions at the time—so glaring, as my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham said just now, that they staggered the imagination.

The Bill says that it is unlawful not to provide information, or to provide information that is wrong. To include such a provision, and then not to include provision for a penalty for such an omission, is extraordinary, but it is typical of this Government and their arrogance—

It being forty-five minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER, *pursuant to Order [7 November 2000], put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair.*

The House divided: Ayes 318, Noes 168.

Division No. 91] **[5.39 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battey, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Denham, John
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
Mcleisaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Oliner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken

Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Clelland and Mr. Tony McNulty.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Osten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Shepherd, Richard
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waller, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Keith Simpson and Mr. James Gray.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Vehicles (Crime) Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 18th December 2000:

Consideration and Third Reading

1. Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading shall be completed at today's sitting.

2. Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at half past Eight o'clock.

3. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Ten o'clock.

4. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Consideration of Lords Amendments and further messages from the Lords

5. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any programme motion to supplement this order or to vary it in relation to—

(a) proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments; or

(b) proceedings on any further messages from the Lords,

and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

Orders of the Day

Vehicles (Crime) Bill

Not amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

New Clause 1

OFFENCE OF MAKING FALSE STATEMENTS

'.—(1) A person who, in making an application to be registered in the register of a local authority or to renew his registration in such a register—

(a) makes a statement which he knows to be false in a material particular; or

(b) recklessly makes a statement which is false in a material particular,

shall be guilty of an offence and, subject to subsection (2), liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 3 on the standard scale.

(2) A person who is guilty of an offence under subsection (1) shall be liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale if—

(a) any previous application of his to the local authority concerned for registration or renewal of registration was refused under section 3(3); or

(b) any previous registration of his in the register of the local authority concerned was cancelled under section 4(1).'.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

5.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment No. 37, in clause 3, page 3, line 21, at end insert—

'( ) Any person who knowingly makes a false application under this section shall be guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale.'.

Government amendments Nos. 1 and 4 to 6.

Amendment No. 40, in clause 18, page 10, line 25, at end insert—

'( ) Any person who knowingly makes a false application under this section shall be guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale.'.

Government amendments Nos. 7 to 14.

Amendment No. 41, in clause 26, page 14, line 16, leave out "3" and insert "5".

Government amendments Nos. 15 to 17.

Amendment No. 42, in clause 27, page 14, line 34, leave out "4" and insert "5".

Mr. Hill: Discussion in Committee—prompted primarily by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow)—showed that there was a gap in the range of offences created by clauses 10 and 18, and I agreed to consider the matter further. I am happy to designate new clause 1 and the associated amendments as "the Buckingham amendments".

Clauses 10 and 18 created offences of failing to notify the local authority or the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency of various changes, but they did not make it an offence to make a false statement in an application for registration, or for renewal of registration. New clause 1 plugs the gap for salvage operators by making it an offence to make a false statement that is material to the application.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): How was it that civil servants in the Minister's Department, when they scrutinised the Bill before it reached the House, failed to spot something that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) managed to spot? Should not the Minister make an apology to my hon. Friend?

Mr. Hill: I hardly think that an apology is in order. I fully recognise that there was an oversight in the drafting. We are extremely grateful to the Opposition, and to the hon. Member for Buckingham specifically, for drawing our attention to the lacuna in the Bill that the new clause is intended to fill.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I thank the Minister for his generosity in calling the new clause the Buckingham amendment. However, does not he agree that, more scrutiny, with other lacunae might have been spotted? Can he guarantee that there are no other lacunae that might have been spotted had more scrutiny time been made available?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I suggest to the House that, in the context of this debate, we should stick to the lacuna that is before us.

Mr. Hill: I am delighted to deal with this particular lacuna, which we debated at some length in Committee. We dealt with a wide range of matters in Committee. We debated all the amendments that had been tabled, and in fact finished early. All the issues that Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members wanted to raise were covered more than adequately in Committee, and the time provided was more than adequate for the purpose.

The offence that I described is punishable by a fine at level 3—that is, £1,000—in line with the penalties for the other clause 10 offences. However, we believe that a higher penalty is appropriate for those who make false statements when they have previously had an application refused—or registration cancelled—on the grounds that they were not "fit and proper" persons.

Such people have been through the procedures before and know what is required. They know that if they applied in their own right, their application would not be successful. We must not allow them to think that an attempt to deceive the local authority is less risky than trading while unregistered. The penalty for trading while unregistered is set at level 5—that is, £5,000—and new clause 1 provides for the same penalty to apply to those caught by subsection (2).

Government amendment No. 1 qualifies the offence in clause 10(1), so that any change affecting the accuracy of the information submitted with an application must be "material". That makes it consistent with new clause 1. It is likely that a wide range of information will be submitted with applications, and we do not want the offence to apply to inaccuracies that will not weigh in the balance when local authorities are making decisions. Such inaccuracies might include, for example, mistakes in the spelling of names or addresses. A similar amendment, Government amendment No. 14, has been proposed for the number plate scheme.

Government amendments Nos. 4 to 9 and Government amendment No. 12, which relate to clause 18, on the application for registration for registration plate suppliers, have a similar effect to the changes proposed for salvage operators. We propose to introduce a new offence, with a level 3 fine, of either knowingly or recklessly making a false statement when applying for registration.

A business convicted of making a false statement might not be considered in some cases to have made a valid registration, so the option of suspension from the register might not be open to the court. We therefore propose to give the court the power to impose a period of up to five years during which such a business will be barred from making a false application.

We also want to address the situation in which a business that has been suspended from the register or debarred from making a further application attempts to reapply before the relevant period has elapsed.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, not least for his kind remarks of a few moments ago. I do not want to be pedantic, but I do want to be precise. The hon. Gentleman said that it would be possible under the new arrangements to prevent someone from making a false application for a period of five years. I think that the hon. Gentleman meant to say a further false application.

Mr. Hill: To the extent that the applicant has already been barred or suspended from the register, an offence has been committed. I certainly accept the rephrasing of the expression along the lines suggested by the hon. Gentleman. However, this is a somewhat convoluted way of dealing with the issue. We have tussled hard to find an appropriate way forward on the matter. It is a convoluted form; nevertheless, it serves to achieve the desired effect.

As I was saying, this may involve a deliberate attempt to deceive the registration authority by providing false details. In line with the proposals for salvage operators, we are proposing a level 5 fine. This offence is more serious than simply providing false information, and ranks alongside the offence of trading while unregistered.

Government amendments Nos. 10, 11 and 13 relate to clause 19, which provides that a suspension from the register of number plate suppliers imposed by a magistrates court should not have effect until the time for appealing to the Crown court runs out. This is a sensible provision, because suspension from the register means that it will no longer be possible for someone to trade legally as a number plate supplier and that should not occur while there is still the possibility of a successful appeal.

There are two ways of dealing with an adverse decision of the magistrates court. One is to appeal to the Crown court; the other is to state a case on a point of law to the High Court. This is done when the magistrates court has exceeded its powers or seriously erred in law. The procedure should be used only in exceptional circumstances; it is, indeed, seldom used. Nevertheless, the legislation must allow for such circumstances.

[Mr. Hill]

Amendments Nos. 10 and 13 apply the same provision as on appeals to circumstances where a case is stated to the High Court.

Amendment No. 11 places a statutory duty on the courts to notify the DVLA when a registration is suspended or a business is ordered not to make another application for a specified period following a conviction for making a false statement. Unless the amendment is made, there will be no mechanism in law for notification from the courts. It is essential that the courts provide the DVLA with this information so that the register can be amended accordingly.

The purpose of amendments Nos. 15 to 17 is to describe the new offence relating to the sale of counterfeit plates more accurately, and to introduce a defence. The amendments relate to clause 27, which sets out to address two scenarios. The first is when defective number plates are sold to an unwitting customer. The second deals with the problem of customising number plates to a customer's specifications. It is already an offence under the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994 to display such a number plate, but many suppliers are happy to sell such plates and let the motorist take the risk of being caught. We want to deter that practice. It is right, however, that the defence should be available to cover any genuine cases in which the defect was slight and the supplier could prove he did not know of the defect and was not reckless with regard to the defect. In the light of those observations, I commend the Government amendments to the House.

I fear that I must resist Opposition amendments Nos. 37, 40, 41 and 42,. Let me explain why. Amendments Nos. 37 and 40 would make it an offence, punishable by a fine of up to £5,000, knowingly to make a false application for entry in the register of motor salvage operators or number plate suppliers. The Bill requires a motor salvage operator to make an application for registration. It does not, however, address the situation in which someone makes a false declaration as part of that application.

We appreciate the motivation behind the amendments. Indeed, the same proposals in Committee prompted us to table new clause 1, the related amendments to part I, amendment No. 4 and the related amendments to clause 18.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): The crucial difference between the Opposition's amendments and the Government's new clause is that, whereas under the Government's proposals the offence occurs when someone either knowingly or recklessly makes a false statement, under the Opposition's proposals, the offence is committed when it is done knowingly, but not in circumstances of recklessness. Why does the Minister believe that recklessness should be included in the offence? What sort of circumstances does he think would be covered? How would he deal with the point made by the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), when I proposed that recklessness should be imported into the offence under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000? He said that to import recklessness would introduce great complexity, legal technicalities and difficulties to the situation. How would the Under-Secretary deal with that point in this context?

Mr. Hill: I hope to come on to those points and set out the Government's objections in the course of my remarks.

We prefer the Government amendments chiefly because, unlike the others, they draw a worthwhile distinction between a false application per se and deception attempted by an applicant whose previous registration has been cancelled or refused. We consider the latter more serious, and deserving of a higher maximum penalty.

Amendment No. 41 relates to the registration of number plate suppliers. It seeks to increase the level of the fine for failure to notify a change of particulars from a level 4 fine of £2,500 to a level 5 fine of £5,000. We believe that that lacks a sense of proportion. One must compare the various offences in the Bill and give each its due weight. Is a failure to notify the DVLA of a change of address as serious as failure to register altogether? We do not think so. Our view is that the two cannot be treated in the same way. To carry on a business while unregistered is to flout the core purpose of the legislation. It cannot be compared with a failure to keep the DVLA updated in every material detail.

Mr. Bercow: I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he is, no doubt inadvertently, giving the impression that the offence of failing to communicate a new address to the DVLA is somehow trifling. Will he, by contrast, accept that it would not be at all trifling if a change of business premises was not notified to the DVLA, so that, as far as that central authority was concerned, the registered salvage operator or registration plate supplier might just as well not be registered at all?

Mr. Hill: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes, but an element of intention must be taken into account in this context. A bona fide supplier has obviously gone through the registration process, thereby demonstrating his integrity and acceptability as a supplier, but he may inadvertently fall into the trap of failing to convey a change of address in due course. That is a problem—but although it is an offence, it is not deeply serious and certainly falls into the category of possible accident rather than malevolence. On those grounds, we think that a worthwhile distinction can be made in the degree of seriousness of the offence. I am sure that we can return to those matters in due course.

Like amendment No. 41, amendment No. 42 treats an offence more gravely than is warranted. The offence under clause 27 is designed to deal with the practice of selling number plates where the characters are so arranged as to make them resemble a personal name or other word that might mean something to the owner.

The Government want to stop that practice, as it can make it difficult for cameras and witnesses to read number plates. That is already an offence, punishable by a level 3 fine of £1,000. However, we do not believe that selling a plate with the numbers "1" and "3" placed close together to look like a "B" is as serious as failure to register as a registration plate supplier, which, of course, attracts a level 5 fine.

In the light of those reasonable objections, I hope that the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) will feel able to withdraw the amendments.

Mr. Heald: My question was obviously quite difficult as the Under-Secretary completely failed to address it, despite saying that he would do so.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on the way in which he has taken up the issue and brought it to a conclusion—which, even if it is not not an entirely satisfactory one, is miles better than what preceded it. My hon. Friend identified the serious risk of people working illegally as motor salvage operators trying to obtain registration by giving false details. In almost every walk of crime, whenever there is an opportunity to make money by using false particulars to obtain the imprimatur of the state—the necessary licences or documentation—there are always cases of false representation. That is true in every field of crime; for example, the use of false identities to claim benefits or for the abuse of credit cards. It is surprising that the Government failed to identify that risk.

If the offence had not been created, gangs would have tried to obtain several registrations using false materials and representations. They would have been able to enter the system; they would have been seen as clean operators and would have been able to salvage vehicles, break them up and sell the parts. My hon. Friend has done an invaluable service; the amendments should indeed be known as the Buckingham amendments. The whole House owes my hon. Friend a debt, and I was pleased that the Government were able to acknowledge that.

In Committee, the Under-Secretary was rather shocked when that point was made. He said:

"Although I shall resist the new clause, I shall resist it in an extremely qualified fashion."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 9 January 2001; c. 66.]

He was obviously in retreat before the logic of my hon. Friend. However, that is no bad thing; it is good for Ministers to retreat when good points are made. They can then make better proposals on Report. The Minister of State, Home Office will be doing a good deal of that when we consider the Criminal Justice and Police Bill in Committee next week.

The creation of an offence of knowingly or recklessly making a false statement in registering as a motor salvage operator, instead of the provision that we proposed—that it should be an offence when a false application is made knowingly—begs the question: why do the Government believe that the words "knowingly or recklessly" are the way to go?

There is a problem with the use of the word "recklessness", as the Minister of State pointed out to me during our discussions on the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, which included an offence of unlawfully intercepting a communication. Such an offence could only be committed by the authorities—or was most likely to be. I suggested that, if the authorities were to use their powers and facilities to intercept the communications of private citizens, it was wrong if the offence was only that they did so knowingly because, as servants of the state, they should be guilty if they acted recklessly.

6.15 pm

The forces of the state—the authorities—in this country do an excellent job, but we do not want them to be able to act recklessly without redress. The Minister replied that we could not make such a provision because the law on recklessness is so complex that no one really understands it, and the Court of Appeal had made contradictory decisions on it. I ventured to suggest that the definition of "recklessness" was a simple matter. If there is a clearly identifiable risk that damage would result from particular conduct and if, having recognised that risk, people engage in that conduct, they are reckless. However, the Minister said that that was not the only definition and cited various cases. I was so concerned at the Minister's reply that I asked that the Attorney-General attend our Committee to give us a proper legal definition. I did not agree with the Minister.

What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. People who may be brought before the courts for making a false statement "recklessly" to register as motor salvage operators may simply be innocent business men who made their statement in ignorance. They may not have understood what was needed on the form. They may be very good at salvaging cars, but not much good at paperwork.

If there is a problem with the law on recklessness, it is wrong that we cannot have recklessness in an offence that applies to the state and its servants—the authorities—because it is far too difficult and complicated and nobody will understand it, but that it can apply to a man running a small business. Such businesses may involve breaking up vehicles—occasionally for spare parts. The hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) knows such small businesses only too well from his days in Southwark—I do not suggest that he ever took his taxi to them.

Is it right that an ordinary business man, with a small business, should be put at risk of being found guilty of acting recklessly, when the real mischief that we want to attack is committed by the fraudster? We want to go after people who knowingly make false statements when registering as motor salvage operators. It was worrying that the Under-Secretary could not give me a ready reply to my question, because he drafted the provisions. There is clearly a significant difference between our suggestions in Committee and his proposals: it is the word "recklessness". If that word has been inserted without the hon. Gentleman's knowledge—or if he has not even thought about it—that really is a poor do. I hope that he will reflect on the matter. Perhaps during the debate he will recall why he thought that the word "recklessness" offered the way forward.

Our amendment No. 37 provides for an offence of "knowingly" making a false application. That is the basis on which we should proceed. Government amendment No. 4 provides for the offence of recklessly or knowingly making a false statement as to the registration of a number plate supplier. Again, I make the same point that I made about the earlier provision: there is an offence not merely in respect of "knowingly" but in respect of "recklessly" making a false statement.

Government amendment No. 4 includes proposed new subsection (2B), under which no application can be made for up to five years if the person has been banned from registering as a result of a conviction for making a false statement to apply. That is sensible; it is right that fraudsters should be banned, but is it fair to ban someone who has acted recklessly? Clearly, such a ban is fair enough if someone has behaved dishonestly, and knowingly so, but recklessness is a borderline issue and the Minister may feel that the provision presents dangers for small business men.

[Mr. Heald]

Government amendment No. 5 is technical and Government amendment No. 6 is consequential. Government amendment No. 7 provides that if a person has been convicted of making a false application, he can be removed from the register and a prohibition will apply. We have no problem with that. Amendment No. 40, which we tabled, would make it an offence to submit a false application to register as a number plate supplier. Again, it includes the word "knowingly".

We suggest that a level 5 fine should be imposed for the offence of failing to notify changes in information on the register. The Under-Secretary dismissed that suggestion, saying that there is a great difference between not notifying a change in circumstances and making a false statement at the outset. However, my experience, as a Minister with responsibility for benefit fraud, was that people would often make a genuine claim initially, but their circumstances would change and they would not tell the authorities. That was a big problem. In a sense, such fraud was almost a crime of omission, although dishonesty and guilt were involved. People often find it easier to mislead the authorities by not doing what they have a duty to do than by deliberately setting out to lie. The same applies to these provisions.

If a motor salvage operator begins perfectly satisfactorily, tells no lies and has a good business, but that business goes badly wrong, he may be tempted to make changes to the business that may lead it into the black market and to become involved in the activities that the Government want to curtail. In those circumstances, not giving notification of a change of address could be a crucial indicator of the fact that that operator is operating dishonestly and is misleading the authorities. It is often easier to detect crimes in which people have to tell the authorities something and lie than those in which they do not have to tell them anything. It is therefore important to impose a fairly tough penalty in such cases to dissuade those who may be tempted to fail to give the information to which the authorities are entitled. I ask the Under-Secretary to respond to that important issue.

Government amendment No. 15 will add the concept of guilty knowledge to the offence of selling a counterfeit registration plate. Again, it states that someone must know, or be reckless about the fact that, something is not a true plate. It is good that that will no longer be an absolute offence and that the Minister is prepared to introduce the mental element or the golden thread to which I have referred—but not too often because the Minister of State hates lawyers and does not like to be reminded too much about the country's legal history. I am not sure why that is so, because if the Minister of State ever becomes Prime Minister, he will look with delight on the country's history and think himself part of a great chain of historical events. He might think that our legal system is rather good; it is one of the things for which this country is most prized. Our common law is recognised internationally as one of the things that we have given to the world and our system of justice is well respected across the Commonwealth and half the world. Perhaps it is not the law but the lawyers at which he aims his attack.

It is good that the golden thread of knowledge and the mental element of crime will be introduced under Government amendment No. 15, but the Under-Secretary should explain the use of the term "recklessness". Why has that complicated concept been introduced, given that the Minister of State has told us that it is almost impossible to understand?

Amendment No. 42 would increase from level 4 to level 5 the penalty for selling a counterfeit plate. Such matters depend on whether people believe that selling a counterfeit plate is a serious crime. On Second Reading, we were told that it was important, that it fuelled crime and that it should be stamped out. I agree with that; everyone who hears media reports of criminals who steal cars and fit counterfeit plates to them knows that it is a way in which they mask their identity. If that is crucial to the commission of crime, surely selling such a plate is an important matter for which a substantial sentence should be imposed.

With the best will in the world, we have to recognise that those who commit such an offence do so for money. It is a commercial offence, so a £2,000 fine is surely too low. If this is a commercial exercise designed to stop people committing the offence, it seems wrong to set the penalty at such a low level. I hope that the Under-Secretary is prepared to reply to those points. Perhaps he will tell us his detailed views on the law of recklessness. If not, perhaps the Attorney- General will tell us what he thinks later.

Mr. Fabricant: I, too, rise to support amendments Nos. 37, 40, 41 and 42, tabled by my hon. Friends. As I said during the debate on the programme motion, I find it extraordinary that the provisions contained in new clause 1 were left out of the Bill. Many hon. Members know that I am pro-American. Being so pro-American, I think that they should be called not the Buckingham amendments but the Bercow amendments because that is what they would be called in the United States and it would be in recognition of the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) discovered this lacuna in the Bill. It is a truly amazing gap.

The Bill is primarily intended to enable the registration of licence plate suppliers and motor salvage operators, but there was no provision imposing sanctions on those who deliberately provide false information when registering. That extraordinary omission clearly demonstrates the need for scrutiny—and, indeed, the need for the House—so it ill behoves the Government deliberately to limit the time available for such scrutiny.

In the previous Session, the Utilities Bill was cut in half, but the Government propose additions to this Bill. I suppose that we could argue that we at least have a listening Government because, now that the Opposition have had time to identify gaps in the legislation, they now suggest the inclusion of the missing provisions. I am not convinced that the Bill does not contain other, similar lacunae. Of course, the Under-Secretary cannot guarantee us that no other lacunae exist because there has been insufficient time to deal with such issues.

I want to speak to Government amendment No. 15. The Under-Secretary wondered whether it was trivial for the numbers 1 and 3 to be put together to make the letter B. My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) has already asked whether the £2,000 fine is sufficient to deter criminals from altering number plates, given that such crimes often involve large sums. This morning I met Sir John Stevens, the London police commissioner, who said that people under the age of 17

commit about 70 per cent. of crime in London—a sobering statistic. Nevertheless major crime is committed to obtain big money. I hardly think that a fine of £2,000 is an adequate deterrent.

6.30 pm

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that his proposition is supported by the Government's own advocacy for the Bill on Second Reading? They made it clear that the measures were designed to tackle car crime in and of itself, not only because of the damage that it does and the emotional scars that it can cause but because it is the gateway to the commission of more serious offences, including drug trafficking and terrorism.

Mr. Fabricant: As ever, my hon. Friend is completely correct. He leads me on to a fresh point. The police are beginning to use interesting new technology in their fight against crime. I welcome the use of the automatic licence plate recognition equipment, which is already used at some of our ports. I hope that it will also be introduced on major trunk roads. The equipment is made up of television cameras that are linked to computers that can recognise and read the licence plates of cars as they move by. If a car is stolen or if the police need to survey it for any reason, the computer will immediately flag up its existence and draw it to the attention of the relevant authorities.

I was about to intervene on the Under-Secretary when he concluded his remarks. I believe that he said he did not think it was too serious a crime to alter a licence plate by putting a "1" and a "3" together to look like a "B" or to use italic instead of standard script, even though to do so would contravene existing road traffic and other Acts. What would be the effect on the new equipment if plates were altered in that way? Surely, if a police officer were trying to detect the whereabouts of a stolen vehicle or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham suggests, one containing drugs and a "1" and a "3" were together on its licence plate, is it not possible that the equipment might see that as a "B" and not highlight to the relevant authorities the fact that the vehicle had just moved by or entered the country? At present, the equipment just recognises UK licence plates, but it will shortly recognise those from other countries.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Does the hon. Gentleman approve or disapprove of people who amend their licence plates in the way that he has described?

Mr. Fabricant: I hope that I made myself clear. However, if I have not done so, I make it absolutely clear now that I disapprove of such conduct. I regret the fact that the Under-Secretary finished his speech before I could intervene, but I got the impression that he was making light of the fact that people could amend their licence plates to make them more attractive. I am sure that he will clarify that when he winds up this debate. For example, if I had the licence plate "FA 13", would I be tempted to change it to "FAB"? I think not. Unlike the late lamented Gerald Nabarro, I have no desire to have a series of vehicles with the licence plates, "NAB 1", "NAB 2" and "NAB 3", or even "FAB 1", "FAB 2" and "FAB 3".

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Or "FAB FM".

Mr. Fabricant: Or "FAB FM", as the Minister suggests, referring to a non-existent radio station with which he thinks I was involved some years ago.

This is a serious matter. If one changes a licence plate to such a degree that a police officer cannot recognise it either with the naked eye or automatic equipment and thus is unable to follow the vehicle or stop it if it is stolen, surely that negates the whole point of having plates in the first place. Does the Under-Secretary not think that he was being reckless in suggesting that such an offence would not be as serious as some of the others in the Bill?

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Before my hon. Friend moves on from the issue of automatic licence plate recognition, will he tell us whether he shares the concerns that I and other hon. Members have about the misuse of such technology and the civil liberties implications? Does he not consider it possible that the existence of such technology might make it more likely that people will wish to change their licence plate numbers even if they are not guilty of a crime?

Mr. Fabricant: If people were to change their licence plates, they would be guilty of a crime. I shall not go into great detail on that question, because that would be out of order, but I merely say that I do not regard the use of the equipment as an invasion of civil liberties. However, I accept that some people will argue that it is another example of big brother.

However, one could argue that if one had a police officer on every street corner—oh, I dream about that nightly for Lichfield, but it will not come about.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fabricant: I shall give way to the Minister, who tried engagingly to intervene on me in the debate on the ten-minute Bill. I realise that he is a relatively new boy and did not know that one cannot intervene in such a debate. I promised that I would give way to him at a suitable juncture; I suspect this is the point.

Mr. Clarke: I was almost out of order earlier, but the hon. Gentleman helped me. However, I wish to point out that there was a useful Adjournment debate this morning with the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) on the issue of police numbers in Staffordshire. We were all disappointed that the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) could not attend to discuss his views in detail in the appropriate forum.

Mr. Fabricant: I am glad that the Minister has raised that point, because I can now put on record where I was this morning.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The House is mainly concerned by the fact that the hon. Gentleman is here now, and should be addressing the new clause that is before us.

Mr. Fabricant: Of course I will abide by your instructions, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, if I had been

[Mr. Fabricant]

able to attend the debate, I would have been there. I was with the Staffordshire Regiment, but I cannot say any more because that would be out of order. It was an equally important event to do with my constituency of Lichfield, but I was torn because I wanted to attend that debate.

To answer the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady), I do not believe that the use of the equipment is an invasion of civil liberties. I regard the use of extra police officers or new technology to apprehend criminals as protection for all law-abiding people. It helps to protect innocent, decent, honourable people—and, by definition, we are all honourable in this House—so it is a good thing.

My hon. Friend is a philosopher. Like Topol in "Fiddler on the Roof", he always see two sides to an argument. He has an Hasidic viewpoint—on the one hand this, on the other hand that—and he is right because he is truly a statesman. On balance, I would prefer it for the new technology to be rolled out. I accept that the civil liberties lobby will say that it is an example of big brother but, if big brother is there to protect me, I am happy. Big brother will be a good brother provided that the Bill is properly scrutinised by the House. That is why I get so upset when Bills are rushed through under timetable motions.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, because it enables me to pick him up on an important theme in the debate. Does he not agree that one of the reasons—a reason on which I did not dilate in the debate on the programme motion—for us to have more time thoroughly to consider the contents of the Bill is that several of its key provisions, amendments and new clauses are not ultimately a matter of party politics? They involve matters of discretion and judgment by individual Members in different parties. There is no uniformity of view on some of the issues, so does my hon. Friend accept that we need a—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We cannot rehearse the arguments that we heard in the debate on the programme motion. There are many groups of amendments to cover and other hon. Members may want to contribute to the debate. I should be grateful if that were borne in mind.

Mr. Fabricant: My final point relates to recklessness. My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire said that what was sauce for the goose should be sauce for the gander when we compare the Bill with other legislation. However, I have a specific issue to raise.

New clause 1(1)(b) states that someone who

"recklessly makes a statement which is false in a material particular, shall be guilty of an offence".

How will it be possible to prove in a court of law that a statement was made recklessly? The principle of English common law, about which my hon. Friend waxed so lyrically and accurately, is the gift that we have given the world. Under common law, it is necessary to prove a guilty mind—there must be mens rea. How will we be able to get a conviction under new clause 1(1)(b)? How will people be able to prove that a statement was made recklessly rather than by pure accident or out of innocence? How can we get into the mind of the individual? That is my criticism of the word "recklessly".

I suspect that the Minister used the same argument when we discussed the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, to which my hon. Friend referred.

Mr. Bercow: The word "reckless" was not mentioned in the Standing Committee's deliberations. Will my hon. Friend confirm that he is describing the distinction between inadvertent neglect and wilful contempt? It is important that that be clarified.

Mr. Fabricant: As ever, my hon. Friend uses words carefully. The courts would try to differentiate in that way, but it would be difficult for them to do so because English law is about evidence. If a crime has been committed, the evidence has to be provided in court so that a magistrate or jury believes that the person has committed the crime. There must be a guilty mind; there must be mens rea. How will we get into the mind of the individual to show that he was reckless rather than in contempt of the law? It will be impossible to prove that.

The Bill was hastily presented, which gave rise to the massive lacuna that the Government are attempting to fill with new clause 1. I suspect that the new clause has also been hastily tabled. It contains a series of lacunae, or at least loopholes, that will keep lawyers, who are so hated by the Minister, in business for many a year. It is sad that, since 1997, Bills have been hastily prepared and, although they have been filled with good intentions, they have also been filled with giant loopholes. Either they contain loopholes that keep lawyers in business for years or, as happened with the Utilities Act 2000, great chunks are removed before they reach the statute book.

Can the Under-Secretary assure me that the new clause has not been recklessly compiled? Can he assure me that there will be convictions under new clause 1(1)(b)? Can he assure me that, if licence plates are changed—for example, when the numbers 1 and 3 are put together to make the letter B—so that police officers and the vehicle licence plate recognition equipment cannot read them correctly, that is not an unimportant matter? If so, why will a level 5 penalty not be applied?

6.45 pm

Mr. Hill: The exchanges to which we have just been treated demonstrate that there is not much difference between the Government and the official Opposition. I shall attempt to deal with the points that have been raised.

The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) mentioned the level of fines if a person fails to notify a change of address. The Government are responding to most people's perception that such a failure, which is more likely to be an unwitting action, is not as serious as providing false information.

Mr. Heald: If the Under-Secretary wants to table a manuscript amendment that contains the word "knowingly", I shall be more than happy to consider it.

Mr. Hill: It is with great enthusiasm that I address the vexed issue of recklessness and knowingness. I shall have several stabs at answering the questions. Let me set out my stall. It is vital that the application process generates true and accurate information. No doubt we would all agree on that. Clause 10 deals with accuracy; the new clause deals with true information. Why should people

who are reckless and do not care whether the information that they submit is true be allowed to escape? That must be discouraged. The conscientious who make a mistake are unlikely to be reckless.

Mr. Heald: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: No, I am sure the hon. Gentleman will have another opportunity to return to the issue of recklessness.

The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) asked how we can get a conviction on the grounds of recklessness. Bearing in mind the amount of time that he took to make his point, I am extremely glad that he is not my lawyer.

It is for the judicial process—the courts—to decide whether an act was reckless. It is incumbent on the prosecution to show that the accused took no steps to verify the information. The prosecution would have to ask whether a reasonable person knew that his statement was false. The fact is that there are many reckless offences in statute. The Criminal Damage Act 1971 contains such offences and successful prosecutions take place under it.

Mr. Heald: I made those arguments when we discussed unlawful interceptions by the state authorities in our debates on the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000. When we dealt with the important matter of the state committing offences, the Minister told me that it was impossible to have the offence of recklessness when the arrogant use of power was the issue. He said that the subject was so complicated that the courts could not understand it and that there were different interpretations of the law. Now, why should the poor old garagiste in Peckham, Southwark, Eltham or north Hertfordshire have to wrestle with the concept of recklessness if it is not good enough for the Secret Intelligence Service and the authorities in Britain?

Mr. Hill: It is a matter of eternal regret to me that I was not a member of the Committee that considered that Bill and was therefore unable to listen to the hon. Gentleman at even greater length. We are dealing now with an entirely different Bill, and there is no comparison between the two measures.

I return to the issues of recklessness and knowingness, on which I was seeking to help the Opposition. At present, a person accused of knowingly committing an offence will escape conviction if he shows that he does not know because he does not care. The introduction of the concept of recklessness fills that gap, as it does in other legislation, and it differs from knowingness in that "knowingly" means that someone has subjective knowledge—he knows that he is making a false statement, rather than just not caring. That is a pretty clear distinction between concepts.

I shall have a final stab at explaining that difference to the Opposition. "Reckless" means not taking pains to ensure whether what is said is true. We want to deter that in the application process, where it is important to be accurate, and that is consistent with clause 10, where reckless failure to notify will also be an offence. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] It is perfectly clear to me from the acclaim that I am receiving from my hon. Friends that I have explained that distinction to the satisfaction of the majority party.

I propose then to proceed to the last issue of minor substance, the question of offences in connection with the supply of number plates, which was raised by the Opposition in their response to my opening remarks. As we have explained repeatedly during our many fascinating discussions on the subject, the issue that the Government are seeking to tackle is the abuse of the number plates supplied, which is the most serious problem.

It is not our purpose to criminalise the number plate supply industry. However, we wish to deter the practice of selling number plates with characters so arranged as to make them resemble a person's name. As I have said before, we think that a level 3 fine is just about appropriate in those circumstances, and we are pretty sure that the majority of the great British public—25 million of whom are motorists—would agree.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 7

UNFIED POWER FOR SECRETARY OF STATE TO FUND SPEED CAMERAS ETC

'.—(1) The Secretary of State may make payments in respect of the whole or any part of the expenditure of a public authority in relation to—

(a) the prevention or detection of offences to which subsection (2) applies; or

(b) any enforcement action or proceedings in respect of such offences or any alleged such offences.

(2) This subsection applies to offences under—

(a) section 16 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 which consist in contraventions of restrictions on the speed of vehicles imposed under section 14 of that Act;

(b) subsection (4) of section 17 of that Act which consist in contraventions of restrictions on the speed of vehicles imposed under that section;

(c) section 88(7) of that Act (temporary minimum speed limits);

(d) section 89(1) of that Act (speeding offences generally);

(e) section 36(1) of the Road Traffic Act 1988 which consist in the failure to comply with an indication given by a light signal that vehicular traffic is not to proceed.

(3) Payments under this section shall be made to—

(a) the public authority in respect of whose expenditure the payments are being made; or

(b) any other public authority for payment, in accordance with arrangements agreed with the Secretary of State, to, or on behalf of, the public authority in respect of whose expenditure the payments are being made.

(4) Payments under this section shall be paid at such times, in such manner and subject to such conditions as the Secretary of State may determine.

(5) In this section "public authority" means—

(a) any highway authority (within the meaning of the Highways Act 1980);

(b) any police authority established under section 3 of the Police Act 1996, the Metropolitan Police Authority or the Common Council of the City of London in its capacity as a police authority;

(c) any responsible authority (within the meaning of section 55 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997) or the Greater London Magistrates' Courts Authority; and

(d) any body or other person not falling within paragraphs (a) to (c) and so far as exercising functions of a public nature.'.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Hill: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: New clause *5—Abandoned vehicles: payments to local authorities—*

'2A. The Secretary of State may make payments to local authorities in respect of expenditure incurred by them in complying with the provisions of section 3(1) below, though such payments shall not exceed the amounts paid in fines in respect of offences under section 2(1)(a) above.'.

Government amendment No. 43.

Amendment No. 26, in clause 37, page 21, line 48, at end insert—

'(f) section 2 of that Act (dangerous driving);

(g) section 3 of that Act (careless, and inconsiderate, driving);

(h) section 4(1) and 4(2) of that Act (driving, or being in charge, when under influence of drink or drugs);

(i) section 5(1) of that Act (driving or being in charge of a motor vehicle with alcohol concentration above prescribed limit).'.

Government amendments Nos. 46 to 54.

Mr. Hill: Amendment No. 43 would remove clause 37. That will satisfy Opposition Members who tabled an amendment to remove the clause. I welcome their intention to withdraw that amendment. New clause 7 would take the place of clause 37, and I shall explain our reasons for tabling it.

Clause 37 establishes a power for the Lord Chancellor to make payments to the authorities responsible for funding magistrates courts to meet the full costs of administering speed and traffic light offences. However, the provision does not enable the Lord Chancellor to make payments to other bodies such as local authorities and the police, which can form partnerships to carry out the enforcement activities. The other bodies involved in the partnerships formed to fund camera placement and operation already have established financial arrangements with other Departments; for example, the police are of course funded principally from the Home Office.

When the Treasury took the decision to allow payments to be made directly from netted-off fine revenue in certain circumstances, it quite rightly placed on any proposals to do so several important criteria that had to be met before approval would be given to proceed. One of the criteria was to ensure that any scheme put in place did not result in increased bureaucracy. As a new Labour libertarian, I fully endorse that sentiment.

We are therefore left with a clear choice either to fund the various partners through several separate funding routes or to link them all up for these purposes by channelling the netted-off revenue through one Department. That is exactly how the current safety camera pilots are operating. The funds are channelled through the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions for distribution to lead authorities in each partnership, which in these cases is a local authority. That arrangement is allowed for the time being under the provisions of the Appropriation Acts, but that can only be a temporary measure. It clearly follows that to meet the Treasury criterion of keeping bureaucracy to a minimum, we must seek to continue the system that is working so effectively in the pilots.

Mr. Bob Russell: Will the Minister state categorically whether the new clause is a road safety, crash reduction measure or a revenue generator?

Mr. Hill: It goes without saying that this is a measure concerned with road safety and the prevention of road accidents. It could not be for any other purpose, and it would be grossly irresponsible and unfair of the hon. Gentleman to suggest otherwise.

Mr. Russell *rose—*

Mr. Hill: I am very fond of the hon. Gentleman, so of course I will give way again.

Mr. Russell: I welcome that clarification and reassurance. I was just observing that so far the words "road safety" and "accident reduction" have not passed the Minister's lips.

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for securing that clarification. I know very well of his excellent work in RoadPeace, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller). The hon. Gentleman is right to be concerned about these matters.

We had hoped to be able to sustain the pilot scheme arrangements within existing law, rules and conventions by allowing DETR to act as a paying agent for other Departments, but that has not proved to be possible.

Mr. Bercow: The Under-Secretary assures the House that in no sense is this a revenue-raising measure, but so far as my hon. Friends and I are concerned, this seems to be a case of "methinks he doth protest too much". Will the hon. Gentleman therefore confirm that in no one year would the receipts to the public fund exceed the expenditure on road safety that those funds would afford?

Mr. Hill: It would certainly be the Government's purpose to ensure that there was an appropriate balance of receipt and expenditure, but if the hon. Gentleman thinks about it, he will realise that it is not possible for any Minister, any Department or any Government to ensure that that is invariably the case. There is an intention that is fulfilled over time and in general terms, but it would be unrealistic for a Minister to offer the precise guarantee that the hon. Gentleman seeks.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman really is digging himself in deep. For the delectation and edification of the House I must repeat what he just said. He referred to an appropriate balance. That does not mean an equal balance. He referred to its achievement over time in general terms. I suggest that as a harbinger of good intent, it would be helpful if he could confirm that the equality between receipts and expenditure on road safety should have to be achieved within five years. Will he, as a junior but rising Minister, at least sign up to that commitment?

7 pm

Mr. Hill: Notwithstanding the hon. Gentleman's slightly improbable blandishments, I will not make the commitment that he is seeking—as with the foreign policy issues on which he tempted me earlier in our proceedings. I repeat the assurance that I gave to the distinguished hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell). The purpose of the provisions before us is entirely to improve road safety and to reduce accidents. The Government's objective will be to ensure that there is a balance of expenditure with revenue, and these matters are subject to the auditing process. They are for the public record and for public demonstration.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): I fully accept what the Minister is saying about balancing budgets over time. That is an acceptable and sensible way forward. However, I am interested to know whether the hon. Gentleman can give us any idea from discussions in his Department of what is expected in terms of revenues from fines arising from the use of speed cameras being channelled into road safety measures. What is the Department's perception of the increased funding from the use of speed cameras being used to increase road safety measures? Does the hon. Gentleman have a programme in mind? By how much will we be able to extend the use of speed cameras from the pilot schemes, which have clearly been successful?

Mr. Hill: The purpose of the proposed legislation is to enable the programme to be rolled out nationally on the basis of eight successful pilot schemes. In due course, we are anticipating a significant increase in the resource that will be available to introduce speed cameras. I hope that that is of some assurance to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): Given the intervention of the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), I wish there to be no misunderstanding. My hon. Friend has made it clear that the money is for road safety purposes. It is therefore axiomatic that the money must be spent on road safety purposes. It would be clear to any auditor and to any highway authority that the use of the money for any other purpose would be against the will of the House.

Mr. Hill: My hon. Friend is right. He puts the matter most succinctly, and I am grateful for his help.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. It is always a pleasure to joust with him.

We do not quite know the purpose of the intervention of the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), because his purpose is rarely clear. However, the effect of his rather foolish intervention, whether he intended it or not, was to tie the Minister down. Will the Minister confirm that the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston said that the money must effectively be ring-fenced—*[Interruption.]* Yes, the hon. Gentleman did. If the Minister agrees that the money can be spent only on road safety measures, which means in practice that it will be ring fenced, why is he not prepared to commit himself to the proposition that that is exactly and exclusively how it will be spent, measured over a five-year period? It is a simple challenge. Why can he not rise to it?

Mr. Hill: The hon. Gentleman is not making an unreasonable proposition. On balance, over a five-year period, one would expect these matters to even out. I accept the general thrust of his observation but I am not in a position to say that there will be precise equality between revenue and expenditure at the end of a five-year period.

Mr. Bercow: Why?

Mr. Hill: However, that would be a desirable outcome to which the Government are certainly working.

I heard the hon. Gentleman, from a sedentary position, ask, "Why?" On the whole, the Government like to approach these matters in a slightly more considered way than responding to flashes of inspiration from Opposition Members. The hon. Gentleman has had not a bad idea, and I have tried to be responsive to the broad thrust of his observation. However, he cannot expect me to make policy on the hoof, even though we are impressed by the ideas that flow from him in such a fecund fashion.

I return to the point that I was evidently so laboriously trying to make. I was saying that we had hoped to make the provision within existing conventions by allowing the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to act as a paying agent for other Government Departments. That has not proved to be possible. Therefore, to establish a clear power for DETR to make payments on a permanent basis, new clause 7 introduces a different arrangement from that set out in clause 37.

New clause 7 is purely a mechanism to allow the funds to be channelled efficiently to any future partnerships through the one Department. In so doing, it allows the funding mechanism for speed limit and traffic signal enforcement to be established as simply and effectively as possible. I stress that the scope of the clause is limited entirely to funding enforcement activity that is associated only with speed limit and traffic signal violations.

Mr. Chidgey: Further to my previous intervention, the Minister will accept that I am generally supportive of the ambitions of the clause. However, I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman provided a little more detail in relation to the national programme that will be funded as he has described. What specific difference will it make to existing plans within the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to extend the programme of speed cameras? Will the hon. Gentleman indicate what amount of revenue—or funding, if he so wishes—will be raised in addition to what would otherwise have been budgeted for in the Department's capital programme? What impact does the Minister think the scheme will have?

Mr. Hill: First, the Government take these matters step by step. We implement experimental or pilot schemes to ascertain whether ideas are sustainable. In this instance, given the success of the pilot schemes they evidently are. Secondly, we roll out the legislation so that the measures can be applied nationally, recognising that that is likely to produce desirable results.

Within the framework that we are debating, we shall proceed in conjunction with local authorities to work out a detailed scheme of support and allocation of resource so that there can be a significant change in local arrangements. I hope that that satisfies the hon. Gentleman. It seems it does, given his assent from a sedentary position.

[Mr. Hill]

If clause 37 is to be replaced, there need to be some minor amendments to the schedule to reflect that. These can be seen in amendments Nos. 46 to 54.

We have debated both on Second Reading and in Committee the principle of the netting-off procedure for safety camera operation. I believe I am right in saying that there is a consensus that it is right and sensible, in the context of improving road safety and reducing the risk of accidents, to press ahead to make netting-off for speed and traffic signal enforcement available nationally. Indeed, in tabling amendment No. 26 to expand the netting-off procedure to cover careless, dangerous and drink or drug driving, the hon. Members for Lichfield, for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) and for Colchester clearly demonstrate that general support for this road safety measure is evident in the House.

I fully recognise that the proposed Opposition amendment is well intentioned, but in this context it is not appropriate, for reasons that I shall set out. The netting-off process is to be applied only to specific fixed-penalty offences. It was decided at the outset that the scheme would be limited to fixed-penalty offences, and the pilot schemes are proceeding on that basis. Some of the receipts from the penalties will be invested in greater enforcement activity, which will continue to put road safety first.

However, more complex cases outside the fixed-penalty procedure are punishable by fine or imprisonment, or both. We maintain strongly that those cases are not to be included because courts may appear vulnerable to the charge that penalties were set in individual cases for reasons of wider monetary pressures, rather than in the interests of justice and the income of the individual. The amendment includes some serious offences that can be dealt with only by court appearance and, following conviction, would result in mandatory disqualification and perhaps even a custodial sentence. Fixed penalties are certainly not appropriate for those offences.

The House will be aware that the Government are currently addressing the wider issue by conducting a review of penalties for the main road traffic offences, including drink and drug-driving, careless driving and dangerous driving. Its purpose is to consider whether the current maximum penalties remain appropriate, and to ensure that any proposed changes to penalties that we may wish to make are consistent within the whole sentencing framework.

For the reasons that I have given, it is right that the clause should be limited to netting off fixed-penalty revenue to fund speed and traffic light violation enforcement and is not suitable for expansion into other areas. I hope, therefore, that the hon. Member for Lichfield will be prepared to withdraw his amendment

I now turn to new clause 5, which was tabled by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and others, which is legally defective. It is headed,

"Abandoned Vehicles: payments to local authorities"

and its references to sections are unsourced and make no sense in the context of the Bill, clause 2 of which refers only to the registration of salvage operators. There is no "section 2(1)(a) above" as the amendment states. It is possible that those who tabled the amendment had in mind the Refuse Disposal (Amenity) Act 1978, which makes it an offence to abandon a vehicle in a public place and obliges the local authority to remove such vehicles in certain circumstances.

The amendment seeks to allow the Secretary of State to make payments to local authorities for the purpose of removing abandoned vehicles, provided that the payments do not exceed the value of fines imposed for abandoning them. That would be an additional resource for the collection of abandoned vehicles. Of course, we understand the extent of concern about abandoned vehicles, and agree that the problem must be tackled. In fact, it was raised on Second Reading and in Committee by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw). However, we do not agree that the amendment would provide the practical solution that it seeks. In particular, it does not take account of the work of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and the police.

Mr. Bob Russell: If that is not a practical way forward, will the Minister indicate what measures the Government have in mind to take action against that growing problem?

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I was coming on to set out those precise measures.

As I have said, we are keen to tackle the problem of abandoned vehicles, which are an eyesore and cause considerable concern to the public. They are also dangerous. I well remember a pupil at a Glasgow school at which my wife once taught who died after playing with an abandoned vehicle and dropping a lighted match into the petrol tank. There was an explosion and the child was killed. It is because of such cases that it is important to deal with the issue.

7.15 pm

We are watching closely a pilot scheme in Medway, with which my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford is involved and which is partly funded by the DVLA. The scheme was due to begin on 22 January, and I understand from my hon. Friend that it has already made a promising start. I rather think that we will hear more from him, should he catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In the mean time, I want to put on the record my tribute to my hon. Friend for his personal contribution to initiating that important scheme.

Abandoned vehicles are usually untaxed and, under the scheme, untaxed vehicles will be wheel-clamped by one of DVLA's contractors—Sureway—and, if they are not taxed within 24 hours, will be removed to one of two car pounds and disposed of after 35 days. The pilot is a multi-agency approach to the problem and, if successful, could be used in other areas. There will be no advance publicity associated with the scheme: the aim is to deliver a short, sharp shock to the owners of unlicensed vehicles and force them to relicense. A number of abandoned vehicles will also be caught in the net.

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): Will my hon. Friend clarify whether that scheme involves recouping the costs of disposing of those vehicles? The experience in my local authority, which is spending about £160,000 a year on the disposal of abandoned vehicles, is that, when the owners are approached, they say that they have sold the vehicle to a person in the pub or somewhere, but that he or she

has not come to pick it up. They are literally discarding their vehicles on the roadside and leaving it to others, through their council tax, to pay for their disposal. Unless a penalty is involved, that practice will continue.

Mr. Hill: My hon. Friend is right: the disposal of abandoned vehicles is enormously costly to local authorities—both those like my own authority of Lambeth which is almost adjacent to my hon. Friend's authority, and others nationally. The problem is enormously expensive and the Government are certainly looking at costs as we review the issue of abandoned vehicles—a matter in which I personally take a close interest as a Minister. My hon. Friend's observation is therefore taken very seriously.

To return briefly to the Medway pilot scheme, we hope its evaluation will provide us with solutions that we can introduce nationally, some of which may require legislative changes in their own right. In the light of his observation, may I tell my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) that it seems more sensible to consider all possible legislative changes as a whole in due course? In addition, on the horizon is the vehicles (end-of-life) directive which seeks to make provision for the collection and environmentally sound destruction, or recovery and re-use, of vehicles that have outlived their usefulness. We are currently looking at how best to implement the directive which will, we hope, tackle the problem that the amendment seeks to address. In the meantime, for the extremely cogent reasons that I have advanced, I trust that the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) will agree not to press his new clause.

Mr. Bercow: There has been a remarkable change of heart on the part of the Government. Of itself, that is not necessarily to be regretted or deplored, but the extent to which, at this relatively late stage in the consideration of the Bill, Ministers seem uncertain about the means by which to achieve their objective is scant reassurance to the rest of the House, the affected industries and, indeed, the wider public.

Despite the fact that the Minister must have been considerably embarrassed about that about-turn, he did his best to camouflage it and presented a difficult case with his usual vigour and alacrity. However, there is a big change on the Government's part. Previously, they thought that the arrangement was fine and, only 10 days or so ago, they were commending their planned intentions to the Standing Committee. Now, it seems, there has been a turf war, from which the Home Office—the lead Department dealing with the Bill—has, not surprisingly, emerged victorious. Nevertheless, there are genuine concerns about the Government's position on the proposal to finance a wide-scale roll-out of additional speed cameras.

The main concern that my hon. Friends and I have, which we explained in Committee and which was not convincingly answered, is that the proposal is far less a road safety measure than it is a tax-raising device. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) takes a different view. Not surprisingly, in view of past experience, he ended up a few moments ago disagreeing with himself, though he was probably unaware of it. That is a curious state of affairs. Hon. Members often disagree with each other across the House, and it is not entirely unprecedented for members of the same party to disagree with each other, but it is very strange for a Member of Parliament to disagree with himself, and it is even more curious—I dare go so far as to suggest that it is unprecedented—for an hon. Member unknowingly to disagree with himself. That, unfortunately, is the situation in which the hon. Gentleman finds himself.

Mr. Bob Russell: I seek clarification from the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). Will he support new clause 7 or will he divide the House?

Mr. Bercow: There are other matters on which there might be Divisions, and the hon. Gentleman, who has a natural and well-developed inquisitiveness, must await developments. I am not prepared to tell him now when we might have a vote. *[Interruption.]* No, I am not disagreeing with myself. I am simply telling the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) that I understand his curiosity, but I assure the hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) that I am not yet ready to satisfy the hon. Gentleman's curiosity.

As will become clear to hon. Members, my hon. Friends and I do not approve of new clause 7. We approve of new clause 5—not surprisingly, as it is ours. Let me be specific. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston had something of a tantrum a moment ago when I accused him of disagreeing with himself, and started insulting me from a sedentary position. I know that he has considerable knowledge of much legislation, and I respect that knowledge. However, people who are very knowledgeable can often be wrong-headed, and the hon. Gentleman is wrong-headed.

I shall explain why I accuse the hon. Gentleman of internal inconsistency and disagreement with himself. He asked the Minister in an intervention to confirm that all the proceeds of fines would have to be spent on road safety measures, for if that were not done, it would effectively defy the will of the House. In other words, any moneys raised would have to be spent on road safety measures. I assume that the hon. Gentleman was not being cynical. Whatever his other failings and merits, I have not accused him of being cynical. I assume that he was saying not just that money raised from fines would be spent only on road safety measures, but that all money raised from fines would be spent on road safety measures, and that it would not be appropriate, for example, to use the money to reduce interest charges that the Government might face. Not only could the money not be spent on another public policy, such as purchasing hospital equipment, but it could not be spent to satisfy another obligation, such as reducing a debt. All of it would have to be spent on road safety measures.

The hon. Gentleman seemed to be suggesting to the Minister—it was so clear that none could doubt or gainsay it—that the Government would ring-fence the funds. The Minister speedily responded and accepted that. He said yes, he thought that that was the intention. Thus the hon. Gentleman suggested ring-fencing, and the Minister took him up on it and said yes. I challenge the Minister to confirm that the ring-fencing would apply, if not in every year without fail—errors occur, and there can be a mismatch in one year or another—at least over the five-year period of a Parliament or, in view of the way in which the Government apparently intend to cut and run, over the expected four-year term of a Parliament.

[Mr. Bercow]

At that point, the predictable confidence and remarkable assurance that the Minister usually displays in the delivery of his arguments immediately deserted him. All of a sudden, he retreated into a combination of the evasive and the coy. Now, I am very fond of the Minister. After all, he was my constituent when I was a young councillor in the London borough of Lambeth some years ago. We used to chat on the bus on which he travelled home, so we have always had good relations. I have the highest regard both for his integrity and for his debating skills. However, when he gets into difficulty, he waffles. When he does not know the answer, he becomes evasive. When he is severely under pressure, he says to the House, "Oh, but I am just a junior Minister. This is not a matter for me. I obviously cannot commit my senior, distinguished and highly respected right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I will get into frightful difficulty if I do."

All that I was challenging the Minister to do was to confirm that, if the funds are to be ring-fenced, they will all be spent on road safety measures over a five-year period. All that I required from him was an answer in the affirmative or the negative. Instead, I got a circumlocutory evasion. That was not good enough.

Mr. Miller *rose—*

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston thinks that he is about to enlighten the House, so of course I give way to him.

Mr. Miller: I want to ask the hon. Gentleman a question. Will he put on record how much he estimates needs to be spent on road safety schemes in his constituency, and what the shortfall is between that and current Government expenditure plans?

Mr. Bercow: That is a fascinating challenge, but I shall be honest and tell the hon. Gentleman that off the top of my head I do not have the square root of a clue. If he would find it a stimulating and enjoyable experience to correspond on the subject, because there is a genuine public interest at stake or he wants to pursue an important debating point with me, I should be happy to correspond with him.

I accept that the hon. Gentleman makes a fair challenge. He is right that, off the top of my head, I do not know the answer. Like all right hon. and hon. Members, I receive regular requests for support for particular schemes, and I lobby vigorously on behalf of those that I think are in the public interest. I do not know what the figures are, but seriously, I would be happy to correspond with the hon. Gentleman. Moreover, I accept the thinking underlying his intervention: that much work needs to be done to improve road safety.

What I found in Committee, as my hon. Friends the Members for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) and—if she were present, which sadly she is not—for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) would testify, was one of those rare but striking occasions on which not only did Government and Opposition Members disagree about speed cameras, but there was almost blank incomprehension of each other's position. It is certainly fair to say that of the Government's attitude to us. The Government seemed to think that using fines for the purpose of the massive roll-out of speed cameras would be a thoroughly good thing, that it would obviously be effective, and that only the most bizarre specimen could possible oppose it.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston nods to confirm that. *[Interruption.]* He rather impolitely spoils his point by saying from a sedentary position that the odd individual whom he has in mind is none other than yours truly. The trouble with that point is that it would apply if I were speaking only for myself, but, as I hope he will accept, I am speaking on behalf of the Opposition.

We believe that there is a degree of disingenuousness in the Government's plans, because they are not prepared to pledge that all the funds will be spent on road safety measures, and that the Government are in error in distorting by over-emphasis. They exaggerate the significance of speed, important consideration though it is, and the cost-effectiveness of a large-scale roll-out of additional speed cameras, as against various other causes of road accidents and possible means by which to address those problems.

Mr. Bob Russell: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as road safety is in need of major investment across the country, any revenues generated by speed camera fines should be in addition to what is provided by the Exchequer, not a replacement for it?

Mr. Bercow: Liberal-Conservative alliances are rare in this Parliament, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I am grateful to him for providing ballast to my argument. He is right to make that point, and he probably would not have to do so if the Government had confirmed more explicitly that all the money would be spent on road safety, and that that money would be in addition to, not instead of, other moneys. I think that the hon. Gentleman is hinting, in his understated and polite fashion—and, in my slightly less understated and polite fashion, I am happy to take up the hint—that the Government have an appalling record on so-called additionality.

7.30 pm

I know that you are familiar with the concept of additionality, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I have heard you expatiate on it in relation to Suffolk matters. The concept relates to whether Government spending is additional to, or a substitute for, what would otherwise be spent. Ordinarily, such argument arises in the context of lottery funding, but I shall not animadvert on that subject now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as you would probably get cross if I did so. I would not want that to happen as we approach the dinner hour of some hon. Members.

None the less, the hon. Member for Colchester made a fair point. Will the Under-Secretary confirm that the funds are additional to any other funds that might be spent? That is a fair challenge. *[Interruption.]* I wish that I could have heard the sedentary observation made by the Minister of State, Home Office, as I might have been tempted to reply.

Mr. Charles Clarke: My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary made an observation about dinner, and I remarked that the presence of only one Back-Bench Conservative Member suggested that the Opposition were

more keen to eat dinner than to participate in the debate in the manner that the hon. Gentleman described during consideration of the programme motion.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Minister, who can never resist an opportunity to point score—something that I never do, as he well knows. All that I can say in response is that I have no intention of going to dinner, although he would probably prefer me to do so. Apart from anything else, I am anxious to retain whatever element of a trim figure I currently possess. I am much more interested in discharging my obligations on Report and Third Reading than I am in consuming whatever the estimable House of Commons Refreshment Department has to offer.

As I have tried to emphasise, the Opposition are anxious that the Government are attaching a disproportionate significance to speed and that they are not attaching enough importance to other forms of dangerous driving. I know that the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston disagrees with that argument. His views will doubtless be informed or reinforced by his constituency experience, so I assure him that I am speaking not off the top of my head, but on the basis of representations made to me by my own constituents. I say in all sincerity that such representations have been made to a number of Opposition Members. I find it inconceivable that they have not been made to Labour Members also.

Perhaps the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston does not agree with the validity of my point. He might think that the only people who make such observations spend their time driving around at extraordinary speeds. However, a lot of people feel that many accidents are caused by dangerous and inconsiderate driving. It is not true to argue that such driving consists exclusively of excessive speed.

Mr. Miller: Does the hon. Gentleman accept the clear evidence to show that decreasing car speed from 30 mph to 20 mph reduces by 60 per cent. the injuries caused in crashes involving children?

Mr. Bercow: Yes. I have heard that point before and I know that it is correct. The hon. Gentleman's comments support the view that we should try to clamp down on speeding. I accept that view, but it does not mean that tackling speeding is the only method by which one should seek to improve road safety and reduce the number of accidents.

Mr. Miller: I agree.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman and I agree on that point and accept that speeding is not the only form of dangerous driving. We must therefore make a judgment on whether it is wise to use all the proceeds of fines for the exclusive purpose of extending dramatically the number of speed cameras throughout the United Kingdom. Although the spending of some money on that purpose might be justified, I am politely suggesting to the hon. Gentleman that I do not think it proportionate or wise to devote all of it—if, indeed, that is what the Government will do in practice.

Mr. Fabricant: On speeding, is my hon. Friend aware of the good work done by the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on bull bars? That work has my wholehearted support. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston spoke about statistics on the killing of children at speeds of 30 mph and 20 mph, but is my hon. Friend aware that a child who is hit at head level by a bull bar—we should bear in mind that bull bars are usually fitted for cosmetic purposes—can be killed by a vehicle travelling at only 4 mph?

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that observation. I was aware of the potential damage that bull bars can do, although I did not know about the important work done by the hon. Member for Newport, West. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for enlightening me on that point.

Conservative and Labour Members must agree to differ, both on the rationale for proposals to use fines for the funding of speed cameras and on their likely implementation. I refer to likely implementation as it is not clear whether the Government intend to stick in practice to the principles of ring fencing and total expenditure of fine proceeds on speed cameras, even though those are the principles that they appear to avow to the House.

We disagree not only about that point, but about payments to local authorities in respect of the obligation to secure the removal of abandoned vehicles. I should like to deal briefly with this matter, as the Minister of State and I disagreed about it in Committee. Indeed, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) also disagreed with me. I listened with respect to the hon. Gentleman's remarks, as I know that he is attending closely to the pilot scheme in his area, but I was fairly unfazed by his comments on a multi-agency approach. Although I always listen to him with interest, I thought that the frequent restating of the need for a multi-agency approach was a substitute for a policy rather than proof of one.

Mr. Heald: In due course.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend rightly indicates that the approach is still for the future. We are not even getting multi-agency co-operation now; it is to occur in the far-distant yonder. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford seems excited, so I shall give way to him.

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): I am not that excited, but I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. If he wants facts rather than proposals—that is my interpretation of his remarks—he should know about the pilot that has started in the Medway towns. It brings together the DVLA, the police, the fire brigade and the local authority. The Medway towns now have a minority Conservative-led administration, so no partisan point is at stake for me. However, he might like to know that, before the pilot began, on average, four abandoned and untaxed vehicles were removed each week from the streets of the Medway towns. Within the first week of the pilot, however, between 50 and 60 vehicles were removed. If he is talking about the proof of the pudding, he should know that the pilots are certainly working.

[Mr. Jonathan Shaw]

They are bringing together the powers of all the agencies by introducing the proposal that I described in Committee. I think that that proposal will work.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. He speaks as a constituency Member of Parliament and I do not seek to gainsay him, but I point out that it would not be right to prejudge the outcome at this early stage. He will accept that it is only on the conclusion of a pilot, when all the evidence has been considered and submitted—this applies also to the public and other inquiries of which we currently hear so much—that one can draw a conclusion about likely effects.

Mr. Shaw *rose—*

Mr. Bercow: I am sorry, but I shall not give way to the hon. Gentleman again. He knows that I am usually happy to do so, but I want to make progress.

I was a little disappointed that the Minister of State cavilled at our references. As he knows perfectly well from Standing Committee debates, the Opposition grounded our proposal on the requirements of the Refuse Disposal (Amenity) Act 1978. Under that Act, it is already an offence to abandon a vehicle in any place in the open air, and fines of up to £2,500 can be levied for such an offence.

A recent Royal Automobile Club survey found that between 150 and 200 cars were being abandoned each month in Islington alone. We must do something to tackle that problem. Although the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford was enthusiastic about how to deal with it in Medway or Chatham and Aylesford, he seemed baleful—nay, doleful—about the prospects of achieving progress elsewhere. Indeed, he suggested that pessimism was his middle name. He said that nothing could be done, that it was too much to expect, that the funds could not be provided, that local authorities would not deliver and that it was all very unfair. He suggested that we had to reconcile ourselves to huge numbers of abandoned vehicles while the Government engaged in a feeble display of collective hand-wringing.

Mr. Shaw: It is gracious of the hon. Gentleman to give way. He mentioned the Medway scheme earlier, and said that it was wrong to prejudge a pilot. Do not his proposals prejudge what local authorities will be able to collect? As I advised him in Committee, officers from Kent county council and Medway council, which are both Conservative authorities, advised me that 90 per cent. of abandoned vehicles were untraceable.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman underestimates the significance of financial constraint as a means of halting or retarding the progress of local authorities in tackling abandoned vehicles. Our proposal is based on our belief that assistance is required. The hon. Gentleman accuses me and the Opposition of anticipating or second-guessing the pilot scheme. I disagree, because the approach that he commends—the final results of which we will be made aware of—need not be incompatible with the simultaneous pursuit of the national policy that the Conservative Opposition recommend. Let a thousand lights burn; let a variety of approaches be adopted, and let the availability of resources that we recommend be a staple feature of the policy. Councils will then have the resources to discharge their obligations.

We developed the arguments clearly in Committee. I was sorry that the Minister and the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford were so unenthusiastic, because I believe that many people who live in areas where abandoned vehicles multiply by the day look to the Government to take decisive action. We recommend such action, but the Government resist it. We believe that we are right and that they are wrong.

Mr. Miller: New clause 7 grants a clear set of powers. They are welcome, especially to hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell), who have had the unfortunate responsibility of dealing with constituents who have lost a loved one through a road crash.

I have persistently and consistently nagged the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) and the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill) on the matters that we are discussing. They therefore know that I believe strongly that we need to do much more about road safety. I agree with the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) that much wider measures are required. I want local authorities to use more widely their powers to reduce speed limits in urban estates. I support better driver education and more rigorous enforcement of the regulations that govern the substances that people may have consumed. I have discussed with the British Medical Association a range of ethical matters that relate to drivers who are hospitalised after causing a crash. Many issues need to be tackled.

I am especially pleased that my hon. Friends on the Front Bench are present. They accept that Parliament and the Government have a responsibility for dealing with those matters, even though some aspects are not popular with the public. That is shown by the failure of the hon. Member for Buckingham to support new clause 7 although he supports the removal of clause 37. Of course, people who believe themselves to be good drivers—we all do when we are behind the wheel of a tonne of steel—are frustrated if they come across too many lights. However, they are there for the good reason that speed kills. The evidence is unequivocal; a reduction in speed causes a reduction in deaths and serious injury.

7.45 pm

As a result of much work, some of which I have mentioned, I want us to reach a position whereby the new clause becomes defunct. In an ideal world, we would educate our drivers, develop vehicle safety, road design and other aspects to the point where such technology became unnecessary. The hon. Member for Buckingham asked about the figures in five years and whether they would be balanced. I should like us to reach a point, through a wide range of measures, where the Government of the day—I am sure that my hon. Friends will remain on the Front Bench—can decide that the provision has achieved its objective and begin to devise other methods of using the resources.

The new clause has revenue implications, and I agree with the hon. Member for Buckingham that the provision should not create a revenue-raising power. That is why I

probed my hon. Friend the Minister through an amendment to ascertain whether any revenue would be used for road safety measures. My hon. Friend confirmed that in Committee and today.

Mr. Chidgey: The hon. Gentleman spoke of an ideal world in which road safety measures would be so successful that awful accidents would not happen. Has the hon. Gentleman considered that if the national programme for speed cameras is so successful that the number of offences is significantly reduced, the revenue will also be reduced? There is a law of diminishing returns. I am seriously worried about the ability to continue supporting the programme.

Mr. Miller: If we considered that argument in isolation, the hon. Gentleman would be right. However, when we take all aspects of death on the road into account he is wrong. It has been estimated that every death costs approximately £1 million. The hon. Member for Colchester agrees with that. We must consider the overall figure. The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) presents an intellectual challenge, but he must consider the issue in the round.

A point made by the hon. Member for Buckingham sums up the difference between the Government and the official Opposition on the issues that we are considering. In debates on previous clauses, the hon. Gentleman described victims of vehicle crimes as potentially suffering emotional scars. I do not disagree with his view, but I should like him to say that he understands and commits himself to dealing with those who suffer more serious emotional scars after losing loved ones.

Mr. Bercow *indicated assent.*

Mr. Miller: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman accepts that. It is vital for the House to take a lead with policies that are unpopular with the wider public. People do not like speed cameras, but when they consider the full facts, they take a different view. The Government have got the new clause exactly right. It will provide another opportunity for the relevant authorities to maintain the pressure on road safety. I hope that, with the many other matters that the House must continue to tackle, the provision will contribute to a reduction in the approximately 3,000 deaths that occur on our roads every year.

Mr. Bob Russell: It is an honour for me to follow the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), whose record on tackling the question of road deaths and crashes I admire. I concur with the points that he made.

I am disappointed that Conservative Members do not intend to force a Division on the new clause. Their language suggested that they were opposed to the new clause—or at least parts of it—yet they will not oppose it. In a way, I ought to be pleased that they will not, but there is nevertheless a conflict between their language and the lack of a Division.

I am also disappointed with the Government for not making it clear that all the moneys generated by the fines will be spent on road safety in the broadest sense. They are missing the opportunity to deal with road safety in the round by narrowing the proposal down to include only speed cameras. I suggest that speed bumps in the vicinity of a school are a more effective road safety device than speed cameras.

The Government could have done more to spell out whether the money generated by the provisions of the new clause will be available in addition to what is currently spent. That was not said, and when something is not said, a degree of uncertainty can emerge concerning the Government's intentions.

Will the Minister give us a definition of a speed camera? Two kinds of camera could be described as income generators, in that their use can result in a fine—fixed cameras, and hand-held radar equipment. Recently, in a village in Cambridgeshire, I saw a different type of speed camera, whose use does not result in an offending motorist being fined. About two years ago, on the M25 in Kent, I saw a speed camera which flashed up a sign to inform drivers that they were breaking the speed limit. In the case of the camera in Cambridgeshire, if a car—or any other vehicle—exceeded the 30 mph speed limit, a sign flashed up "30 mph".

I understand, however, that the downside to those devices is that some motorists have been tempted to drive at speed to activate them. I suggest that we need a hybrid speed camera. If the object of the exercise is to reduce road deaths and improve road safety, rather than to generate income, we should ensure that vehicles do not speed in the first place. We need speed cameras that warn drivers that they are exceeding the speed limit. If they continued to do so, they would deserve a hefty fine, because they would have progressed from a yellow card to a red card, to use football terminology.

I urge the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and those who are gifted in the design and development of such technology to ascertain whether it would be possible to develop a speed camera that was both a warning device and a means of imposing a penalty.

Mr. Chidgey: My hon. Friend stirs the imagination with his concepts of developing the technology of speed cameras. Has it occurred to him that making speed cameras more visible might provide a greater deterrent? Perhaps they might attract attention more readily—and instil some caution into the motorists approaching them—if they were bright, fluorescent yellow, to continue my hon. Friend's football analogy.

Mr. Russell: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's suggestion. Speed cameras are at present a nice grey, which blends into the street scene.

There is no excuse for motorists speeding. The object of the exercise must be to reduce the speed of vehicles and the number of accidents. We know that 3,500 people are killed on our roads each year, and that the number of people injured runs to hundreds of thousands. We also know the cost to the public purse of all those road accidents. Surely it makes sense to prevent the speeding and the accidents from happening in the first place.

I agree with hon. Members who said that there must be a culture change. I was not helped when I received a letter from an organisation called the Association of British Drivers bearing the sub-heading "Promoting effective road safety instead of the criminalisation of safe driving", which states:

"Unfortunately, the Speed Kills dogma . . . has the exact opposite effect".

[Mr. Russell]

I wonder what the Minister has to say about that.

I draw the House's attention to a worthy publication called *Essex Safety Cameras*, which contains the latest news about the Essex partnership and pilot schemes. If any hon. Members have not yet received a copy, I am sure that Essex county council, the Essex police or the Essex magistrates will be happy to provide them with one. The publication spells out the success of the pilot scheme, and if anyone needs to be convinced, they should read it.

The Association of British Drivers has a different view, however. It tells me:

"Councils such as Essex have a deliberate policy of preventing both drivers and professional highway engineers from deciding what is a safe speed to travel at. Instead, completely unqualified local residents can choose, based on nothing but their own prejudices."

I find such comments regrettable in the extreme.

Speed is a contributory factor in many road deaths and road accidents. We do not know precise figures. If the Bill results in just one death being prevented, it will be worth while. However, I believe that it will result in many deaths and serious accidents being prevented. I therefore urge the House to support it. I also ask the Minister to consider incorporating a proposal that every penny generated by the new system should be spent on road safety in the broadest sense, in addition to moneys already earmarked for the purpose.

Mr. Efford: I want briefly to raise one or two points with my hon. Friend the Minister. I accept all the arguments about road safety, but I want to concentrate on the issue of abandoned vehicles, which is dealt with in this group of clauses.

I accept my hon. Friend's point about the flaws that may exist in new clause 5, but I want to raise the point about the cost to local authorities of dealing with abandoned vehicles. My hon. Friend said that the Bill would restrict its focus to fixed penalties. Abandoned vehicles attract fixed penalties. While we are dealing with issues such as vehicle registration, it would not require a giant leap to add not only the issue of speeding but that of abandoning vehicles by the roadside.

8 pm

The scrap value of such vehicles has disappeared, which is why we are experiencing this problem. Disposing of a vehicle properly costs money so perhaps we should ask vehicle manufacturers to cover the cost of disposal. Furthermore, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency cannot pursue an individual who has disposed of a vehicle on the roadside. It may ask, "Is this your vehicle? You are the last registered owner," but that person may reply, "No, I have sold it to somebody else—it is no longer mine." Even though the vehicle may be parked outside that person's house, the DVLA can do nothing about it.

I have pursued the issue with my local authority, which assures me that that is the case, but it is surprising that the DVLA has no power to pursue the last registered owner if that person states that he no longer owns the vehicle, even though he may not have returned the log book with a new owner's name on it or taken some such step. There are regulations in place that would allow the DVLA to pursue such individuals, but we must place the responsibility to deregister a vehicle on the person disposing of it. We must impose strictures on the last owner, who should remain responsible for the vehicle—and, therefore, responsible for its disposal—until another person is registered as the owner.

Up and down the country, and in London in particular, council tax payers and local authorities face the huge expense involved in disposing of vehicles abandoned on the kerbside, and there are no comebacks on those who deny that they own such vehicles. There are more powers to deal with someone who disposes of litter the street than with someone who disposes of a vehicle. Abandoned vehicles can be extremely dangerous as well as inconvenient and costly to the public purse.

I want to put my views on record and stress to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary that there is an urgent need to take action. Abandoned vehicles represent a huge cost to the taxpayer and an enormous problem that will not go away unless we give powers to impose a cost on those who dispose of their vehicles in such a way.

Mr. Fabricant: Certain expressions come to mind when one thinks of the new Labour Government—hit the ground running, the people's Parliament, the people's dome and joined-up government, for example—but the new clause reveals not joined-up government, but turf wars between Ministers. Government amendment No. 43 will delete clause 37; it will be replaced by new clause 7. However, I shall speak to amendment No. 26, which stands in my name and, I am delighted and slightly embarrassed to say, that of the Liberal Democrats in the form of the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell), who served with us in Committee, and the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey), who, like me, is one of the seven chartered engineers who are Members of the House. It is always worth plugging that issue.

I listened to the argument presented by the Under-Secretary as to why the Government would not support my amendment, which and I must confess is a probing amendment that highlights certain issues that the British Motorcyclists Federation and I want to be known. As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) said, under clause 37 and new clause 7, income derived from speed and traffic light cameras will be ring-fenced for road safety. We approve of that. However, we have tabled our amendment for a simple reason.

Under proposed new subsection (5) clause 37, speed and traffic light cameras will deal with the speed of vehicles, contraventions of restrictions on the speed of vehicles, temporary minimum speed limits, speeding offences generally and traffic light signals; but perhaps that sends the wrong message as to the cause of road traffic accidents, and I shall refer to analysis carried out by a number of institutions.

Mr. Chidgey: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that time is short because of the programme motion. I shall not be making a speech so I am grateful to him for accepting my intervention. Does he recall that the Minister said that extending the offences relating to the amendment beyond speeding would introduce a distortion of justice in terms of the penalties inflicted? When he argues that moneys raised should be spread wider in terms

of road safety, will he address the point on which I sadly did not receive a satisfactory answer from the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port (Mr. Miller)?

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): Ellesmere Port and Neston.

Mr. Chidgey: Somebody from somewhere, from a sedentary position, reminds me not to forget Neston.

Does the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) accept that, notwithstanding the overall cost of accidents to the economy, as such schemes become more effective and motorists become more law abiding in respect of speed, revenues, by definition, will fall? Consequently, there will be less money for such schemes.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman shows an engineer's logic, if I may say so. *[Interruption.]* A chartered engineer's logic, absolutely.

Mr. Chidgey: A fellow, even.

Mr. Fabricant: A fellow of the Institution of Civil Engineers, I believe. Anyway, the hon. Gentleman displays sound logic. If the implementation of speed cameras is effective, there will be fewer offences and, therefore, less income. That makes one wonder whether there will be sufficient money for road safety programmes. One could go on with the argument and say that if there were no accidents one would not need a road safety programme, because the roads would be safe. I guess that everyone would like to achieve that.

To bring the House back to the amendment, I point out that considerable analysis has been undertaken of the characteristics of urban motor cycle accidents. They rarely have anything to do with speed. Keith Booth, of Modern Analytical Studies, Rochford, Essex, has done an analysis showing that 62 per cent. of accidents involving motor cycles, mopeds and scooters were primarily caused by other road user groups.

Mr. Bob Russell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fabricant: No, simply because we have to move on. There will be a vote at 8.30—

Mr. Heald: Oh!

Mr. Fabricant: I suspect that there will be a vote. We must at least end consideration on Report at 8.30 because of the draconian conditions laid down by the Government. I want to move on quickly to say that 50 per cent. of accidents involving motor cycles were caused by car drivers, 10 per cent. by pedestrians and fewer than 1 per cent. each by pedal cyclists, buses and coaches and heavy goods vehicles. Other causes—for example, animals running into the road—accounted for 3 per cent. while 35 per cent. were caused by motor cyclists, of whom 30 per cent. were on motor cycles and 5 per cent. on mopeds and scooters.

Any motor cyclist will say that motor cyclists have to drive carefully. A driver of a four-wheel vehicle will barely notice the small bounce as he goes over a pothole. However, the rider of a motor cycle would be likely to fall off, causing considerable injury and considerable expense to the rider.

It is often the car driver who causes the accident. He may be executing a quick turn from the left or right, and, not looking in the rear-view mirror, he may not notice the motor cyclist. Motor cyclists tend to be rather safe on the roads, and the fact that a large percentage of them are involved in road accidents should not lead people to believe that they are causing accidents. In fact, car drivers are the main cause of motor cycle accidents.

According to Whitaker, Hurt and others, and according to "Transport Statistics Great Britain 1998", motor cyclists emerge badly, by comparison with other drivers, from the DETR's annual survey of drivers' observance of speed limits. However, Whitaker estimated that the speed of impact of the motor cycle in 93 per cent. of the 425 accidents in his British sample was under 40 mph, and that in 75 per cent. it was under 30 mph. My point is that accidents involving motor cyclists do not necessarily involve speed.

Mr. Bob Russell: Some do.

Mr. Fabricant: That is true.

Mr. Pound: And most do not.

Mr. Fabricant: Indeed, most do not. I am not sure of the statistic that the hon. Gentleman is using, but we should not belittle him for saying that. An obsession with speed on its own is a distortion of reality—a distortion of the truth.

Perhaps the most interesting findings were those of Carsten and others in 1989 with regard to careless driving. They were that

> "At the top-high level, major driver/rider factors were 'failure to anticipate' . . . or unable to anticipate . . . and 'failure to yield at junctions'".

That is plain bad driving; it has nothing to do with speeding.

As I pointed out in an earlier intervention, and as was pointed out by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), the speed of a vehicle can of course kill, but the design of the vehicle will also affect its ability to kill. When a bull bar is fitted to a car or a four-wheel drive vehicle merely as a cosmetic device, that too can be a major contributory factor in the creation of a killing machine.

I am very conscious of the time. I am also very conscious of the draconian timetable set by the Government, and of the many other groups of new clauses and amendments that we wish to discuss. I shall therefore not press amendment No. 26 to a vote. I accept the Minister's point that if the issues raised in the amendment were included in the clause, pressure might be put on magistrates and juries to apply fines rather than disqualification or imprisonment. I hope, however, that the House has noted that speed is not the only issue, and that motor cyclists get rather a raw deal.

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) for not pressing his amendment to a vote. He made a well-informed speech, as did my hon. Friends the Members for Eltham (Mr. Efford) and

[Mr. Hill]

for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw). I am sure the House will agree, however, that we heard especially serious, expert and indeed creative contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) and the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell), both of whom are distinguished members of RoadPeace. I am extremely glad that we have now heard the speech from the hon. Member for Colchester of which he was cheated in Committee.

8.15 pm

In our earlier exchanges, I remarked with a degree of awe on the fecundity and fertility of the mind of the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). I fear, however, that fecundity and fertility have now fallen into fantasy. It is preposterous to describe the provisions that we propose as a tax. New clause 7 provides for the money raised by fines to be used by local authorities for traffic matters. There is no taxation here. After all, the fines go into the coffers of central Government now. The provision is not a tax, but a penalty for an offence. Drivers who keep to the speed limits will not be affected; only those who break the law will be penalised.

As with so many road traffic measures—for instance, those to enforce bus lanes—we are dealing with the encouragement of compliance. We expect the number of fixed-penalty offences to fall as more drivers reduce their speed and observe traffic light directions: the Eastleigh proposition, in other words. We believe that fewer fixed-penalty notices will be issued, with a corresponding decrease in the amount of receipts. Increased compliance will also reduce the number of casualties. This will mean lower costs for the motoring community, and safer roads.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): The Question is, that all remaining—I am sorry; we now come to new clause 2.

New Clause 2

IDENTIFYING MARKS ON VEHICLES

'It shall be an offence for any person

(a) to be in possession of a motor vehicle or motorcycle which does not show a valid identifying mark, or

(b) to deface, remove or otherwise alter or attempt to alter a valid vehicle identifying mark;

and for the purposes of this Act a valid identifying mark shall be those numbers, letters or combination thereof marked on or affixed to the vehicle by the original manufacturer for the purpose of identification and so registered in the registration documents issued by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency or such other agency as shall be responsible for such registration.'.—*[Mr. Chidgey.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Chidgey: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

I thought for a moment that I was about to be airbrushed out of the debate, cut off in my prime—and what a prime to be cut off in!

New clause 2 deals with the problem of identification of motor vehicles. Specifically, it proposes that it should be an offence for any person

"to be in possession of a motor vehicle or motorcycle which does not show a valid identifying mark",

or

"to deface, remove or otherwise alter or attempt to alter a valid vehicle identifying mark".

A key issue throughout the Bill's perambulations has been the traceability of stolen vehicles. Concern about that has been shared by members of all parties. In Committee, we had a number of detailed debates about how the Bill would help to strengthen the audit trail of vehicles and their parts, especially in the case of vehicles that were stolen and broken up so that their spare parts could be sold illegally. The new clause is intended to strengthen that audit trail by improving identification of vehicles: the onus would be placed on the purchaser of a vehicle to ensure that it bore an appropriate identification mark.

The new clause is particularly relevant to motor cycles. I am sure that Ministers will be familiar with—indeed, will have read avidly—a 1998 Home Office publication entitled "Nought to Nowhere in five Seconds—a guide to motorcycle security". It is not an election manifesto from any party that I would wish to name. *[Interruption.]* That publication—with which, as he has acknowledged from a sedentary position, the Minister is intimately familiar—stated that in the past three years, meaning from 1995 to 1998—

Mr. Charles Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the title of the work—"Nought to Nowhere in Five Seconds"—is an abbreviated history of the Liberal Democrats?

Mr. Chidgey: I really should not have given the Minister that opportunity, but my generosity clearly knows no bounds. He will know that when I quoted that title, in my own mind I was thinking of the official Opposition. However, unlike the Minister, I thought it better not to make such a low, churlish and cheap political point. Clearly the Minister does not share my good nature, or perhaps my politeness towards other hon. Members.

That now notorious document, which I am sure will be mentioned in other contexts in future, shows that, in the past three years, 54,800 motor cycles—worth £55 million—were stolen and not recovered. However, the Motorcycle Industry Association's statistics tell a different story. They show that 25,000 powered two-wheelers are stolen annually, which is considerably more than is indicated in the statistics that the Home Office seems to think are correct.

Moreover, of those 25,000 vehicles, only 14 per cent. are recovered. It is a very revealing statistic when one compares it with the stolen car recovery rate, which is 60 per cent. Clearly, motor cycle theft is a growing and disproportionately serious problem. Information would therefore seem to be far more important in that context, to identify motor cycles, than it is in identifying stolen cars.

I am pleased to say that, although motor cycle theft is increasing, there is phenomenal growth in motor cycle sales, which demonstrates that powered two-wheelers are considered a very attractive alternative to car. All of us who have an interest in transport policy and in reducing pollution and congestion should welcome that growth.

Last year, 175,000 new powered two-wheelers were sold in the United Kingdom, which was the highest motor cycle and powered moped annual sales figures for 18 years. Moreover, since 1999, sales of those vehicles have increased by 10 per cent; and they are more than four times greater than they were only five years ago.

The huge growth in motor cycle ownership demonstrates just how important it is to tackle that sphere of vehicle crime. Unfortunately, however, the issue has so far been neglected in our debates on the Bill. As such vehicles become more popular and more numerous on our roads, and as opportunities to steal them off our roads increase, their theft, illegal possession or illegal disposal must be a growing concern.

As the Home Office recognised in its now infamous document "Nought to Nowhere in Five Seconds", it takes no more than five seconds to steal a motorcycle—to load it into the back of a van or to drive it away. Motor cycles are highly vulnerable to theft. Moreover, because there is no left or right-hand bias on a motor cycle, they are very attractive throughout the world market.

Mr. Bob Russell: Just like us.

Mr. Chidgey: The Minister may like to reflect on the fact that left or right does not encompass the third way, and that the middle of the road is a recipe for a rather serious accident but, perhaps that is a different story.

Organised criminals are responsible for stealing motor cycles to order, removing their registration plates, obliterating identifying marks and rendering them almost untraceable. Although police have the power to seize suspected goods, current legislation—such as the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984—is insufficient if vehicle ownership cannot be proven. If it cannot be proven, the suspect goods have to be returned to the probably illegal owner.

New clause 2 would combat such crime directly by creating a new offence of possessing a vehicle without a valid identifying mark. It would place the onus on the legitimate purchaser of a motor car or a motor cycle to ensure that the vehicle carries the appropriate mark. Additionally, the mark conforms with the detail shown on the V5 form.

The new clause would also put the force of law behind current advice from trading standards officers and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. New clause 2 would underline the need for caution by any person acquiring motor vehicles of any description.

Mr. Hill: The offence that the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) has proposed in his well-intentioned amendment is already catered for in legislation. Section 173(d) of the Road Traffic Act 1988 makes it an offence for any person who—with intent to deceive—forges, alters or uses any plate containing particulars required to be marked on a vehicle that, in this instance, relate to the vehicle identification number, which is already required on motor cycles by statute.

The point that the hon. Gentleman makes is very well taken. However, for the reason that I have given, I very much hope that I can persuade him to withdraw his motion.

Mr. Chidgey: I can see that the Minister is in some haste, for purposes not connected with debating my new clause. However, as I do not wish to play unpleasant games with the House, I shall take note of what he said and take a future legislative opportunity to check whether the facts that he elucidated are indeed correct—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) questions my doubting the Minister, but that is life.

I have listened to the Minister's comments, and in the spirit of those comments, I am happy to beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 3

INSPECTION OF PREMISES: PART II

'( )—(1) A justice of the peace may issue a warrant authorising a constable or (as the case may be) an authorised person to enter and inspect premises, provided that admission to the premises is reasonably required to secure compliance with the provisions of this Part, or to ascertain whether these provisions are being complied with.

(2) A constable or an authorised person may, if necessary, use reasonable force in the exercise of his powers under a warrant issued under subsection (1).

(3) A constable or an authorised person may at any reasonable time—

(a) require production of, and inspect, any registration plates kept at the premises; and

(b) require production of, inspect and take copies of or extracts from any records which the person carrying on business as a registration plate supplier is required to keep at such premises by virtue of this Part.

(4) A constable or an authorised person in seeking to enter any premises in the exercise of his powers under a warrant issued under subsection (1) shall, if required by or on behalf of the owner or occupier or person in charge of the premises, produce evidence of his identity, and of his authority for entering before doing so.

(5) Any person who obstructs an authorised person in the exercise of his duties under a warrant issued under subsection (1) shall be guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 2 on the standard scale.'.—*[Mr. Bercow.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Bercow: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: New clause 6—*Inspection of premises: Part I*—

'( )—(1) A justice of the peace may issue a warrant authorising a constable or (as the case may be) an authorised person to enter and inspect premises, provided that admission to the premises is reasonably required to secure compliance with the provisions of this Part, or to ascertain whether these provisions are being complied with.

(2) A constable or an authorised person may, if necessary, use reasonable force in the exercise of his powers under a warrant issued under subsection (1).

(3) A constable or an authorised person may at any reasonable time—

(a) require production of, and inspect, any motor vehicles or salvageable parts kept at the premises; and

(b) require production of, inspect and take copies of or extracts from any records which the person carrying on business as a motor salvage operator is required to keep at such premises by virtue of this Part.

(4) A constable or an authorised person in seeking to enter any premises in the exercise of his powers under a warrant issued under subsection (1) shall, if required by or on behalf of the owner or occupier or person in charge of the premises, produce evidence of his identity, and of his authority for entering before doing so.

(5) Any person who obstructs an authorised person in the exercise of his duties under a warrant issued under subsection (1) shall be guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 2 on the standard scale.'.

Amendment No. 30, in clause 9, page 6, line 5, leave out clause 9.

Amendment No. 31, in clause 25, page 13, line 14, leave out clause 25.

Mr. Bercow: As hon. Members who served in Committee are aware, the arguments on the subject of the right of entry to and inspection of premises were well rehearsed in Committee, so there is no need to develop them now. Suffice it to say that, as far as we are concerned, the overweening power of the state to enter and inspect is already very great indeed. We are concerned about that. We believe that warrants should be required. It is not acceptable that entry should occur without them.

Mr. Charles Clarke: I commend the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on the exceptional brevity and clarity of his speech. Had we only experienced that in Committee and in all our proceedings on the Bill, we would be in a different position today.

As the hon. Gentleman said, we debated the matter exhaustively in Committee. I do not think there is any need to go through the discussions again. Deciding the circumstances in which warrants are needed and the circumstances in which they are not is simply a matter of balance of judgment. In our view, the introduction of the new clauses in this group is inappropriate as they require warrants to be obtained even in the case of registered premises. The Government consider it to be right that a registered business should be open to routine inspection by the enforcement authorities to ensure compliance with the requirements of the House.

Operators will have agreed to comply with the obligations imposed on them under the registration scheme, and it would make no sense to require warrants to be obtained for routine inspections to ensure that the scheme is in fact being adhered to. The Bill already contains a limitation on the power of entry and inspection to such times as are reasonable.

As I said, we have debated the matter at length. I am confident that the power of my rhetoric will have persuaded the hon. Gentleman to withdraw the motion, and I hope that he will do so. If not, I urge my colleagues to vote down the Opposition.

It being half-past Eight o'clock, MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair, pursuant to Order [this day].*

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 118, Noes 326.

Division No. 92] **[8.30 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Shephard, Richard
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Keith Simpson and Mr. James Gray.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Blenkin, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine

Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Colter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Macleggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malliaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Oliner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*,
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'dns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Tony McNulty and
Mr. Clive Betts.

Question accordingly negatived.

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *then proceeded to put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that hour.*

Clause 10

NOTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

Amendment made: No. 1, in page 6, line 37, after "affecting" insert "in a material particular".—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Clause 16

REQUIREMENT OF REGISTRATION FOR REGISTRATION PLATE SUPPLIERS

Amendments made: No. 2, in page 9, line 25, after "he" insert "—

(a)'.

No. 3, in page 9, line 26, at end insert—

'; and

(b) is not an exempt person.

(2A) The Secretary of State may by regulations provide for—

(a) activities of a prescribed description to be treated for the purposes of this Part as not being activities which consist in selling registration plates;

(b) persons of a prescribed description to be exempt persons for the purposes of this Part.'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Clause 18

APPLICATIONS FOR REGISTRATION

Amendments made: No. 4, in page 10, line 20, at end insert—

'(2A) A person who, in making an application for registration—

(a) makes a statement which he knows to be false in a material particular, or

(b) recklessly makes a statement which is false in a material particular,

shall be guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 3 on the standard scale.

(2B) Where an order under section 19(A1)(b) has effect in relation to a person who has been convicted of an offence under subsection (2A), no application for registration shall be made by that person under subsection (1) in contravention of the order.'.

No. 5, in page 10, line 23, leave out "19" and insert "19(1)".

No. 6, in page 10, line 23, at end insert—

'( ) A person who makes an application in contravention of subsection (2B) or (3) shall be guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale.'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Clause 19

SUSPENSION OF REGISTRATION BY A COURT

Amendments made: No. 7, in page 10, line 26, at beginning insert—

'(A1) Where a person is convicted of an offence under section 18(2A) the court before which he is convicted may, instead of or in addition to imposing a fine, by order do either or both of the following—

(a) provide for the removal of any entry relating to him in the register;

(b) prohibit him from making an application for registration under section 18(1) within such period not exceeding five years as may be specified in, or determined under, the order.'.

No. 8, in page 10, line 27, after "Part" insert—

'(other than an offence under section 18(2A))'.

No. 9, in page 10, line 30, leave out "The suspension shall not" and insert—

'No order under subsection (A1) or (1) shall'.

No. 10, in page 10, line 32, leave out "to the Crown Court".

No. 11, in page 10, line 34, at end insert—

'(2A) A court shall give notice to the Secretary of State of the contents of any order which has been made by it under subsection (A1) or (1) and which has effect.'.

No. 12, in page 10, line 35, leave out from "register" to "has" in line 36 and insert "—

(a) to give effect to any order of a court under subsection (A1)(a); or

(b) to reflect any suspension effected by an order of a court under subsection (1),

but may not do so until the order concerned'.

No. 13, in page 10, line 37, at end insert—

'( ) In this section "appeal" includes an application under section 111 of the Magistrates' Courts Act 1980 (application by way of case stated).'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Clause 26

NOTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS: PART II

Amendment made: No. 14, in page 14, line 5, after "affecting" insert "in a material particular".—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Clause 27

OFFENCES RELATING TO COUNTERFEIT REGISTRATION PLATES

Amendments made: No. 15, in page 14, line 21, leave out from "which" to end of line 22 and insert—

'is not a registration plate as a registration plate knowing that it is not a registration plate or being reckless as to whether it is a registration plate'.

No. 16, in page 14, line 26, leave out "selling counterfeit registration plates" and insert—

'activities which are unlawful by virtue of subsection (1)'.

No. 17, in page 14, line 29, leave out from "person's" to end of line 31 and insert "unlawful activities;".—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Clause 28

OFFENCE OF SUPPLYING PLATES ETC. TO UNREGISTERED PERSONS

Amendment made: No. 18, in page 14, line 36, after "person" insert—

'(other than an exempt person)'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Clause 30

INTERPRETATION OF PART II

Amendments made: No. 19, in page 15, line 13, at end insert—

' "exempt person" means any person who is an exempt person by virtue of regulations made under section 16(2A)(b);'.

No. 20, in page 15, line 26, leave out "and".

No. 21, in page 15, line 33, at end insert—

'; and

"selling registration plates" is to be construed in accordance with any regulations made under section 16(2A)(a).'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Clause 35

ACCESS TO CERTAIN MOTOR INSURANCE INFORMATION

Amendments made: No. 22, in page 20, line 2, leave out from first "by" to first "the" in line 3 and insert—

'regulation 10 of the Motor Vehicles (Third Party Risks) Regulations 1972 or by any subsequent regulation made under any corresponding power in'.

No. 23, in page 20, line 15, after "means" insert "—

(a)'.

No. 24, in page 20, line 18, at end insert—

'; or

(b) information relating to motor vehicles to which section 143 of the Act of 1988 does not apply or to any certificates or other documents issued in connection with such vehicles.'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Clause 37

FUNDING OF CERTAIN MAGISTRATES' COURTS' COSTS RELATING TO VEHICLE CRIME

Amendment made: No. 43, in page 21, line 9, leave out Clause 37.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Clause 44

EXTENT

Amendments made: No. 45, in page 24, line 5, leave out "to 37" and insert—

', 36 and *(Unified power for Secretary of State to fund speed cameras etc.)*'.

No. 25, in page 24, line 8, at end insert—

'( ) Section 35 extends to England and Wales and Scotland.'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Schedule

CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

Amendments made: No. 46, in page 26, line 26 [The Schedule], leave out "59F(1) below" and insert—

'(Unified power for Secretary of State to fund speed cameras etc.) of the Vehicles (Crime) Act 2001 (unified power for Secretary of State to fund speed cameras etc.)'.

No. 47, in page 26, line 32 [The Schedule], leave out "59F(1) below" and insert—

'(Unified power for Secretary of State to fund speed cameras etc.) of the Vehicles (Crime) Act 2001'.

No. 48, in page 26, line 36 [The Schedule], leave out "59F(1) below" and insert—

'(Unified power for Secretary of State to fund speed cameras etc.) of the Vehicles (Crime) Act 2001'.

No. 49, in page 26 [The Schedule], leave out lines 37 to 40.

No. 50, in page 26, line 43 [The Schedule], leave out "59F(1) below" and insert—

'(Unified power for Secretary of State to fund speed cameras etc.) of the Vehicles (Crime) Act 2001'.

No. 51, in page 26, line 46 [The Schedule], leave out from beginning to "references" in line 48.

No. 52, in page 27, line 2 [The Schedule], leave out "59F(3) below" and insert—

'(Unified power for Secretary of State to fund speed cameras etc.) of the Vehicles (Crime) Act 2001'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Title

Amendments made: No. 53, in title, line 3, leave out "Lord Chancellor" and insert "Secretary of State".

No. 54, in title, line 4, leave out from "certain" to "to" in line 5 and insert "expenditure relating".—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Order for Third Reading read.

8.45 pm

Mr. Charles Clarke: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I shall repeat some of the points that I made earlier when we discussed the programme motion. The Bill has been subjected to thorough scrutiny in Committee. I express my appreciation to the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members who led that debate and to my colleagues who made constructive contributions throughout. As I said earlier, some aspects were less than constructive, but the overwhelming majority of contributions were positive in tone.

The Bill has emerged the better for its time in Committee. Helpful suggestions were made to improve it, and on Report we discussed some of the proposed changes, but its essential principles remain unaltered.

I shall assess the issues that arose over the guillotining and programming of the Bill. We moved a programme motion on the meetings of the Committee itself. It is generally acknowledged that a full debate was held in Committee; Members had the chance to make their case in the time available and the arguments were fully and substantially made.

That was less true for the programmed debate on Report, which we have just concluded, because four groups of amendments could not be discussed. The new clause on specifications of registration plates, tabled by the Opposition, had no relation to the Bill. The matter arose from the euro-fanaticism of the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) who wanted to raise a marginal issue. The second group related to the scope of activities and persons covered in parts I and II. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be generous enough to acknowledge that the debate—like that on inspection of premises—would have been a reprise of the Committee debate, when we discussed the issues in great detail.

The third group related to fees for registration; again, we discussed that matter in detail and at great length in Committee.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Some of us were not in the Committee. Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: I will give way, but first I will reply to the right hon. Gentleman's sedentary remark. During the debate on the programme motion, the hon. Member for Buckingham made the point that the purpose of the Report stage was to allow hon. Members who might not have been members of the Standing Committee, such as the right hon. Gentleman, to participate in the debate. Throughout the whole debate on Report, there was no participation from Conservative Members, apart from the

[Mr. Clarke]

Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen, who were in constant attendance and participated fully in the debate; the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), who was a member of the Committee, and also participated fully in this debate; and an intervention from another Opposition Member. Although it is true that, in theory, hon. Members should be able to discuss the measure—I acknowledge that—in practice, no other Members wanted to discuss the issues.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the Minister, who daily demonstrates his lack of parliamentary experience, but I suppose he will learn—if he is spared to spend a bit more time in this place. The reality is that Report gives an opportunity to those Members who are not on the Committee to participate, if they choose so to do. I suspect that one reason why so few Members chose to participate is that the Government are not allowing a proper opportunity for proper debates on Report. The Government cannot have it both ways—they cannot crush all debate and then complain that hon. Members do not turn up to participate.

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making his points, which are pretty familiar to the House. As I said in the debate on the programme motion, the difficulty, which is reflected in the exchanges that occurred just before I spoke, involves those on the Conservative Front Bench ensuring that hon. Members, such as the right hon. Gentleman, can operate through the usual channels. That is one of the key issues in the House. The right hon. Gentleman also makes some offensive remarks, which he is entitled to do, but I have attended fully throughout all the debates—perhaps ad nauseam—and have dealt with the issues raised by my hon. Friends, if not all those raised by Opposition Members.

The final group of amendments contained several technical amendments and a point of substance on the affirmative procedure, on which the hon. Member for Buckingham might have divided the House, but, as he will acknowledge, that matter was debated fully in Committee. I make those points, which are perhaps not fully relevant to Third Reading, because I am aware of the arguments made by Members such as the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), and want to place on record my belief that the debates in Committee and on Report have been constructive and positive. The debates in Committee took place within the time constraints of the programme resolution and were finished in a way that allowed all hon. Members to make their points.

Mr. Bob Russell: Almost all.

Mr. Clarke: We addressed that matter earlier.

Although we did not debate certain amendments on Report, my assessment is that the various points represent a reprise of the debates in Committee. Notably, few Opposition Members participated, other than those on the Front Benches and the hon. Member for Lichfield, to whom I give due credit.

The Bill is necessary because the public are greatly concerned about vehicle crime. It is a serious matter, and the statistics speak for themselves. Some 350,000 vehicles are stolen annually, of which more than two fifths are not recovered. We are on target to reduce vehicle crime by 30 per cent. over five years. It has already fallen by 20 per cent. since we took office. The Bill will help significantly to reduce it further and shows that partnership is a central precept of the Government's approach to reducing crime.

We established the vehicle crime reduction action team, whose membership included a broad cross-section of the vehicle industry, the police, motorists, local government and insurers. The team proposed a series of important recommendations, which the Government have sought to honour. One set of recommendations dealt with changes in the law, which is why we introduced the Bill. It is not simply a clever Government idea; it is the result of a considered and proper process—the model for developing such proposals.

The Bill will fill the gaps in the existing law. At present, stolen vehicles may find their way into a salvage trade that is quite unregulated, as may vehicles that are fraudulently reported to have been stolen. Criminals can all too easily get hold of false number plates to disguise such vehicles that come into their hands and others that they have stolen themselves.

Vehicles that have been written off may be repaired and put back on the road. They are not required to undergo any check as to their true identity. Some of those vehicles are of course stolen. Those problems are addressed in the Bill, which will cut the scope for profit from vehicle crime, so diminishing its appeal. As a result, we hope that there will be at least 39,000 fewer vehicle thefts and 6,000 fewer fraudulent insurance claims—so-called theft claims—each year.

The Bill will also extend the time limit for prosecuting the crime of unauthorised vehicle taking. It will assist the detection of uninsured driving, by giving the police the right of general access to the motor insurance database. It will make it possible for the money collected from fixed-penalty fines for speeding and jumping red lights to be directly applied to road safety in the ways that have been discussed.

Part I deals with the regulation of motor salvage dealers. More than 40 per cent. of stolen vehicles are not recovered. Criminals in the salvage industry can disguise stolen vehicles or break them up and sell them as parts. Vehicles may be reported stolen when they have been sold to the salvage trade. That is insurance fraud. Part I will require motor salvage operators to register with their local authority and to renew their registration at intervals.

Concern was expressed in Committee about whether applications to register could be made on a standard form. It would be possible to prescribe such a form in secondary legislation, and we acknowledge the suggestions that were made in Committee. We will consult local authorities and the industry fully on the regulations to be made, and standardisation will be discussed. The Committee also said that it might be necessary to have slightly different information-collecting methods for different types of business. It discussed that issue fully.

In Committee, the hon. Member for Buckingham and other Conservative Members suggested making it an offence to supply false information when applying to be registered. The House will have heard from the discussions on Report that we have taken that point on board. The hon. Gentleman acknowledged that and I

acknowledged publicly the role that he played in drawing our attention so clearly to this issue. The suggestion has become a helpful addition to our measures to regulate the salvage industry.

Part I also enables us to make sure that registered dealers keep proper records. The police will have powers to enter and inspect their premises without a warrant. That will make it difficult to dispose of stolen vehicles, and it will deter insurance fraud.

Part II regulates the supply and issue of number plates. Many people are surprised to discover that there are no controls over this trade, and vehicle thieves naturally take advantage of that. However, the consequences of the current lack of regulation are by no means confined to vehicle theft. Burglars and terrorists use false plates; others use them just to deceive speed cameras. Under part II, number plate suppliers will have to register with the DVLA.

Mr. Fabricant: The Minister has raised an important point, but how easy is it to forge a number plate? Although many in the House may recognise the importance of controlling the manufacturers of number plates, if the plates can be forged easily by someone in his own home, that will negate the whole effectiveness of part II.

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman raised that point fully and positively in Committee. I reinforce the point that regulations can be made under the Bill to specify further information to be held on number plates. That will make it difficult to forge plates or to disguise the identity of a vehicle. There will be a link between the information on the number plate and the vehicle for which the plate is intended. The specific purpose of the provision is to enable the Government to specify, after wide consultation, the form of the number plate, so that it is clear that every number plate meets certain criteria. I accept that forgery can never be outlawed, but it will be made a great deal more difficult. The identification that results from that will enable us to deal with vehicle crime more effectively.

The Bill also provides powers to make suppliers keep records, which should deter the purchase of plates for criminal purposes. Record keeping will provide an audit trail for the police, who will be able to enter and inspect registered premises without a warrant. It will be an offence to provide plates or materials to an unregistered supplier or to sell counterfeit plates. The Committee persuaded us that it should also be an offence to supply false information to the DVLA in an application to register. We have introduced proposals to that effect.

Part III deals with vehicle licensing and registration. There will be a compulsory identity check before the issue of a new registration document for a vehicle that has previously been written off. That should help tackle illegal tampering. Part III also targets uninsured driving, which can be associated with dangerous driving and other illegal activity, but is all too often undetected. To deal with the problem, the motor insurance industry has proposed, and the Bill provides, that the police should have bulk access to insurance information. We expect this access to be available from 2003.

Clause 36 lengthens the time limit for prosecuting so-called joyriders. Those who take vehicles without authority cause immense distress and may even become involved in accidents. Joyriding sometimes leads to yet more serious crime. However, as the law stands, no charges may be brought for this offence more than six months after it was committed. We want the Crown Prosecution Service to be able to bring charges so as to signal that joyriding is not an offence that will be treated lightly.

Mr. Heald: We have just voted on a proposal to allow the Minister to determine that certain activities do not constitute the sale of registration plates. The Committee discussed whether manufacturers who do not sell directly to the public would be exempted. Does the Minister have that possibility in mind?

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman asks a reasonable question, although I think that we covered it in Committee. The purpose of the proposals is to ensure that the Bill is targeted on the right people. We had a long discussion about people who deal in parts. The vintage bike industry was mentioned. The Committee tried to respect the needs of hobbyists by ensuring that the Bill did not become a sledgehammer that hit the legitimate activities of such people. That is why we wanted the sensitivity with which the Government always exercise their Executive powers to be enshrined in legislation.

Clause 36 will extend the time limit to three years and enable proceedings for taking a vehicle without authority to be brought at any time within six months from the date when sufficient knowledge came to the attention of the prosecutor.

A more widespread threat to public safety is speeding, which we debated at length on Report. Rolling out speed cameras nationally is a vital part of our road safety strategy. New clause 7 will allow the money that magistrates courts receive from fixed penalties for speeding or jumping red lights to be used to fund road safety. The funds will be ploughed directly back into the fight against road crime and our efforts to improve road safety. That will ensure that funding is available to increase the number and geographical spread of safety cameras, for example, which will aid the prevention and detection of speeding and red traffic light offences. As speeding drivers may be guilty of other offences, there will also be a wider crime reduction benefit.

Mr. Shaw: Will my hon. Friend's hypothecation pertain to motorways? Some 33,000 vehicles were found to be breaking the speed limit on the M2, which runs through my constituency.

Mr. Clarke: I saw the press coverage of the M2 speed cameras. Our proposal does apply to motorways. However, I must emphasise, as the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill) did, that the process is about promoting road safety, and road safety alone. Some of the press coverage of the M2 cameras suggested that there might be a financial motive. That is not the case.

Mr. Bob Russell: The Minister said that the revenue from the fines would be used for road safety measures. How broad is the definition of road safety in that sense?

Mr. Clarke: I think that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary fully explained the situation on Report.

[Mr. Clarke]

Road safety will primarily focus on increasing the number and geographical spread of safety cameras. That is the principal consideration. I do not want to hide that fact from the House, but it does not exclude taking a wider look at road safety implications. Safety cameras make an important contribution to road safety and our proposals will extend to motorways.

Mr. Brady: The Minister told the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) that the cameras' primary purpose is to promote road safety. Is he clear that motorway cameras will focus on stretches where there are roadworks and lower speed restrictions, instead of being rolled out generally across all the network?

Mr. Clarke: I can confirm that the police identified and focused on accident black spots in the pilot schemes. It is intended that that practice should be followed across the country. The cameras might be related to roadworks and other restrictions, which might be temporary in nature. However, most police forces have a detailed mapping of where road accidents occur most frequently. They naturally want to put cameras at those locations, both to act as a deterrent, which the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) mentioned on Report, slowing drivers down at the key points of danger, and to record the drivers who break the law.

Mr. Brady: I thank the Minister for his full reply. Given that we would all wish to maximise the deterrent effect, can he confirm that it is the Government's policy, where possible, to ensure that signs to warn of the presence of speed cameras are in place on motorways?

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary and his colleagues in the DETR are considering carefully how we can improve the signage of road speed limits. The need for improvement has been forcefully pointed out by the AA and the RAC, and it is necessary to work harder to ensure that motorists are fully aware of the speed limit wherever they are. That is an important aspect of the road safety proposals that the Government are considering.

The operation of those proposals will be a matter for each local authority. My own county, Norfolk, has published a good road safety document, which is in my constituency file. I was reading it earlier because I want to respond to the authority's proposals for improving signage and policies. Road safety is the general thrust of local government policies, and they have been much encouraged by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary and his colleagues in the DETR.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) was asking about the signs warning of speed cameras rather than of the speed limit itself.

Mr. Clarke: I am sorry if my answer was unclear. I was trying to refer to the specific signage for speed cameras and the more general signage for speed limits. When I drive, I find it frustrating to see a picture of a speed camera without a speed limit attached. Putting those signs together is important. It is a matter not for me but for my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary, and I know that DETR is working hard on that.

Mr. Fabricant: Do the Minister and the Under-Secretary agree that if there is to be more widespread distribution of speed cameras, there needs also to be a wholesale review of speed limits? In some cases, limits might need to be lower, but in others they may need to be higher.

Mr. Clarke: I was just consulting the oracle on this matter—my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary.

Mr. Fabricant: Does the Under-Secretary drive?

Mr. Clarke: I do not know whether my hon. Friend drives. He is an outstanding Transport Minister, and the people of the country are fortunate to have him. The hon. Member for Buckingham made it clear that he did not use computers, but I do not think that that disqualifies him from being a Member of the House, even though in the modern information age, one might think that he would want to know what was going on around him in the world. Perhaps that is reflected in his contributions.

Mr. Bercow: The Under-Secretary is unassailable.

Mr. Clarke: I never use the word "unassailable". Unlike the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, I have a lot of experience outside the House, if not in it, and I know that the word "unassailable", especially when uttered by Conservative politicians, should not be used in circumstances that pertain to any significant development.

In answer to the question of the hon. Member for Lichfield, the Government are developing our road safety strategy, which includes signage. Those matters are also being considered by individual local highways authorities. In my county, for example, the authority is specifically considering, among other things, a 20 mph speed limit in specific areas such as those surrounding schools.

I emphasise again that the focus of the approach is on improving road safety. As part of the national roll-out of the programme, the Government will issue guidance to local partnerships on signage for speed cameras. I can therefore make a stronger commitment than I did in my off-the-cuff response to the hon. Gentleman that the guidance on signage for speed cameras will include precisely the points that he raised.

It is the Government's intention to cut vehicle crime at the roots. That means reducing the market for stolen vehicles. We will do that by regulating the motor salvage trade and the supply of number plates, which is the Bill's main purpose. Vehicle identity checks and new requirements for documentation by the DVLA will reinforce the system of regulation. The Bill has three ancillary purposes: first, to extend the time limit for prosecuting so-called joyriders; secondly, to make it easier for the police to detect uninsured driving; and thirdly, to enable magistrates courts receipts to be directly applied to road safety.

The Bill has been closely examined in Committee and has been strengthened as a result. Its consideration by the House means that it will go to the other place in good

shape. We shall continue throughout its passage in Parliament to listen to constructive criticism, as we have tried to do in this House, and to consider changes if they will help to deliver the sound legislation to which we are committed. I commend the Bill to the House.

9.9 pm

Mr. Bercow: The Minister of State, Home Office had the temerity to criticise the Opposition for a poor attendance this evening. He demonstrated not only temerity but unwisdom, given the fact, to which I must refer at the outset, that the hon. Members for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy), for Warrington, North (Helen Jones), for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) and for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), who were all members of the Committee that examined the Bill, have toddled out of the Chamber and have not been present to hear the Minister of State make the case for the Third Reading. It ill behoves the Minister to chide us, to suggest indifference and to accuse us of being part-timers when his hon. Friends, who might have been expected gleefully to listen to his honeyed words, have absented themselves from the Chamber and possibly from the Palace.

Mr. Bob Russell: For the sake of accuracy, will the hon. Gentleman tell us what has happened to about 50 per cent. of Conservative Members who served in Committee, who are not with us this evening?

Mr. Bercow: Yes. I regret to say that to the best of my knowledge, my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) is indisposed. That is why she is not present. What is important is that my hon. Friend has demonstrated on Second Reading, in Committee and on other occasions the closest possible interest in the Bill. I am sure that the Minister—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We must now get on with Third Reading rather than talk about the attendance or non-attendance of members of the Committee that considered the Bill.

Mr. Bercow: We were considering the level of interest on Third Reading. That would be fairly clear. I am developing the argument, and that is precisely what I intend to continue to do, as was my initial intention.

The Minister's recollection of proceedings in Committee does not entirely square with mine. It is true that the Government were guilty of the most extraordinary Horlicks in failing to determine that false applications to register as a salvage operator or registration plate supplier should be a criminal offence. We pointed that out to the Government, and to their credit they have belatedly accepted the point. I am grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for the tribute that he paid. Beyond that, I do not agree with much that the Minister of State, Home Office said about our proceedings in Committee.

I accept that we made some progress. However, we were hurried and heavily circumscribed. There was inadequate time and we got through the proceedings only because the vast majority of Labour Members either had nothing to say or had something to say but were instructed in no uncertain terms by the powers that be not to say it.

I much regret that we are embarking on Third Reading after the most derisory and cursory consideration of the amendments and new clauses that were tabled on Report. There were eight groups and no fewer than 61 new clauses and amendments. By my recollection, we got through four groups. We really only considered three groups, although we voted on the fourth as well. Even if we include matters relating to the inspection of premises, we have covered in a desultory fashion only 38 of the new clauses and amendments, leaving a remaining 23 still to be debated, some of which were new clauses and amendments tabled by the Government.

In the circumstances, it is preposterous for the Minister to claim that there has been adequate debate on the Bill. I must emphasise, as the Government are seeking a Third Reading, that we think it profoundly unsatisfactory that there was such minimal consideration on Report. One of the reasons for that—I have made the point before and I have had no effective rejoinder to it—is that the Government, in their arrogant, imperious and inconsiderate fashion chose a timetable on Report. They did not consult, there was no discussion and we had no debate. We are being invited to give a Third Reading to a Bill the consideration of which on Report was scanty, to put it mildly. We did not properly get through even half of the groups of new clauses and amendments.

Mr. Forth: Can I try to lift my hon. Friend into a more optimistic frame of mind? Does he not agree that, as a result of the process that he accurately described, it is imperative that the House of Lords should give the matter the detailed consideration that the Government have not allowed it in this House? At the very least, a compensatory factor might then enter our parliamentary proceedings, so that for every occasion on which the Government denied the Commons the opportunity to examine a Bill properly the Lords had to do so in the utmost detail.

Mr. Bercow: My right hon. Friend is right. I have referred before, without embarrassment—and I do so again—to the symbiotic political relationship between us. What my right hon. Friend says is pertinent and I hope that it will be heard in another place. Our consideration of the Bill has been inadequate, although marginally less so as the result of deliberations in Committee—*[Interruption.]* I am bound to tell the Under-Secretary, who is chuntering from a sedentary position and not paying proper attention to what I am saying, that the Bill is better in spite of the Ministers and not because of them. Frankly, they were Tweedledum and Tweedledee in Committee, and did not achieve very much. I was grateful for their tribute to Conservative efforts, but we have seen only a modest improvement in the Bill and it is pitiful that we have made so little progress today.

I emphasise the fact that, traditionally, Members on both sides of the House have seen it as their responsibility to scrutinise, probe, inquire, test and seek improvement. In this case—and this is an important point in support of our claim that inadequate time has been dedicated to the subject—Conservative Members alone have played any significant part in the proceedings, together with a little input of variable quality and irregular frequency from Liberal Democrat Members. The only Labour Members to have contributed on any significant scale were those who themselves wanted to table new clauses and

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amendments. The fact is that there have been few of them. The vast majority sat doing other things, were not engaged and did not take an interest. Their minds were elsewhere, to use a term that is common parlance in relation to other matters at the moment.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: Yes, briefly, but I must warn the Minister that many points need to be made on Third Reading, and I intend to make them in detail and at whatever length is necessary.

Mr. Clarke: I wish to place on record the fact that the hon. Gentleman's remarks on the participation of Labour Members in Committee were simply untrue.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Minister. He is accusing me of telling an untruth, which is dangerous, especially as he is a senior, respected, important and ambitious Member with a full diary. He has great claims and hopes for the future, and it would be unwise for him to traduce me. I do not know what he knows but, by now, he ought to be aware that I have a fairly good recollection of who spoke at earlier stages of the Bill's consideration and who did not. I simply make the point that far more Government Members did not speak regularly in Committee than did. That is a matter not of dubiety or speculation but of recorded fact. If the Minister wants to have a wager with me about it, I shall be only too delighted.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend talked about the contribution of Conservative Members in Committee. The Minister himself said that it was a useful and important contribution. Does my hon. Friend share my unease at the continuing lack of scrutiny? By introducing a new clause, we filled a gaping hole in the Bill. The Bill was incomplete when it came to Committee. Does my hon. Friend share my unease about the fact that, because of lack of scrutiny, there may well be other giant loopholes through which criminals and lawyers will be able to pass?

Mr. Bercow: I am worried about that. I am even more worried when a rising Minister—or would-be rising Minister—complains to the House that had we had this or that debate, it would probably only have been a re-run of what took place in Committee. I made the point before and, for the avoidance of doubt, I remind the Minister now that the purpose of the exercise is for those who served on Committee to report to the House as a whole so that its wider membership can engage in the debate—as I know my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), to name but one, is ever keen to do. It will not do for the Government to behave in such a navel-gazing, inward-looking, selfish fashion by seeking to dismiss the claims of those who were not fortunate enough to serve on the Committee, but who wish to contribute to the consideration of the Bill. However, I am not to be diverted for a moment longer from focusing on the purpose of the Bill.

The purpose of the Bill—to cut car crime—is valid. It is the Bill's effectiveness in achieving that purpose which is uncertain, to put it mildly. The Minister of State, Home Office, knows perfectly well that between March 1998 and March 1999, 1,482,889 car crimes were committed. In the ensuing year, from March 1999 to March 2000, there was, if I remember correctly, a reduction of exactly 7,000 car crimes, so the incidence of car crime fell by 0.5 per cent. in that period.

The Minister of State and his hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions are committed to the goal of a 30 per cent. cut in car crime between now and 2004.

I am ordinarily an understated fellow, as you know from your own experience, Madam Deputy Speaker. I tend to beat about the bush. I am not very good at putting my points strongly. I sometimes think that if only I spoke up and made the argument a little more forcefully, I might have a greater impact. *[Interruption.]* My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst rather unkindly accuses me of being wet and weedy, but he is probably justified in this case.

I put it on the record that I wish the Government well in achieving the 30 per cent. reduction in car crime by 2004, but do I believe that it will happen? I am bound to ask the Minister of State, who may have trotted off elsewhere by 2004, "What are those pigs that I see flying in front of my very eyes?" I do not believe that that target will be achieved. The notion that the Bill will be instrumental in achieving that purpose strikes many of us as a triumph of optimism over reality.

The Minister drew attention to the incidence and cost of car crime. That is germane to the consideration of the Bill. There is an annual cost of £3.5 billion arising from car crime. The hon. Gentleman speaks glibly of the intention to ensure that there are 39,000 fewer vehicle thefts as a result of the provisions of the Bill, but he failed at any stage—on Second Reading, in Committee, on Report or on Third Reading—to explain how that objective is compatible with or delivered by the reduction of at least 2,500 in the number of policemen. It is extraordinary that the Government expect more with less: fewer people must satisfy higher targets, but there is no indication how those are to be achieved.

Another problem in relation to the Government's target, and a lacuna in the Bill, if I may satisfy my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield, is that it does nothing about thefts from vehicles, concerning itself exclusively and perhaps narrowly with the theft of vehicles. If the Minister of State wants to trumpet the Bill as a flagship measure for the greater good not only of the community, but of his rising ministerial reputation, it is a pity that the terms of the Bill have been so narrowly drawn. The Minister is getting itchy. Although there are many other points and other lacunae to which I want to draw attention, I give way to him.

Mr. Charles Clarke: It would be helpful to the House if the hon. Gentleman set out the legislative changes that he would recommend to deal with thefts from vehicles. Our overall strategy deals with thefts from vehicles, but the Bill deals with one aspect of that strategy. What are the hon. Gentleman's proposals for legislative change?

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman tempts me into a potentially lengthy lecture on the subject. If I embarked upon it, he would be the first to complain. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman chunters from a sedentary position.

A useful signal that we could send to those who engage in car crime of the kind to which I have just referred would be immediately to scrap the home detention curfew scheme or the early release scheme—that ludicrous policy that entitles anyone serving a sentence of more than three months but less than four years to be released from jail on a tag, typically having served less than half of his or her sentence.

I sense that you are getting itchy, Madam Deputy Speaker. That is an undesirable prospect for you, as well as for hon. Members who think that you may be about to pounce upon them, if I may put it that way. I shall not dilate further, as you would not want me to do so. I was led astray by the Minister of State and I must not pursue the point, although I must say that it is unwise of the hon. Gentleman to make interventions that invite further and legitimate criticism of other aspects of Home Office penal and sentencing policy.

Mr. Brady: Has it occurred to my hon. Friend that one of this Government's characteristics is their tendency to announce policies or to take legislative measures when they believe that the results will be achieved regardless of their actions? May they not have decided that vehicle theft will decrease because of technological improvements, not least in the security devices built into cars? May they not have concluded that results would accrue on theft of vehicles without their intervention? On the other hand, they have no meaningful policy to address the problem of thefts from vehicles.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend makes a sound point, to which I suspect the Minister of State cannot respond.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: Well, I shall give the hon. Gentleman one last chance. Perhaps not. He now appears to have had second thoughts.

Mr. Clarke *rose—*

Mr. Bercow: He now has third thoughts. As he is an ambitious chap, I warn him that such indecisiveness is inconsistent with the tributes that have so far been paid to him.

Mr. Clarke: With all respect, I point out that the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) was confusing thefts from vehicles with thefts of vehicles. Technology makes a difference with regard to both sorts of crime. With regard to thefts from vehicles, the most important changes have occurred in vehicle security, in respect of which we are encouraging manufacturers and have introduced various other changes. As the hon. Gentleman said, those changes will reduce vehicle crime as the motor fleet becomes larger.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Minister, who has clarified his position in so far as he judged it necessary to do so. I shall not get into a debate about prepositions at this stage, not least because a number of my hon. Friends want to contribute.

Suffice it to say that the Opposition are anxious about a serious issue that relates to the integrity—or otherwise—of the Bill. That issue is, of course, the use of the proceeds of fines to finance a widespread roll-out of speed cameras throughout the country. An interesting exchange about that subject occurred earlier between the Under-Secretary and the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston, who has sadly departed the Chamber. Knowingly or otherwise—a term that I use advisedly—the latter seemed to be pressurising the Minister. He asked him to confirm that all fine proceeds must be used for road safety measures, as doing otherwise would be defying the will of the House.

Rather too quickly, and with too great an enthusiasm, the Under-Secretary rushed to agree. I then challenged him to confirm that it was Government policy to ring-fence. I sought a commitment that there would be an exact equivalence between the money raised and the money spent. I did not ask for a commitment in respect of every year, but for the five-year term of a Parliament, although I acknowledged that it would last for only four years if the Government cut and run. I demanded an assurance that all the proceeds of the fines would be spent on road safety measures alone.

That was when the Under-Secretary's usual self-confidence and unfailing fluency collapsed and he started to use a combination of the obfuscatory and the coy. He was obfuscatory as he sought to get away from the issue, and coy in the charming manner with which we are now familiar. In effect, he said "Oh, I am but a junior Minister and it is not a matter for me. Hon. Members cannot expect me, as a mere junior Minister, to commit to what might happen in future, although I can speak in general terms about what we want to do."

Mr. Heald: In due course.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend observes that things will occur in due course. Indeed, it was on that point that the Under-Secretary's previously silky advocacy became nothing more than a celebration of motherhood and apple pie. That issue has not been properly considered. My hon. Friends and I do not intend to divide the House on Third Reading. I have already been subjected to verbal flagellation by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, who is disappointed and strongly opposes the Bill and who believes that we should take a more oppositional line.

However, I am fair minded, and prepared even now to give the Government the benefit of the doubt. Given the Bill's risible consideration in Committee, the other place will want to scrutinise the provisions in great detail. There is therefore at least an argument for keeping an open mind.

Speed cameras and the Government's integrity or lack of it on that subject are important. Their attitude to local authorities' responsibility for disposing of abandoned vehicles shows them indulging in an orgy of complacency—a complacency displayed not least by Back-Bench Labour Members.

Let us consider inspection of premises, which the Bill covers. I am a right-wing libertarian, sometimes known as a Conservative libertarian. I am alarmed by the constant arrogation of powers to the state. I do not like the fact that so many officers of the state, public agencies and

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other officials can, without warrants, enter and inspect commercial premises, domestic property or both in pursuit of their claims. That is unsatisfactory. I generally support the view that, when police or other authorities want to inspect and consider evidence to ascertain whether criminal acts have been committed, they should first be obliged to obtain a warrant.

The Government's position is that warrants neither should nor should not be required. They have an extraordinary attitude, which is neurotic, difficult to justify in theory and impossible to substantiate in practice. Under the Bill, registered motor salvage operators or registration plates suppliers have somehow signed up to a more rigorous regime, and are able to have their premises entered by a police constable or other authorised person without a warrant. Those who are not registered and are suspected of unlawful or perhaps even criminal activity can have their premises entered and inspected only if the constable or other representative of authority has first acquired a warrant. The registered person therefore gets a worse deal than the unregistered person.

That is the logic of new Labour in 2001. No amount of vacuous half-hearted attempts at explanation by the two highbrow characters who represent the Government on the Treasury Bench could alleviate our anxieties about the provisions on inspection of premises.

The Government's performance on the specifications for registration plates was even more pitiful. Many of us are worried that the current drafting of clause 33, especially proposed new section 27A(1)(a) and (b), could allow for the mandatory display of a European Union flag on the registration plate of a car. We debated that matter at reasonable length in Committee. I enjoyed the exchange with the Under-Secretary, my former constituent when I was a Lambeth borough councillor. However, the same technique was employed as on previous clauses.

The Under-Secretary tried to brush our argument aside; he dismissed it with a good deal of rhetorical tomfoolery. However, when I challenged him to guarantee that the British Government would oppose any proposal to require the display of the EU flag, he retreated into obfuscation and coyness. He said that I was paranoid and that I was getting too excited. He then used the modesty defence, claiming to be only a humble servant, a mere Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, a son of toil who could not question the judgment of the Secretary of State, still less that of the Prime Minister.

The Under-Secretary also had the brass neck to say that I could not commit the Conservative party to opposing such a proposal. The hon. Gentleman then conjured up an absurd scenario in which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) was suddenly the leader of the Conservative party. I said that, although I did not anticipate such a scenario, it was conceivable that if such a scenario arose, my right hon. and learned Friend might—though I doubt it—be so unwise as to agree to such a proposal. I also made it clear to the hon. Gentleman that no such proposal would be advanced with my support from the Conservative Front Bench, from which I would immediately feel it necessary to depart in such circumstances.

The hon. Gentleman made no such clarion call, and no such obvious declaration. The risk is that, in future, a proposal could be introduced and the purpose of clause 33 would be to facilitate the ready transposition into British law of the provisions that the hon. Gentleman's European masters intended.

The hon. Gentleman argued that any fees to be levied would cover only administration costs. However, when we tabled amendments that would tie the Government down more precisely, so that no stealth taxes could be levied, the hon. Gentleman resisted them. He engaged in the merest casuistry to try to justify his position and argued that the wording in the Government's existing, unamended clause was preferable to ours. I therefore asked the hon. Gentleman to confirm that the charges levied would never be greater than the level of the administration costs, at which point we had the normal retreat into obfuscation and coyness. I received no answer, no satisfaction and no reassurance. That was not good enough.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend reminds me—although this was not my reason for intervening—that, on Second Reading, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) boasted about such stealth taxes being used to build car parks in her constituency.

Why is my hon. Friend so surprised at the Minister's refusing to guarantee that the European Union flag would not be put on to licence plates? Does he not recall that, although the Labour party in opposition said that it would object to having the European Union flag put on to the credit card-type driving licences, all driving licences now bear the European Union flag?

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing out the tergiversation of the Government on matters European. They have changed their mind seven times on the issue of whether the United Kingdom should be a member of the European Union. It is not, therefore, surprising that the Government are as inconsistent in this important but secondary matter as they have shown themselves to be in the past.

The Government's position on this issue is unsatisfactory. The hon. Gentleman was invited to provide reassurance, and he conspicuously and repeatedly failed to do so. I fear the worst. I do not suspect the hon. Gentleman's integrity, but he is—as he has already suggested—but a puppet on a string. The puppet-master is elsewhere, and we have good reason to fear an obnoxious proposal being introduced in the future which it would not be feasible for us effectively to resist.

One of the most unattractive features of the Bill is that nine of its clauses provide effectively for government by regulation. I am a strong supporter of the affirmative resolution procedure, and highly resistant to the over-zealous use of the negative resolution procedure. To elucidate that point for those who may be listening to our proceedings elsewhere, the issue is whether we debate the regulations or whether they go through on the nod.

The hon. Gentleman sought to justify the fact that the Government did not intend to debate these matters by saying that they were not big enough, and that such debate would not be a proper use of parliamentary time. I responded that the Government have often made a mess of regulations that have not been debated in the House, and, as a consequence, have had to return to the House to improve the regulations and seek the House's approval for that redrafting. The Government could save themselves a

future headache if they were more tolerant of present debate. It is most unfortunate that they are taking this dismissive, imperious and arrogant attitude towards the House.

My right hon. and hon. Friends may ask, "What's new?" That attitude is not new, but it is unsatisfactory, worrying and indicative of the Government's disdain, indifference and contempt for the legislature's right to act as a check on the Executive. That right and responsibility is of the greatest importance to me and my right hon. Friends, even if it is not important to high-flying, very ambitious and, if I may say so, somewhat indifferent Ministers.

The Bill involves substantial costs and the Government have estimated them, though their estimates usually turn out to be on the low side. I have been very generous—

Mr. Forth: Too generous.

Mr. Bercow: From a sedentary position, my right hon. Friend chunters that I have been too generous. He does not think that I have been robust enough and believes that we should divide the House on Third Reading. I am resisting his exhortation to do so. My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) and I have made the judgment that we shall look to the other place properly to scrutinise all the provisions with a view to their further and dramatic improvement.

I am happy to await the outcome of the deliberations of the other place. Nevertheless, although the Bill is slightly improved, it has many defects. It is the cause of real concern. It is not satisfactory. *[Interruption.]* The Minister of State can chunter dismissively from a sedentary position, but he cannot disregard the fact that many things were wrong with the Bill, that it still has defects and that substantial progress still has to be made.

9.41 pm

Mr. Chidgey: I shall draw myself back to the topics that I would hope to discuss on Third Reading, although that is quite an effort following such an interlude.

I must place on record my disappointment with the debate. Considering the number of amendments and new clauses that were tabled, we barely scratched the surface of much of the agenda. The Minister, in his winding-up speech on Report, made an effort to explain the substance of the various amendments that were not covered, but that is no substitute for proper examination and the ability to reassure the House about the meaning of Government amendments.

We have been denied an opportunity properly to scrutinise many amendments tabled not only by the Government but by the two Opposition parties. I am particularly disappointed not to have debated amendments Nos. 27, 28 and 29, which stood in my name. I know that the British Motorcyclists Federation was interested in those proposals because they covered theft, which is a theme throughout. However, although the Bill concentrates on motor vehicle theft, there are few references to the theft and illegal resale of spare parts, which is a matter of great concern in many quarters that would have appreciated a proper discussion of the issues.

I am quick to say that, in the main, the Bill is welcome. It is clearly intended to have an effect on vehicle crime, and I believe that it will do so. I agree with the Minister and the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who spoke for the Conservatives, that the Bill is better than it was on Second Reading. However, we should put its effect in context. The Minister mentioned the number of cars that are stolen and rightly said that the measure will stop the ringing of cars. However, one must remember that even though the Bill may reduce vehicle thefts by 36,000, a total of 350,000 vehicles are stolen in this country every year, and such a reduction represents a mere 10 per cent. of that.

Although we should welcome this brief Bill, which will have some effect, we must bear in mind the context. It is not a panacea nor the answer to vehicle theft and vehicle crime. For example, it will make no impact on the 130,000 vehicles that are stolen, recovered and recorded as recovered. Of course, those vehicles are often wrecked beyond repair and of no use. Nor will it make an impact on the 700,000 thefts from vehicles every year, which the hon. Member for Buckingham touched on. Those 700,000 thefts are, of course, only recorded thefts. Other sources claim that the total number, unrecorded and recorded, is about four times that figure—close to 3 million.

The Bill will have no impact on spiralling motor cycle theft: the current rate is 25,000 a year, and increasing rapidly. Nor will it have an impact on the organised criminal trade in car and motor cycle spare parts, which is estimated to cost the economy five times as much as vehicle theft.

Much more needs to be done to prevent the theft of vehicles and parts. As the Minister said in response to an intervention, we need to do far more to make vehicles more secure and more readily traceable, but we also need to do far more to change the culture. As I think was said on Second Reading, we must recognise that there are areas in which communities are disruptive, crime rates are high and, consequently, the rates of vehicle thefts and thefts from vehicles are also high. It is not enough to encourage vehicle manufacturers to make their vehicles more secure; better policing must be provided in the areas that are most prone to theft.

Mr. Fabricant: I have just noted a statistic. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that between 6 million and 7 million plates are issued every year? Can he imagine how a diminishing police force could possibly regulate that area, in practice?

Mr. Chidgey: I generally welcome interventions from the hon. Gentleman. Because we share a profession, I always feel that it would be churlish not to listen to his contributions, whatever their worth may be. Perhaps he should refer to the debate on Second Reading, when I drew attention to the manufacture of between 6 million and 7 million plates every year. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Gentleman would listen for a minute, he might get the benefit of my explanation. I speak from memory, but I think that some 2 million new plates are manufactured every year, and some 2 million are used for transfers in the trade. On Second Reading, I asked what happened to the other 2 million. I found it incredible that as many plates were damaged as were distributed for new cars and transferred in the trade.

That is, of course, the whole purpose of the new legislation on the regulation of manufacture and distribution of registration plates. It is a welcome feature

[Mr. Chidgey]

of the Bill, but it can only be aimed at preventing the ringing of cars, which involves a mere 36,000 of the 375,000 vehicles that are stolen each year.

There are still fears in the motor cycle industry that the Bill does not address the vulnerability of motor cycles to theft. The Motorcycle Action Group, the British Motorcyclists Federation and the Motor Cycle Industry Association have all expressed strong, well-thought-out and genuine concerns about the lack of protection for motor cycle owners. They are dismayed that the Bill's aspirations are so limited.

While car theft is falling—although at a far lower rate than the Prime Minister would wish, judging by his projections relating to targeted vehicle crime—the theft of motor cycles, and the trade in stolen parts from them, is rising dramatically. According to the RAC Foundation, it rose by some 25 per cent. in the last 12 months alone. The Association of Chief Police Officers has estimated that the value of stolen spares from motor cycles in circulation is about £400 million. That is a significant measure of the seriousness of motor cycle theft and the theft and circulation of spares.

The Bill is very limited in its aspirations. However, so far as it goes and in what it aims to achieve, it is welcome. As the Minister explained, part I will extend statutory regulation to motor salvage, reduce the opportunities to dispose of stolen motor vehicles and assist police in their investigation of vehicle thefts. Those are necessary and welcome provisions.

Part II has highlighted throughout our debates the shambles of vehicle registration plate manufacture and distribution. There are 27,000 outlets supplying up to 7 million plates annually. Clearly that needs regulation.

Mr. Fabricant: It is a shambles?

Mr. Chidgey: Yes.

Mr. Fabricant: Why?

Mr. Chidgey: I do not think that I will bother with that type of sedentary comment. The hon. Gentleman must be a little tired. He has been in the Chamber for most of the debate, unlike many of his colleagues. I think that we should make allowances for that.

We hope that, as amended, part II will go some way towards bringing order out of that particular chaos.

As for part III, the new laws on vehicle licensing and registration and on raising standards should provide a more effective way of tackling vehicle crime, particularly—as the Minister said on many occasions—in eliminating the ringing of stolen cars.

New clause 7, which is now clause 37, deals with a matter of great debate, concern and, sometimes, contention. Allowing fines from speed camera offences to fund the costs of extending the system and improving road safety is of course welcome. There is also clear evidence that reducing speed, particularly in dangerous locations, improves road safety. There is, however, a caveat. That funding should not be used as a way of proliferating speed cameras regardless of the need for, and benefit of, more cameras. If that happens, the effectiveness of speed cameras and their impact on improving safety will be reduced.

The Ministers will recall that, in Committee, various issues were raised to which they offered to return, with amendments, on Report. I have not heard replies to those points in the Government's amendments, perhaps because we have had so little time for today's debates. I shall therefore mention two of them again, to which the Ministers can reply either now or later.

I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), will remember our discussion on what happens when salvage operators cease to trade. What happens to their records? Who is responsible for collecting and storing them? Those records are necessary if we are to maintain an audit trail, which is so important in tracing vehicles. In Committee, we accepted that it was unfair to expect the Minister to have an immediate reply on that point. However, he will remember that he recognised that it was an important point and said that he would return to it. I do not think the point has been dealt with in any of the amendments that we have debated today, although we have not debated all of them.

The Minister may also recall that, in Committee, we raised the issue of stolen cars that are covered only by third-party insurance. As such cars are not covered for theft and no claim is made when they are stolen, they do not become a part of the insurance companies' written-off trail and simply disappear. In Committee, I expressed very strong concerns about how we can close that loop and catch those who steal the vehicles. As I understand it, about one third of all damaged vehicles fall into that category. Perhaps the Government's amendment No. 22 has addressed the issue. However, as hon. Members will know, we have not had the opportunity to debate that amendment.

I look forward to the Minister's response.

9.54 pm

Mr. Forth: This measure tells us a lot more about Front Benchers in the House than it does necessarily about its specific provisions. It is a typical Labour response to a problem. The arrangement of clauses at the beginning of the Bill includes the tired litany of words and phrases such as "registration", "keeping of records", "right to enter and inspect premises", and so on. Unbelievably, the Bill suggests that local authorities should judge whether a company is fit and proper to conduct its business.

That is bad enough, but clause 32 says all that needs to be said about Labour's approach to a problem. In that one clause, 10 stages of bureaucracy, intervention and regulation can be identified. They are what the Government seem to believe will solve all the problems in this area. The clause mentions "notification", "issue of duplicates", "correction of errors", "payment of fees", "making of appeals", "carrying out of examinations", "courses of instruction"—

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Is the right hon. Gentleman leading up to advocating the well-known Conservative approach of market testing? Under that regime, private firms could bid to provide the registration service that he describes. Perhaps Arthur Daley would be an appropriate person.

Mr. Forth: That is a very attractive suggestion. I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the great world of

market economics, but my point is this: although I would expect from the Government the bureaucratic, regulatory and interventionist response to problems that this Bill contains, I am very disappointed to find that it has the support of hon. Members on my own party's Front Bench. I thought that I belonged to a party that believed in the operation of the market, in enterprise, in small businesses, and which was against the nanny state. The Bill is a monument to the nanny state, if I ever saw one, and I find it unbelievable and inexcusable that my hon. Friends have been prepared to accept it.

It appears that the official Opposition are increasingly prepared to accept measures such as this, for reasons that are unclear to me. Perhaps I shall have a word with my hon. Friends after the debate to see whether I can find out what on earth is going on.

Presumably, we shall have a chance to start opposing the Government's approach—perhaps not in connection with this Bill, but with some other. It is interesting that those who toiled through the Committee stage and who sat through Report spent a lot of time identifying weaknesses that remained in the Bill and in the Government's approach. The Government assert over and again that they want to support and encourage small business, but this measure, through the mountain of regulation that it proposes, can only damage new, small and struggling enterprises. The Government have not yet been able to resolve that apparent dilemma.

The Bill poses a challenge to the Government and to the Opposition. Have either thought through all the implications of the measures for which they so readily reach? The tired ideas of registration, endless record-keeping, inspections, examinations, tests, expenses, fees, charges and all the rest may or may not go some way towards resolving the problem that has been identified. However, I have heard nothing in our debates of the adverse and negative effects that the Bill is likely to have.

Bureaucracy will not suffer—the Bill will be yet another of the Government's job-creation schemes, creating even more bureaucrats, officials and inspectors. Whether there will be enough police officers to implement the Bill effectively is another matter, but it will certainly provide more bureaucrats. The one growth area that can be identified is officialdom—the Bill will fail in its adverse effect on small businesses.

This is a matter of regret to me. I wish that I could divide the House to oppose the Bill. Regrettably, on this occasion, I can only give vocal expression to my opposition to the Bill and hope that next time my right hon. and hon. Friends will do better.

Mr. Charles Clarke: With the leave of the House, Mr. Speaker, I should like to respond to a couple of points.

First, I note that all Members who wished to speak in the time allocated to the Bill have been able to do so, thus fulfilling the proposition in the programme motion. Secondly, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will write to the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) on the points he has raised, because I do not have time to reply to them now. Thirdly, I simply make the observation that the deep division in the ranks of the official Opposition on whether to oppose the Bill shows their position.

It being Ten o'clock, MR. SPEAKER *put the Question already proposed from the Chair, pursuant to Order [this day].*

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Local Elections (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 18th January, be approved.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Motion made,

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That, for the current Session of Parliament, Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 37, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 46, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 48, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Motion made,

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

ADMINISTRATION

Ordered,

That Mr. Stephen Hepburn be discharged from the Administration Committee and Caroline Flint be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. McWilliam, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

Adoption

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

10.1 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I am very grateful to have this opportunity to debate the criteria for adoption and, in particular, appeals. There is a great deal of activity regarding this subject in the media. In addition, the Government have produced the performance and innovation unit report, the White Paper and the ministerial statement. A great deal of attention is being paid to the issue.

Along with many other hon. Members, my focus has been narrowed, to some extent, by my experience of constituency cases. Very often, adoption cases arouse great emotion among the families concerned and among the wider media when they get into the public domain. I started life in the House with a difficult case that brought to a head issues of age bars and overseas adoption. The case was satisfactorily resolved through the intervention of the then Under-Secretary of State for Health, now the Minister of State, Home Office, the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng). The right hon. Gentleman intervened personally and resolved the case to the family's satisfaction and happiness.

More recently, my constituency has been the centre of attention in a high-profile adoption case. There have been weekly serials in *The Mail on Sunday* and a great deal of television attention, much of it very distressing. I do not wish to go into the pros and cons of that case because an independent inquiry has been set up. Indeed, it is partly with the help of the Minister and his officials that the inquiry is taking place, and it would be wrong of me to pass judgment on the rights and wrongs of the case. That case, along with others with which I and other right hon. and hon. Members have dealt, illustrates some of the problems in the process.

I can put my specific remarks in a more general context. The Government have produced a White Paper, based on the Cabinet Office report and the Prime Minister's personal intervention in the matter. All the feedback that I have had from the adopting community—the adopters, the professionals and the social workers—is very positive. It is felt that a lot of progress has been made and that many of the policy prescriptions that have been offered are extremely helpful.

We are in a very positive environment—the one cloud on the horizon is that we have been here before. As the Minister knows, the 1993 White Paper expressed—probably less well than the present one—many of the hopes for future legislation. However, that White Paper never became legislation. I sincerely hope that the current White Paper does not go the same way. The Minister is not the master of parliamentary business—none the less, the context is positive.

I wish to start with a general proposition. It might help to promote the ideas in the White Paper if a little more support were given to the role of the adopters and, as a separate group, the foster parents who work on a paid basis for local authorities. There is a clear and positive statement in the White Paper and the associated regulations as to the primacy of the child. That is absolutely right; the language is spot-on and none of us would have any quibbles about it. However, the "Introduction to prospective adopters" in the draft adoption standards document includes a passage that the Government intend should set the tone. It states:

> "People who want to adopt will be responded to promptly, given clear information on the recruitment, assessment and approval processes and treated fairly, openly and with respect."

There is absolutely nothing objectionable about that; it seems to be carefully drafted and entirely proper.

There is an important omission, however. There is no sense in that document that adopters are valuable, valued and important. Indeed, if they do not come forward in greater numbers, it will not be possible to realise the objectives of the White Paper. It would be helpful to show a little more warmth and commitment to adopters as a group.

I make that point for two reasons. The first is that—unlike social workers, doctors or teachers—adopters are a scattered community. They are not a profession; they cannot express their frustration, lack of morale, problems, difficulties over bad publicity and so on. That is all the more reason for the Government to acknowledge publicly that they are an important part of the process.

Secondly, there is a problem of adopter recruitment. Two years ago, there was an enormous profusion of interest in adoption after several harrowing television programmes; 24,000 people expressed interest. Of course, many of those expressions were flippant or had not been thought through. Few of them ever bore fruit. That has never been fully explained to me, but it suggests a lack of receptiveness in the system.

The appeals process is absolutely crucial to the confidence of adopters. The Government have obviously given much thought to that issue. The White Paper contains a helpful passage—paragraph 6.23—that seems to represent a clear commitment to the appeals process. However, I have some concerns on the matter and some suggestions as to how the system might work.

Having seen some difficult cases, I think that there is a role for a system of independent appeals for adopters who have difficulties with the approval process; for birth parents, who are also important actors; and for third parties. I am thinking especially of the recent Klinsky case, in which a doctor had independent evidence that something was seriously remiss, wanted to be a whistleblower, but had no access to a suitable process. Appeals could encompass the concerns of all those stakeholders.

The starting point for discussion has to be the fact that most adoptions work extremely well and smoothly; about 95 per cent. of approvals occur without difficulty. However, the remaining 5 per cent. of cases often generate enormous bitterness and frustration. Because local authorities operate self-regulation systems, there is no outside appeal process so people turn to the law—as in the celebrated case to which I referred earlier.

As we know, the law is a cumbersome beast; it is slow and expensive. Adoption law is extremely complicated and requires expensive legal advice that people of ordinary means cannot afford. The legal process peters out, so people turn to the press and statements are made that compound the problems. The lack of an independent appeal process crystallises the difficulties.

Does the Minister agree that there is probably not the same enthusiasm for independent appeals in the professions—in the system and in social work

departments—as there is among adopters themselves? Indeed, there is some resistance to appeals. That is why I press my case and hope that the Minister will confirm his commitment.

Why does self-regulation not work? The problem is partly inherent in all such internal complaints systems. For example, despite all the good intentions, the police complaints procedure rarely produces satisfactory remedies, which is why the Home Secretary wants to make it more independent. There is an additional problem with adoption. I do not know whether the Minister will confirm this, but insurance is a particular problem. If a social services department admits liability, it blows its insurance cover. That serious technical problem prevents the openness that would be expected in an internal, self-regulating complaints process.

Such difficulties lead people to conclude that a proper, stand-alone independent appeals system should deal with the relatively small number of cases that produce a breakdown. I do not know how far the Minister has thought through the practical problems of operating such a system, but various suggestions have been made. The first suggestion is that the system should be broadly based and open to birth parents, adopters and third parties. An obvious requirement is that it should have a gatekeeper, so that frivolous complaints are not allowed and only serious investigations can take place. Clearly, there should be pre-selection, as with the ombudsman and similar schemes. The appeals need to be dealt with very quickly, otherwise the system would defeat the objective of speedy adoption—the key to the policy.

I do not know whether the Government have considered the suggestion that they will have to set up a body or a formal structure to deal with the ratification of the Hague convention—an issue that arises from the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999. That structure could provide a vehicle for an independent complaints appeals procedure. That is the main point that I want to make based on my own experience and discussions with the various adoption groups.

I am sure that the importance of speed is recognised in fact, it is stated explicitly in the White Paper but I want to make two specific points, the first of which is about infants. I understand that 2,200 children under the age of one are currently awaiting adoption, 770 of whom have waited for more than six months and 990 between two and six months—very young babies. Has any thought been given to creating a fast-track procedure for infants, as opposed to other categories of children?

My other question about speed relates to the text of the draft standards. The Government are clearly committed to six-month time horizons, making the process quicker. That is welcome, but how will they work? How will local authorities be required to report whether six months has been exceeded? Many of the emotive difficulties with inter-racial adoption are not about race, but about time periods. Everyone accepts that same-race placements are almost invariably best, but it is a matter of how quickly they can take place. The issue is very much one of speed and how time limits can be set and made meaningful.

I became involved in such problems in the first place because of overseas adoption. Apart from the difficulties of domestic adoption, we have a culture that is resistant to overseas adoption. For example, last year in this country, 350 such cases were approved; in France, it is 10 times that number. In talking to people in the social services profession, not necessarily those in my area, I have sensed a certain sniffiness and suspicion of the people who opt for overseas adoption. That is wholly unjustified; we live in an increasingly globalised environment. People have voluntary and paid jobs abroad and marry foreign husbands and wives, and it is often very natural to want to adopt from overseas. However, the system is extremely resistant to that.

As I understand it, the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999, which was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten), will make the process easier. However, without something to facilitate overseas adoptions to ensure that the proper channels are used overseas and in the United Kingdom, such adoptions will not become easier, or, if they do, they will happen in a highly irregular manner. The recent internet case is a good example of people using irregular or inappropriate channels. If there were a proper system of accredited agencies or an official agency that was supported with at least its start-up costs, there would be a proper, recognised and regulated procedure. That would help to avoid abuse.

I should be grateful for the Minister's reaction to those points, and I thank him for staying to reply to them.

10.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing a debate on the issues relating to the criteria for adoption. I pay tribute to him for the way in which he has presented his case with his customary skill and precision. He has put forward a strong case and made some important points.

The hon. Gentleman raised several issues to do with the White Paper and he also referred to the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999. He was right to say that his hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) introduced this important Act, and we are very pleased that he did. One of the things that it will do is impose an obligation on local authorities to provide a proper inter-country adoption service. The hon. Member for Twickenham asked whether a proper agency would facilitate the process; in future, that will be done by local authorities or approved adoption agencies. That is an important safeguard for the quality and the integrity of the inter-country adoption procedure. I know that he and his hon. Friend support that very much, as we do.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that the Act has not yet been brought into effect. I know that some Members will ask why not, since it was enacted in 1999. We have already brought one section of the Act into effect, and that relates to ensuring that people who want to adopt a child from abroad conduct a proper home assessment study in this country which has not been privately commissioned. Several concerns have been expressed about privately commissioned home study reports, and we have made sure that that practice will come to an end.

However the main thrust of the Act is to provide the legal platform to allow the United Kingdom to ratify the Hague convention. We have to ratify it as a United Kingdom, so the equivalent regulations and legislation have to pass through both the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Scottish Parliament has completed its processes but, unfortunately, the Northern

[Mr. John Hutton]

Ireland Assembly has not yet done that. I understand that it will do so later this summer, but we are not able to ratify the convention until the Northern Ireland Assembly has completed its deliberations. I hope that will be done soon, and I want to dispel any suggestion that we might be dragging our feet on ratifying the Hague convention. That is not so, but we have to ratify the convention as a United Kingdom.

The hon. Gentleman raised several important points about aspects of the White Paper that relate to national standards. He asked us to ensure that there is a bit more warmth, as regards the national standards, towards prospective adopters, and raised several important points about the appeal process. I am sure that he understands that the standards have been issued for consultation. We have not yet made any final decisions on what they will look like, and we shall have to wait to see what suggestions people make during the consultation exercise. We shall consider ways of improving the operation of the standards, and we shall examine carefully his comments about prospective adopters.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to reaffirm our commitment to the introduction of an independent appeals system for prospective adopters who might have been turned down by an adoption panel. As the White Paper made clear, we are fully committed to introducing a proper independent appeal system. There are number of reasons for doing that, and I shall mention two tonight. First, such a system would support good decision making in local authorities. I do not subscribe to the view that an independent appeal system will impede the process of coming to a speedy decision on adoption or will give rise to bad decisions because people are looking over their shoulders at the person standing behind them. It is important that people know that there is an independent and effective appeals procedure, and I believe that that will support, not impede, good decision making.

The second reason is simple. Concerns have been expressed about the process by which people are approved for adoption. The hon. Gentleman referred to that. Although national standards will help people to be confident that they are being treated fairly and properly, if an adoption panel decides to reject an application, the person concerned will have the right to go to an independent appeal process. It is important that we put behind us the arguments that people have been treated arbitrarily or unreasonably, because such claims are likely to impede our attempts to create greater confidence in the system. We want more people to offer themselves as adoptive parents.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned fast-tracking for infants. The adoption standards in the recent White Paper made it clear that we will ensure that voluntarily relinquished infants are placed for adoption, wherever possible, within three months. Disagreement would make that task harder, but we should be able to proceed more quickly if a child is voluntarily relinquished.

There is significant interest in the general matter of adoption. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the press and wider public interest in the adoption process which has been sparked by a long-running concern, as expressed by hon. Members, about the failures of the looked-after care system. We know that many children who leave care have limited prospects of employment and few educational qualifications. Many of them will experience periods of homelessness and joblessness. That is unacceptable. People in care deserve the same opportunities to enjoy a stable and secure family life as any other child. Unfortunately, they have been denied that because of the way in which the care system has worked. The Government are clear that adoption holds out a positive opportunity for young people in care to enjoy the opportunities that we have taken for granted for our children.

For those reasons, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister initiated a thorough review of adoption in February. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that my right hon. Friend commissioned the performance and innovation unit in the Cabinet Office to consider the evidence and make recommendations. The report was published on 7 July last year. Following extensive consultation, we published the White Paper "Adoption: a new approach" on 21 December. It outlines the most radical overhaul of adoption law and practice in more than 25 years and sets out a vision for high-quality public services that offer new opportunities for looked-after children. It is based on placing their needs first and designed entirely from their perspective.

We know that adoption works and want more children to benefit from the generosity and commitment of adoptive families. The White Paper sets a new national target to deliver a minimum 40 per cent. increase in the number of lasting adoptions by the year 2005, although I hope that the Government's measures will help to achieve a 50 per cent. increase in that period. Our aim must be to give many hundreds more looked-after children the chance to live as a permanent member of a stable, secure and loving new family.

To meet that target, we must attract more prospective adopters. The hon. Gentleman is right about that. We must attract adopters who are suitable to meet the needs of children in the care system. We need more ethnic minority and black adopters. We also need more adopters who are able to take on sibling groups, because that is a particular issue. We also know that there is widespread concern about the fairness, clarity and consistency of the adoption process. Many people have explained that that could be deterring many potential adopters from coming forward.

To help to address those problems, we published the first ever set of national adoption standards. They will help to drive up the standards of service for children and adoptive parents in all parts of the country, making adoption services faster, fairer and more transparent. They have been written to ensure that looked-after children, prospective adopters, birth families and the general public understand what they can expect from the adoption service. They will also set challenging new targets to speed up the adoption process. I shall say a little more about that in a moment, because the hon. Gentleman expressed concern about that aspect of our proposals.

The draft national standards are underpinned by a clear set of values that govern the way in which adoption services should be managed. Most importantly, the national standards clearly spell out that the welfare, safety and needs of children must be put at the centre of the adoption process. It is important for us all to remember that adoption is about meeting the needs of children, not the needs of adults.

The Prime Minister's review of adoption identified many concerns about the current adoption process. In particular, many concerns were expressed about the assessment process for prospective adopters. At the moment that is widely perceived to be too slow, too intrusive and too bureaucratic. We are tackling those concerns.

The standards will set out how prospective adopters will be welcomed and treated in an open and fair way. In future, written eligibility criteria will be provided. People will not automatically be excluded on grounds of their age, health or other factors. There must be no blanket bans based on arbitrary criteria, because they are unfair to children who are waiting to be adopted and to prospective adopters.

The standards also make it clear that the best family for a child will be one that reflects their birth heritage. I know that the hon. Gentleman was concerned about a constituency case in which that was a controversial issue. However, no child should be denied a loving adoptive family solely on the grounds that the parents have different racial or cultural backgrounds. The primary consideration in determining a child's adoptive parents must be the child's needs, safety and well-being.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear, as I was, that current research—such as that recently published by Rushton and Minis—has confirmed that although a same-race placement is preferable, it should not be pursued at the expense of a child drifting in the care system. Our guidance to adoption agencies strongly reinforces this view.

The draft standards also propose new time scales for processing applications from prospective adopters. They can expect a written response to a first inquiry within a week; a follow-up interview and an invitation to a preparation meeting within two months, and a decision within six months of making an application to proceed. That will be a substantial improvement on the current arrangements.

We accept that delivering that will be a challenge for local social services departments. However, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues have found, as I have, that some social services departments are able to achieve that already. The issue, as in the national health service, is consistency of performance and of raising the standards of all authorities to those achieved by the best. We know that that can be done because some authorities are doing it already. Clearly, the hurdles are not insurmountable. Social services departments will need to be supported by clear direction of public policy and backed up by investment of new resources. I hope that we are providing a clear lead on that.

For foster carers who want to adopt a child, when it is in the child's interests to do so, the application will in future be processed in just three months.

We need to recruit more adopters, however, and from more diverse ethnic backgrounds, and that is a priority too. In future, information on becoming an adoptive parent will be provided promptly, and will include details about what is expected of adopters. The assessment process will be faster, fairer and more transparent, with prospective adopters being given the opportunity to attend preparation meetings, to learn more about the children waiting for adoption and to talk to others who have adopted children. I hope that the measures will help us to treat adopters better and to support them better so that we can attract more adoptive parents to adopt more children successfully.

As the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out, prospective adopters will have, for the first time, a right to a wholly independent review of their application, should they be turned down by an adoption agency. The PIU report recommended that an appeals mechanism for potential adopters should be put in place in all local authorities, whereby applicants who have been rejected could have their case reviewed by a panel in a neighbouring area. Feedback from the consultation exercise on the report showed that many people were concerned that this would not be independent enough. I agree.

That is why we have decided to introduce a new independent review procedure for potential adopters whose application is rejected. For the first time, prospective adopters who are to be turned down will have the right to a fully independent review of their case. We will establish an independent body, appointed by the Secretary of State. Its role will be to set up a new adoption panel to look at all the evidence again, and to make a new recommendation to the agency, either in support of the original decision or against it. The agency will have to take account of that new recommendation before making its final decision. The new panel will be entirely independent, with no representation on it from the original panel. I accept that the Department will need to do more work to finalise the details of how the new independent appeals system will work. We will bring forward our proposals in the near future.

This year the Government will carry out a fundamental review of the adoption assessment process and the operation of adoption panels, including consideration of streamlining the assessment of "second time around" adopters, to explore what improvements could be made, with a view to implementing improvements during 2002.

In the meantime, we will be working with local authorities to review current assessment practice and to identify areas of best practice. We will also be consulting stakeholders later in the year on how the assessment process could be tailored for different groups such as foster carers, friends and families, and those who have adopted previously.

The White Paper also spelled out that a clearer legal duty will be placed on local councils to plan for and provide comprehensive support services for adoptive families. That will apply equally to all adopters, including those adopting children from overseas. Families adopting children will be entitled to have their needs for support services properly assessed. They will have access to a comprehensive package of post-adoption support, including adoption allowances, in a way that is more consistent throughout the country—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, Mr. SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at twenty-nine minutes to Eleven o'clock.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

House of Commons

Wednesday 31 January 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Corus (Llanwern)

1. **Mr. Damian Green** (Ashford): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer with regard to the future of the Corus steelworks plant at Llanwern. [146520]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): During the past weeks, I have of course discussed the future of Llanwern with my right hon. Friend the Member for Newport, East (Mr. Howarth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), and that of the steel industry generally with my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales. In addition, I have twice met Sir Brian Moffat, the chairman of Corus.

I have to tell the House that the Government have not been given any detail about the forthcoming restructuring of the British steel industry, much of which is, of course, based in Wales. The company has not engaged with the Government or with the National Assembly. I regret that and urge Corus to recognise the record of our steelworks and our steelworkers and not to take any short-term decision which would have devastating effects on our communities.

Mr. Green: The Secretary of State paints a very disturbing picture. Will he acknowledge that some of the problems—only some, I agree—that have led to this terrible crisis are the result of explicit Government policies, which have led to business rates being too high; the climate change levy, which particularly affects steelworks; and the web of bureaucracy and interference that they have tied around manufacturing industry? There are clearly faults on many sides in this terrible crisis. Will he accept responsibility for the fact that the Government have caused some of the problems that are presenting such a terrible prospect for the steel industry in Wales?

Mr. Murphy: I certainly do not accept that. I doubt whether many of the hon. Gentleman's constituents will lose their jobs in the next few days; many hundreds, if not thousands, of my constituents certainly will. I strongly reject the points that he has made. Let me tell him that I have met the chairman of Corus, and none of the points to which the hon. Gentleman referred and in respect of which we have made some representations and changes—for example, rates in Wales—would make any difference whatever to the decisions that Corus proposes to take in the next couple of days. That is what the chairman of Corus said. He said that he intends to base his decision on the restructuring of the steel industry, not on whether the company is paying too much in rates in Cardiff, Llanwern or wherever. That is not the case.

In fact, Corus has been unmoved by any offer of help whatever. The company is intent on making its decisions entirely on its own. I repeat that our steelworkers are the best in Europe; they produce the highest output per employee and our Welsh plants are the most efficient and productive in the world. In 1998–99 alone, they increased their productivity from 533 to 571 tonnes per person, which is well above that of any other country in the whole of Europe.

The devastating effects of what might happen in the restructuring will fall on my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) and, as I said earlier, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newport, East and my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West, but right across Wales—north and south—the effects of the decision will be calamitous. It is a decision entirely made by the company, based on what I fear are short-term considerations.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Does Brian Moffat's contemptible refusal even to consider the offer from a consortium to take over Llanwern prove the reasons behind his plans? The decision is nothing to do with the marvellous productivity at Llanwern, which is at least 20 per cent. better than the Dutch arm of the business; it is entirely about the fact that he said, "We don't want more competition." The "we" that he was referring to is Corus after the assets have been stripped from Llanwern and the hard-won contracts that have been earned there are handed over to the Dutch arm of the industry. If the decision is taken, it will be enormously damaging to a bedrock industry that has served Newport, Wales and the United Kingdom for many years. That will be an act of industrial vandalism. Can we not impose some common sense on the company and make it realise that it has a responsibility to Newport, to Wales and to the work force of the United Kingdom?

Mr. Murphy: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. He worked for many years in the Llanwern steelworks, so he is perfectly aware of that plant's efficient record. I wrote to Sir Brian Moffat to tell him that the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation bid had been made and that Corus should take the bid seriously. The company has rejected the bid, but I hope that it does not reject the vote of confidence in the Llanwern steelworks that the bid undoubtedly represented. It was a vote of confidence in the workers, in the management and in the efficiency of the plant. I agree entirely with my hon. Friend.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Does the Secretary of State agree that the Conservatives are hardly in a position to criticise, given that they presided over the

largest loss of steel jobs in the history of Wales? Some 35,000 to 40,000 jobs were lost under their leadership. Furthermore, does he agree that it is not the time for any one party in Westminster or Cardiff to attempt to score cheap political points when the Welsh economy stands to lose thousands of jobs? Does he agree that we must do all that we can to ensure that the Welsh Assembly has as loud a voice as possible to influence the decisions of that company?

Mr. Murphy: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. It certainly is not the time to start making party political points about the future of the steel industry, particularly when Corus has said that whatever any Government could do will have no effect on the decision that the company is likely to take. All of us in Wales—whatever party we represent—must fear that 5,000 or 6,000 direct jobs could be put at risk. In addition to those, literally thousands of indirect jobs in all sorts of industries and services will be affected. It will be devastating news for Wales if what is predicted comes about. Once again, I appeal to Corus, if it has such decisions in mind, to rethink them.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): The Secretary of State may be aware that, on the day that Corus was formed, I received a call from its managing director, Tony Vickers, to tell me that there was no threat to jobs in Ebbw Vale and that the plant was secure. If we are to believe the serious press, that plant faces closure. We are told that redundancies will take place in Corus because of financial problems. If this is so, will my right hon. Friend comment on the fact that, since it was set up, Corus has handed out £700 million to its shareholders, appropriated £900 million from the workers' pension fund, wasted £135 million by buying companies abroad and given millions of pounds to sacked chief executives and massive wage increases to former Dutch managers? Is he surprised at what is happening to the industry and the steelworkers, given that Sir Brian Moffat has said that he was interested not in making steel but only in making money?

Mr. Speaker: May I appeal for very brief questions?

Mr. Murphy: I understand my hon. Friend's point. He knows that I worked in Ebbw Vale from 1971 until I came to the House. When I first started working in that town, more than 10,000 people worked in the steel industry. Today, there are fewer than 1,000 working in the industry, and the loss of those jobs to the people of Blaenau Gwent would be catastrophic. I know that, and I also know that the production and efficiency of the works at Ebbw Vale are second to none. With my hon. Friend, I hope and wish that any decision that is taken in the next couple of days will not close down that very efficient plant.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I join the Secretary of State in deploring the shameful way in which Corus has refused to listen to its work force and refused to listen to representations from all political parties in Wales. However, although the axe is being wielded by Corus, the death sentence was passed by his Government and their attitude to manufacturing. There has been a lack of clarity on the future of the euro and a refusal to put forward regional fiscal policies, and the Government need to send out messages on those issues. Does he accept that the decision is a wake-up call to his Government to get manufacturing right in Wales and in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Murphy: Let me repeat what I have said already to the House. On all the occasions that I and the First Secretary have met Sir Brian, no blame has been attached to any Government or any Government policies for the steel industry. The hon. Gentleman knows that the relationship between the euro and the pound has improved and that Corus has benefited to the tune of many tens of millions of pounds in the past few weeks. However, it has already said publicly and privately that that issue is not the reason for the restructuring that now faces us. There are all sorts of factors, but the principal one is that the company wants to slim down its manufacturing base in the United Kingdom. We are asking Corus to think again, realise its commitments to our communities and ensure that its policy is based on long-term consideration of the economy and on its own prospects. Its decisions should not be based on short-termism, as they are currently.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): Shotton steelworkers thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary for what they have done to help them. However, has the First Secretary told Sir Brian Moffat in any of their meetings about the deep anxieties of the Shotton work force, who fear both closure and the loss of their cold strip mill, where 300 jobs are at stake? The Shotton work force are one of the most magnificent of their kind in western Europe. We could not suffer any more job losses after experiencing Europe's biggest redundancy in 1980—a redundancy that was, incidentally, implemented by the Conservative party.

Mr. Murphy: First, I acknowledge the enormous amount of work that my right hon. Friend has done on behalf of his steelworkers and the communities in Shotton and in Alyn and Deeside generally. I was with him not so very long ago at the steelworks. I have no doubt that the First Secretary has stressed in his meetings with Corus and others the importance of recognising that the Welsh Assembly and the Government are intent on trying to ensure that all the United Kingdom's steelworks, including those in north Wales, are saved from destruction.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I, too, call on Sir Brian Moffat to think again about the enormous impact that the job losses would have not only in Llanwern, but throughout the whole of Wales. Indeed, devastating rippling effects would be felt not only throughout Wales, but in every part of the United Kingdom. Sir Brian Moffat would tear the guts out of steel in Wales if he closed Llanwern. I applaud any action taken by the Secretary of State and other Ministers in negotiating with Corus to ensure that the jobs remain safe in Wales.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to Sir Brian Moffat's comment that business rates had no effect on the company's decision. I understand, however, that Corus made representations to the National Assembly for Wales many months ago about the enormous impact of the business rates. Has the right hon. Gentleman made

representations to the Chancellor of the Exchequer or the Prime Minister suggesting that the climate change levy be scrapped?

Mr. Murphy: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's commitment to ensuring that we work together on the matter and ask Corus to rethink what it has in mind. He referred to negotiations, but no negotiations have occurred between Corus and the Government or the National Assembly for Wales. Our meetings have dealt only with general policy and there have been no discussions on the detail of whatever announcements await us. On the other issues that he mentioned, I told the House earlier about our suggestion to Corus that we could negotiate on matters such as business rates. Those matters were not taken into account, however, and are not relevant to the decision making of Corus. I wish that they were.

Mr. Evans: It is obvious that Corus cannot escape blame for the way in which it is handling its decision. For those who are waiting for proposals at Llanwern and other steelworks throughout Wales, the company's indecision must be torture. I implore Sir Brian Moffat to sit at the table and negotiate in the long-term interests of the Welsh steel industry and those who have the skills to work in it, to ensure a viable future. Will the Secretary of State implore the Prime Minister himself to become directly involved with the steel crisis? Will he tell the House exactly what direct action the Prime Minister has taken so far to try to save the jobs? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before the Secretary of State responds, the House must settle down. There is far too much noise.

Mr. Murphy: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has, of course, already met Sir Brian Moffat, only a week ago. As I said, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the First Secretary and I have also met Sir Brian. We will continue to meet, but there is no point in having meetings unless the company is prepared to talk about reality. In the meetings that have so far been held, I fear that there have been no concrete negotiations whatever.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I implore Corus to ensure that when it next meets my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister or myself, it discusses details and restructuring proposals. Perhaps then it will realise that what it has in mind will have devastating effects on my constituents and those of many other hon. Members.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): Following the unusually long delay in making the announcement, and given the great importance to Wales of the steel industry, will my right hon. Friend request that a delegation of Members be present at the board meeting where the decisions are made, so that we can put the arguments for keeping the steel industry in Wales going?

Mr. Murphy: I shall certainly make that point to Corus and to others engaged in the process. However, if Corus's record of engagement so far is anything to go by, it is unlikely to accede to that or any other request. It is disgraceful that a major public company such as this simply is not willing to listen to the leading elected Members representing the people of the country.

Unemployment

2. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): What discussions he has had with the First Secretary on unemployment in Wales. [146522]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State regularly meets the First Minister, and I hold regular meetings with the Assembly Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, when we discuss a wide range of issues including unemployment levels in Wales.

The Government's continued firm handling of their sound economic policy has seen a significant reduction in the number of people claiming benefits in Wales, with a fall in the claimant count from 4.7 per cent. in December 1999 to 4.3 per cent. in December 2000.

Mr. Brady: I thank the Minister for his reply, although it was somewhat selective. He knows, as I do, that unemployment in Wales is rising, and with manufacturing in Wales now under threat, there is a danger that it may rise further. Will he and the Secretary of State, who appear to be the only people in the country who do not recognise that the climate change levy will hurt the British steel industry, make urgent representations to the Government to try to ensure that that damaging tax is scrapped?

Mr. Hanson: I hate to disparage the hon. Gentleman's facts, but since the general election youth unemployment in Wales has fallen by three quarters and long-term unemployment has fallen by 60 per cent. I will take no lessons on tax from the hon. Gentleman. The Government are committed to tackling unemployment. I notice that the hon. Gentleman did not mention that unemployment in Altrincham and Sale, West has fallen by 52 per cent. since the general election.

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): During the devolution debate, the nationalists and the Liberals said that people overseas were queueing up to invest in Wales as soon as the Welsh Assembly was established. That has been shown to be patent nonsense. Who is responsible for an employment and industrial strategy in Wales? Is it his office, the Welsh Assembly, the Welsh Development Agency, training and enterprise councils or local government?

Mr. Hanson: There is a partnership agreement between the National Assembly—which is responsible for the Welsh Development Agency—my right hon. Friend, myself and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, and that is achieving results. As I said, there has been a 60 per cent. fall in long-term unemployment and a fall of three quarters in youth unemployment. Online finance enterprise has created 400 jobs in south Wales, and Wireless Systems has created 250 jobs in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. That demonstrates that our policies are working.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): In the Government's discussions with Corus, did they ask its chairman, in the event that Llanwern closes, how much of Llanwern's

capacity could be made at Port Talbot and how much would be transferred to Corus's plant at Ijmuiden in Holland?

Mr. Hanson: We have met Corus, but as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, there has been little discussion with the company about the details of its package, about which it has kept quiet. We deplore the fact that it has not given information to the Government. There are still opportunities for Corus to discuss proposals with the Government, and we would welcome that.

Mr. Martin Caton (Gower): The good news that my hon. Friend has given the House about employment in Wales is obviously right, but I know that he will appreciate that it is of little comfort to the workers at Valeo Climate Control in my constituency, who learned that the French-owned company intends to close that plant by July. The work force are gutted; they have done everything and more in recent years to improve productivity. They are now recognised by Valeo as a centre of excellence in terms of productivity, quality and flexibility. Will my hon. Friend and our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State meet a delegation of hon. Members who represent workers at Valeo and representatives of the work force at Valeo to discuss saving those jobs?

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Mr. Caton) to discuss the situation at Valeo. I am saddened by the announcement that 337 jobs will be lost. I believe that production will be maintained until the end of July, and I am hopeful that the Welsh Development Agency will be able to pursue with the company the possibility of a new buyer for the site in the near future. I give my hon. Friend the commitment that we will meet him.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): We have rightly spent more than 20 minutes speaking about Llanwern, but another major public company, Dairy Crest, today announced the loss of 800 jobs, including 270 at Marshfield in Cardiff and 270 at Carmarthen. Last Friday, as the hon. Member for Gower (Mr. Caton) pointed out, the closure of Valeo's plant at Gorseinon was announced, with the loss of about 330 jobs. On Monday last week, Dewhirst announced that 300 jobs were likely to go at Fishguard, after announcing 175 job losses at Lampeter.

The falling trend of unemployment that the Government inherited is rapidly disappearing. Every day we hear of job losses in Wales. What are the Minister and the Secretary of State saying to the Lib-Lab coalition in Cardiff, which seems to include the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik), judging by his earlier question? What are Ministers saying to the Lib-Lab coalition about the way in which it is presiding over what was a good news story about jobs in Wales?

Mr. Hanson: Obviously, I regret the decision announced today about the Carmarthen and Marshfield plants, but it will come as no surprise to the hon. Gentleman that the same company announced on the same day that there is to be an expansion at Wrexham, with a further 175 jobs.

I say sincerely to the hon. Gentleman that the Government are committed to creating employment. Unemployment is falling in Wales. We have the right economic conditions. There will always be ups and downs in the employment market, and we regret that. We will work with companies and with my hon. Friends in the Administration in Cardiff to create employment. What will damage employment prospects in Wales are severe cuts in public spending from the Conservatives, the madness of their economic policies and the continuation of what they did for 18 years.

Health and Education

3. **Mr. Jon Owen Jones** (Cardiff, Central): What recent discussions he has had with Secretaries in the Welsh Assembly about health and education spending in Wales. [146523]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I regularly meet the Health and Education Secretaries to discuss health and education issues in Wales. Spending in both of those areas is often part of our agenda.

Mr. Jones: Is my hon. Friend aware that I have received representations from head teachers in my constituency, members of staff and governors, who believe that they have been unfairly treated in the payment, particularly the direct payment, of moneys to schools in Wales? They look across the border and see large sums being spent directly in schools in England, and they believe that they have been unfairly treated. Will my hon. Friend raise these matters with the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning when he next meets her?

Mr. Hanson: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The £1.35 billion extra for health and the £551 million for education that the Government have given the National Assembly are significant. My hon. Friend raises an important issue about the expenditure and distribution of those funds, and I will discuss the matter with the Minister in the Assembly shortly, when I next meet her.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Following the decision of the Scottish Executive last week about the funding of social care for the elderly, what discussions has the Minister held with the Welsh Assembly and Ministers in Wales about the unfairness to elderly people in Wales, let alone those in England?

Mr. Hanson: Those matters will form part of our on-going discussions with the National Assembly about the implications of the Scottish decision. The £551 million for education and £1.35 billion for health that the Government have allocated would not be available if the hon. Gentleman's party came to power. Let us not talk about semantics. His party is committed to cutting that resource. Our party is committed to investing that money. Whatever else happens with the health service, under this Government there is more money in Wales for the health service there.

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): What measures can my hon. Friend take to ensure that education in Wales serves industry so that we have people with the right skills to take advantage of the jobs that will come to Wales?

Mr. Hanson: I know that my hon. Friend battles hard for his constituency and for employment. Local authorities will use the more than £500 million extra for education in Wales to build up skills. I reiterate the important point that the money would not be available if the official Opposition were in government. They would cut those resources for Wales.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [146550] **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 31 January.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Dr. Ladyman: Yesterday, we had to confront the pain of the parents whose children were involved in the organ-stripping scandal at Alder Hey hospital. Does that not put in perspective some of the trivia in which we politicians sometimes get bogged down? After the malpractice at Bristol royal infirmary, the horrors of Harold Shipman and the scandalous events about which we heard yesterday, should we not focus on the need to drive through reform and rebuild public confidence in clinical practice in this country?

The Prime Minister: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. All hon. Members will have been appalled by the findings of the report published yesterday, and I condemn, without reservation, the practices at Alder Hey, which have added to the grief and pain of parents and relatives who had suffered enough through losing their children. Unfortunately, the chief medical officer's census of organ retention shows that Alder Hey was not alone in that practice. It is therefore essential that we introduce measures to amend the Human Tissue Act 1961 to clarify the basis on which consent is given, ensure that organs and tissue are specified, and make it a criminal offence to ignore the response of relatives.

As we focus on those appalling events and take action to ensure that they are not repeated, we should also pay tribute to the work that the vast majority of doctors, surgeons and nurses undertake day in, day out in our health service. We should not allow appalling circumstances to disguise the fact that, in the main, they provide a fantastic service to the people of this country.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): I concur with the Prime Minister's condemnation of the practices at Alder Hey and look forward to the introduction of new measures. I also congratulate and pay tribute to the great majority of health service staff.

Let us consider another pledge that the Prime Minister made in recent years. He promised that the new asylum laws that came into force last year would

"deter the bogus asylum seeker."—[*Official Report*, 16 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 386.]

Does he accept that, once again, he has failed miserably to deliver?

The Prime Minister: No, I do not. Decisions are now outstripping applications for the first time. Last year, 110,000 decisions were made. The latest asylum figures, which have just been published, show a sharp reduction in applications. It is correct that large numbers of asylum applications have been made here, as they have elsewhere in Europe. However, the Conservative party opposes the important measures that we have introduced to deal with that. It is all very well for the right hon. Gentleman to raise the matter, but he always refuses to tackle it.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister says that there has been a reduction in the number of applications. However, the figures that were published last Thursday constitute an all-time record of nearly 100,000. It is a good job that he does not give such answers to his press secretary; he would get the sack these days.

On the Government's figures, unfounded asylum applications are running at 78 per cent. of a hugely increased number. The Government said that they would disperse 65,000 people, but they dispersed only a fraction of that number. The voucher system has failed and a panic review is under way. Will the Prime Minister confirm that the latest United Nations figures show that more asylum seekers came to Britain than any other European country last year?

The Prime Minister: What I said was that the last month's figures showed a sharp fall, which they do. However, it is not the case that Britain is the only country suffering an increase in the numbers of asylum seekers. Between January and October last year, Ireland had a 65 per cent. increase, France a 30 per cent. increase, Sweden a 28 per cent. increase, Belgium a 20 per cent. increase and the Netherlands a 15 per cent. increase.

The question is what measures are necessary to reduce those figures. We have introduced two measures. One is to take away cash benefits for asylum seekers; the other is to make sure that those who bring asylum seekers in, in the backs of lorries and by other means, are subject to criminal penalty. The two measures that we have introduced are important in reducing the number of asylum seekers. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that it is his policy to get rid of both those measures?

Mr. Hague: It is our policy to take a much tougher approach, and the Prime Minister knows it. Normally, he seeks to amend his answers by going to *Hansard* afterwards. He does not normally amend them in his very next answer, claiming that he had said that it was only in the last month that the number of applications had fallen, but omitting to say that the number of applications in the last quarter was higher than in the same quarter of the

previous year, and omitting to say that in the last quarter, the figure was higher than in any quarter of last year, and that the number of applications is, therefore, rising.

The reason for that increase is that the Government have been unfailingly weak. They have promised new laws, but the only result is that the crisis has deepened. By allowing Britain to become a soft touch for those who wish to abuse the system, and by making life much more difficult for genuine refugees by failing to deal with the problem, has not the Prime Minister once again been all spin and no delivery?

The Prime Minister: First, let us deal with the right hon. Gentleman's allegation that we are a soft touch for asylum seekers. We have taken two measures to ensure that our rules are tougher. The right hon. Gentleman said that he wanted tough action. These are the two measures: we withdraw cash benefits and we make sure that there are penalties for people bringing people into the country illegally. A third measure that we have introduced is to increase dramatically the number of people dealing with claims, which is why the backlog has dropped from more than 100,000 to a little more than 60,000, and why the number of decisions being made is now higher than the number of fresh applications coming in. Those are the three measures. If the right hon. Gentleman wants a serious policy debate about how we ensure that people do not abuse the system, will he say which of those measures he supports and which he does not?

Q2. [146551] **Ms Joan Ryan** (Enfield, North): My constituents are well aware of the investment that the Government have made in the national health service, because our hospital, Chase Farm hospital, was under threat of closure for 10 years under the previous Government. It is now secure and has a newly refurbished accident and emergency department. However, it has many old buildings that need replacing. Everyone except members of the shadow Cabinet thinks that those are important issues, and we fear that if the matter were left to them, we should never see a new building. For the peace of mind of my constituents and many others, will the Prime Minister re-state the commitment of this Government and any future Labour Government to continuing to invest in the fabric of our hospitals

The Prime Minister: I certainly will. We will continue the record investment going into the health service, which is ensuring that accident and emergency departments up and down the country are being refurbished and that more nurses are coming into the health service.

The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) made an interesting speech yesterday. I do not doubt that hon. Members know that he has been saying that he now wants to match our commitments on public spending. He wants to match our commitments on health, education and so on. This is what he said yesterday:

"At the next election Labour will be proposing large increases in public spending."

That is dead right. There will be spending on nurses, doctors, teachers and police. He goes on—*[Interruption.]* I know that Opposition Members do not want to listen to this, but they are going to have to. The right hon. Gentleman goes on:

"We have argued repeatedly that these increases are unsustainable."

If they are unsustainable, how is he going to match them?

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Moving on from asylum and immigration and this afternoon's latest dose of pebbledash populism from those on the Tory Front Bench, will the Prime Minister turn his attention to long-term care for the elderly? In Scotland, long-term care in the home will be provided free. Why is he prepared to go on justifying charging people for that in England, Wales and Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: The devolved Parliament and the devolved Executive are perfectly entitled to decide to provide that free care. We believe that the money would be better spent elsewhere in the national health service. I would say to the right hon. Gentleman only that we cannot spend the same money twice.

Mr. Kennedy: The Prime Minister must acknowledge, however, that the Sutherland report, which led to that policy initiative, was UK-wide. If it is good enough for one part of the UK, why is it not good enough for the rest?

The Prime Minister: That is a difficult argument to use in respect of devolution as people are perfectly entitled to use their money and overall resources in different ways. We have decided that it is best to have free nursing care, which will mean improvements for many thousands of people in our country. The question is simply one of resources. In the end, as I have said to the right hon. Gentleman many times, we have to decide how best to spend the money. We believe that it would be better spent on other things in the NHS, particularly as about seven out of 10 of those who receive personal care already receive assistance from the state. For that reason, we believe that the additional money—it would cost about £1 billion to achieve free care in Britain as a whole—would be better spent elsewhere in the NHS. Again, the devolved Executive are entitled to create such a difference. That is the consequence of devolution.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Has the Prime Minister had a chance to look into the proposal that I put to him recently about growing surpluses in the miners' pension fund and the amount that has gone to the Government since the Tory privatisation of the industry in the mid-1990s? Will he have a look at the matter with a view to ensuring that, in agreement with the trustees of the miners' pension fund, a lump sum should be paid to every single retired miner and widow? That would put clear blue water between us and the Tories. When they were in power, they shut every pit in Derbyshire and many other coalfields, and they would not pay the miners a penny piece.

The Prime Minister: Under the mineworkers' pension scheme, the income of its members has risen by about 30 per cent., but there are provisions that protect the Government, who have a contingent liability of, I think

£20 billion under the scheme. I will certainly look carefully into what my hon. Friend has said, but I am afraid that I can give him no guarantees.

St. Ives

Q3. [146552] **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): When he next intends to visit the St. Ives constituency.

The Prime Minister: I am always delighted to come to Cornwall, but I regret that I have no immediate plans to do so.

Mr. George: That is a pity, because we would love to celebrate jointly the memory of succeeding in achieving objective 1 status for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. Is the Prime Minister aware that, a year after the start date, not a penny piece of objective 1 money has gone to any capital projects and that local people are increasingly frustrated at the lack of progress, red tape, the complexity, the meddlesome quangos and unnecessary Government intervention? Will he please intervene on our behalf, cut through the nonsense, and give us the money and the power to get on with delivering the sustainable economic development that Cornwall so justly deserves?

The Prime Minister: It says here that objective 1 programmes have got off to a good start, which seems rather inconsistent with what the hon. Gentleman has said. As I understand it, the first wave of projects has already been approved and announced, and will total some £7 million. In the end, it is obviously for local partnerships to make programmes work because of the procedures that have to be gone through. Money is coming from the Government and the European Union and it is, of course, important that it should be sensibly spent. The Government are making every effort to encourage local partnerships, but it is up to them to set the pace on the ground.

Ms Candy Atherton (Falmouth and Camborne): I too would welcome my right hon. Friend to St. Ives and west Cornwall.

It was, of course, the Labour Government who delivered objective 1 status for Cornwall, and it is the Labour Government who are ensuring that it will succeed. I cannot think of two things that the Liberal Democrats have done for Cornwall; can my right hon. Friend?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on being infinitely more on-message than I was a moment ago. Of course, she is absolutely right. We are delighted that we have secured objective 1 status not just for Cornwall but for other parts of the country. That was part of a settlement made in Berlin, which meant that the British rebate was protected and will also mean that, for the first time since we joined the European Union, our contributions over the coming years will be more like those of France, Italy and similar countries. We protected the British national interest, but we also secured a very good deal for Cornwall.

Engagements

Q4. [146553] **Mr. John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings): Two weeks ago, in answer to a question from my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister made a promise to the House. He pledged that he would introduce legislation in this Session—those are the words he used: "this Session"—to make adoption easier. Can he tell us which aspects of his White Paper on adoption require primary legislation, and when the House can expect to see it?

The Prime Minister: The short answer is that I cannot say offhand exactly which aspects require primary legislation and which do not require legislation. I can say, however, that we can push ahead with those that do not require legislation. In respect of those that do, I expect my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health to present proposals shortly. I very much hope that those proposals will have the support of the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues.

Q5. [146554] **Mr. Hilary Benn** (Leeds, Central): My right hon. Friend has strongly supported medical research, arguing that patients should not be denied its benefits. Is he aware, however, that of the 25 million people in Africa with HIV and AIDS, only one in a thousand can gain access to the life-prolonging drugs created by that research, because they are simply too expensive? Does he agree that the pharmaceutical companies have a moral obligation to make such drugs available to the people of Africa at a price that they can afford?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend may know that the Chancellor is looking at ways of actively encouraging the process, and ensuring that vaccines are available to people in Africa at a reasonable cost. It is absolutely terrifying to think that 95 per cent. of those with HIV live in developing countries, and that 70 per cent. are now in sub-Saharan Africa.

We are contributing to the effort to fund the process of finding a vaccine. We have invested some £14 million in the international AIDS vaccine initiative, and are also putting money into the treatment of other diseases in Africa such as malaria and tuberculosis. Moreover, as my hon. Friend will know, under this Government, the amount of aid and development money has been considerably increased. I should like us to take a range of initiatives, not just nationally but internationally through the G8 and the European Union, so that the scandal of HIV-AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa can be regarded as a matter that the whole international community should combat.

Mr. Hague: Was the Prime Minister's press secretary speaking for the Prime Minister last Friday when he gave his extraordinary briefing against the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson)?

The Prime Minister: Of course, he always speaks for me. I should add, however, that the right hon. Gentleman should not believe all the representations that he has read in the press.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister must be losing his grip on reality as well as losing his grip on his Cabinet. Given that he praised the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in the House last Wednesday but then sent out his press secretary on Friday to rubbish the right hon. Gentleman are we to understand that he did not have the

courage to express his views in the House, or are we to understand that the terms used about the former Minister, who was described as "detached", "lacking focus" and being in the same mental state as the former Secretary of State for Wales, the right hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr. Davies), were meant to be complimentary?

The Prime Minister: He did not say that last bit at all, and he also paid tribute to the former Northern Ireland Secretary.

Mr. Hague: So it was all meant to be complimentary. No doubt when the press secretary described the Chancellor as having psychological flaws, that was also meant to be complimentary, and constituted a great tribute.

The Prime Minister looks hurt because we have dared to raise the issue that has consumed his Government for the past week—which has involved the sacking, at the instigation of his press secretary, of a Cabinet Minister who has since been rubbished by half the Cabinet. The Government have spent the last week in civil war. The Prime Minister has been rubbishing the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, while the rest of the Cabinet dine out on crocodile tears and champagne.

Is this not the real verdict on this Government, without an inquiry? A Government of spin and dishonesty—guilty. A culture of cronyism and favours—guilty. A Prime Minister who promised a new type of politics and has once again failed to deliver—guilty.

The Prime Minister: Shall I tell the House what the Conservative party is really angry about? Last week, my official spokesman compared Conservative economic policy to that of Mickey Mouse. I want to make it clear that he has been reprimanded strongly for that. We are a fan of Mickey Mouse. It was wrong to compare Conservative economic policy to that of Mickey Mouse.

I know exactly why the Leader of the Opposition wants to go back to the matter that he has raised. We have done a little research on the questions that he has asked in the past few months. He has asked one on Northern Ireland, two on adoption, four on the Hindujas—and another three, I suppose, today—seven on the dome and 14 on Europe. On education, he has asked none; on pensions, none; on transport, none; on jobs, none; and on poverty, none. How many has he asked on the countryside, the issue that Conservative Members care about so much? The answer, again, is a big zero.

The Leader of the Opposition, who has nothing to say about any serious policy, is raising those types of issues. I am not hurt by that. *[Interruption.]* No, I am not hurt by it. I am delighted by it because it shows that, when it comes to jobs, the economy, schools, hospitals and crime, we win and he loses.

Mr. Marsha Singh (Bradford, West): Will the Prime Minister join me in extending his profoundest sympathy to my constituents and to others in the United Kingdom who have lost family and friends in the greatest earthquake disaster in Indian history, a terrible human disaster? Although I welcome what the Government have already done—£10 million in aid has been made available—will he assure me and the House that he will monitor the situation and that, if more needs to be done, more will be done?

The Prime Minister: I certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. The Department for International Development has already reacted quickly not merely in terms of the aid that has been made available—some of it has already been passed on—but in respect of the people. It has attempted, with other countries, to ensure that we send out teams of experts, people who can help with the terrible disaster. Our deepest sympathy goes to the people in India who have been affected and to relatives and friends not just there, but here too.

Q6. [146555] **Mr. Richard Spring** (West Suffolk): Is the Prime Minister aware that, since he took office, in the county of Suffolk, there are 40 fewer police officers, crime has risen by 20 per cent. and, most horrifically and shockingly, crimes of violence are up 60 per cent? Only last week, the small post office in my rural Suffolk village was held up with almost unimaginable savagery. That is why so many of my constituents feel that the Prime Minister has let them down and that he misled them at the last general election.

The Prime Minister: Of course, it is appalling when a robbery takes place, as happened in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. As he knows, we are putting in more money to fund more officers on the beat up and down the country, which is why, over the next few years, we will increase the number of police to the largest ever in this country. We are managing to do that only because of the extra investment that we are putting in.

There will come a point when the Conservative party will have to choose between the two economic policies that it is now running. One is to tell everyone that it will spend more money. The other is to tell everyone that it will spend less. I think that most people know what Conservative policy is. We had cuts and privatisation before, and that is what we will get again. Until the Conservatives make a definitive statement on their economic intentions, we cannot take the complaints of people such as the hon. Gentleman seriously.

Q7. [146556] **Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the people of Lancashire are very appreciative of the orders that the Government have placed and the commitment they have shown to BAE Systems? Unfortunately, however, the loyal and highly skilled and motivated work force—who lobbied this Government and previous Governments to get those contracts—are being rewarded with thousands of job losses. That is not acceptable. I wonder whether my right hon. Friend can use his good offices to meet the management of BAE Systems and the trade unions to see whether we can get that injustice reversed.

The Prime Minister: I understand that there have been no specific announcements of redundancies. However, because of our concern about some of the press reports, meetings were held between my hon. Friend the Minister for Competitiveness and the company. We shall ensure that we keep closely in touch. I certainly wish to pay tribute to the enormous work and skill of my hon. Friend's constituents and the many people at BAE Systems who

do an excellent job. BAE Systems is a very fine company and we certainly wish to see people continue being employed there.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): Does the Prime Minister think it fair that elderly people needing social care in England and Wales will be disadvantaged compared with those in Scotland?

The Prime Minister: I am just about prepared to wear that from the Liberal Democrats, but may I remind the hon. Lady that she supported a Government who, for 18 years, could have done all that on nursing and personal care, but did neither? We are introducing free nursing care for the first time in this country. As I have just explained, we do not believe it right to spend £1 billion on personal care when we think it better and fairer to use that money elsewhere in the health service. It is up to the Scottish Executive to decide how they wish to use their money.

The one thing that I would say to the hon. Lady, as I have just said to the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring), is that we have been asking Conservative Members for a commitment that they will at least match us on social service funding. We still have not had a commitment from them. If the Conservatives were to return to power, people would not only not receive free personal care, they would not receive free nursing care either.

Q8. [146557] **Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas** (Crosby): Many of us know of constituents whose daily lives are threatened by disruptive youths or by nuisance neighbours. I therefore welcome the Government's introduction and implementation of parenting orders, which are making a real difference to many communities across the country. However, may I ask my right hon. Friend what we can do to encourage local authorities to use antisocial behaviour orders more as a tool of intervention than as a weapon of last resort?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Antisocial behaviour orders, where they have been used, have been very popular indeed. That is because there is nothing worse for a family than living next door to people who are engaged in antisocial or criminal behaviour. It is essential that we take action, and I think that the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 are very important. Moreover, as a result of legislation that we plan to introduce in this Session, a further battery of weapons including fixed-penalty notices will be available to police. We are quite determined to crack down on the yob culture in every way.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): May I ask the Prime Minister to look, not this afternoon but later, into the case of Mr. Krishna Maharaj—who is black and British, and a business man who has been in jail in Florida for 14 years after being convicted of murder? Clive Stafford-Smith has said that, of the 300 cases that he has examined, he is most convinced of innocence in this man's case.

Will the Prime Minister help the Foreign Office in its efforts at a consular level in Florida to look into the matter of the judge who heard the first week of the case and who was taken away in shackles after being accused of taking bribes? Other questions include whether, on two occasions, state attorneys went into Mr. Maharaj's cell, effectively to ask him for a bribe, and whether the Foreign Office can take up Governor Bush's suggestion that, although he did not know about the case, he was prepared to look into it? The case has had the support of the Home Secretary, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, a former Attorney-General and the Mayor of London.

The Prime Minister: The short answer is that I do not know about that individual case. I am perfectly prepared to look into it, although that should not be taken as prejudgment of the facts. I shall look into it and get in touch with the hon. Gentleman.

Q9. [146558] **Mr. Martin Salter** (Reading, West): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the previous Conservative Government's decision to abolish the police housing allowance in 1994 was an act of monumental folly? It triggered quite unprecedented problems in the recruitment and retention of police officers in high-cost housing areas such as Reading, Thames Valley and elsewhere. Will he join me in questioning the wisdom of Thames Valley police authority, which has responded to the problem by flogging off 333 houses in the past six years? Furthermore, it plans to demolish 12 perfectly serviceable police houses to make way for a rifle range. Is that not simply Thatcherism gone mad?

The Prime Minister: The abolition of the housing allowance in the Metropolitan area and elsewhere, and the loss of police houses, obviously had a serious impact on police recruitment. The additional resources made available by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary mean that we are able to recruit more officers, although I entirely understand my hon. Friend's concern about the decision of the Thames Valley police authority.

If my hon. Friend will allow me, however, I can tell him that is not the only police service in the country that it is receiving more police officers. A press release today from the North Yorkshire police is entitled "Force Strength to Reach All Time High". It states that, as a result of the additional money that the Government are putting in, by March 2002 there will be more police officers in North Yorkshire "than ever before".

Lockerbie

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the result of the Lockerbie bombing trial.

Almost two years ago, I announced that we had secured the agreement of the Libyan Government to the surrender of the two men charged with the Lockerbie bombing. That agreement brought an end to almost a decade of diplomatic stalemate. It was made possible by a unique legal innovation—a trial before Scottish judges under Scots law in a third country.

I want to record our gratitude to the Government of the Netherlands and to their local authorities for their ready and full co-operation in making available the excellent facilities at Camp Zeist. Their co-operation has confirmed the reputation of the Netherlands as a seat of international justice. I have today written to the Dutch Foreign Minister formally recording our thanks.

The whole House will wish to express its appreciation of the work of the police in what has been one of the longest and widest investigations in British history. The Dumfries and Galloway constabulary and the other police forces that co-operated in the inquiry can take credit for the evidence that was brought to court.

The trial has been open and its proceedings have been punctilious. It is widely agreed that it has proved to be the fair trial that we promised.

The panel of Scottish judges has now returned its verdict. The judges unanimously found guilty Mr. Al Megrahi, an official of the Libyan intelligence service. They acquitted Mr. Fhimah. We accept the verdicts of the court. Mr. Al Megrahi is reported to intend to appeal. The House will understand that, in the circumstances, I will not comment on the substance of the legal arguments. However, the House will wish to know what international action the Government intend to take in the light of these verdicts.

The initiative to hold the trial at Camp Zeist was taken by Britain and secured by agreement with the Governments of the Netherlands, the United States and Libya. However, we made those arrangements in accordance with the resolution of the UN Security Council—a resolution that is binding on all member states.

Libya has complied with some of the requirements of the Security Council, such as handing over the two suspects. In the light of the guilty verdict, we will expect the Libyan Government to fulfil the remaining requirements. We therefore require Libya to accept responsibility for the act of its official who has been convicted. We also require Libya to pay compensation to the relatives of the victims.

Before coming to the House this afternoon, I spoke by telephone to Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State. We both are clear that Libya must now fulfil the requirements of the Security Council in full, and we both committed our Governments to close co-operation to achieve those common objectives. I shall be able to continue that consultation with Colin Powell when I meet him in Washington next week.

It is also in Libya's own interests to be seen to co-operate fully with the Security Council. In the light of the conviction of one of their senior intelligence officials, Libya's leaders need to take every opportunity to prove to the international community that they have definitively renounced terrorism and will abide by international law.

The Lockerbie bombing stands among the most brutal acts of mass murder. The community of Lockerbie suffered a sudden and devastating tragedy. I spoke after the verdicts to my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown), who is today with the local people who have borne their tragedy with dignity.

Every passenger and crew member of Pan Am 103 was killed. That night, more than 400 parents lost a child, 76 women and men lost husbands or wives and seven children lost both parents.

Nothing can repair the loss of those who were murdered that night or remove the grief of their relatives. But today, at last, those relatives know that a fair trial in an open court has seen justice done.

3.36 pm

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for his statement. Today, the whole House and, I suspect, the whole country will have had in its thoughts the families who lost beloved relations and friends when Pan Am 103 was casually blown out of the sky—those who perished in the air and those whose lives ended on the ground when the name of Lockerbie became synonymous with terrorism. For those families, the intervening 12 years must have seemed an endless struggle to come to terms with the brutal and savage attack conducted for a cause 1 million miles from its victims. We should honour those families for their fortitude in loss and their tenacity in never giving up the pursuit of justice. It will be, as the Foreign Secretary says, of some limited comfort to them that today at least one of the murderers has been brought eventually to justice.

This has been from the outset a massive investigation, carried out in conditions of immense difficulty. I join the Foreign Secretary in congratulating the police and all the other authorities for what they have done and thanking the Netherlands' authorities for allowing the trial to take place there.

A number of important questions remain. Although everyone will appreciate the difficulties of reinstating sanctions against Libya, will the Foreign Secretary agree that it would be wrong at this stage to lift them? It is clear that Libya has not fully complied with the United Nations Security Council resolutions. We all want Libya to become a respected member of the international community, but before there can be reconciliation there must be a full acceptance of responsibility and guilt. A Libyan official has been convicted of this atrocity. It follows inescapably that the Libyan Government are implicated. For Libya to re-enter the community of civilised nations, it must unequivocally accept specific responsibility for the bombing of flight 103 as well as for the killing of WPC Fletcher. Libya, as the Foreign Secretary has said, must pay whatever compensation is ordered by the courts.

Can the Foreign Secretary be confident that the Gaddafi leopard really has changed his spots and set his face against the sponsorship of international terrorism?

On the issue of a possible public inquiry, I hope that the Foreign Secretary will tell us today that he has not finally ruled that out. Are there any serious prospects for

further criminal proceedings? If not, surely it could help the process of reconciliation for there to be the fullest scrutiny and disclosure of these hideous events.

Will the Government undertake that Al Megrahi will neither be released early as part of some deal with Libya, nor permitted to serve part of his sentence in Libya?

This is an important step towards the conclusion of a tragic and bitter story. Of course, life will never be the same for the families of Libya's victims, but we stand ready to support the Government in their endeavours to bring about a finality that will enable those families, as much as they can, to move on, and eradicate the continuing threat of international terrorism.

Mr. Cook: May I first welcome the tone and substance of the right hon. Gentleman's opening remarks? In response to his questions, I assure him and the House that there is no question of sanctions being lifted until Libya has complied in full with the requirements of previous United Nations Security Council resolutions. The sanctions cannot be lifted without the agreement of the Security Council, which requires the assent of all the permanent members. We will work closely with the United States to progress this matter within the Security Council. The two key steps that Libya must take to comply with the requirements are to accept responsibility and pay compensation. We secured both a statement of responsibility and a payment of compensation in the case of WPC Fletcher two years ago. We will be seeking to make the same progress on the Lockerbie bombing.

On Libya's actions on external terrorism, in 1992—in a statement that was made during the previous Administration—the Libyan Government renounced terrorism, but the requirement placed on them by the Security Council is to show by concrete actions that they mean that statement of renunciation. Libya's response to the verdict of guilty and the remaining requirements placed on it by the Security Council will be an important test of its commitment to abiding by international law, of which the Security Council resolution is part.

There has been no decision to rule out a public inquiry. Indeed, it would be inappropriate to reach a view on such an inquiry at this early stage, in particular, as an appeal is pending. No inquiry could commence before an appeal was concluded.

I have met relatives of those who died in Pan Am flight 103 and I am well aware of the strength of feeling among them. I have conveyed that to my colleagues the Deputy Prime Minister and the Home Secretary, who would have to decide on an inquiry. They will have to reflect on the strength of those feelings as against the many inquiries and the full criminal trial that have already taken place and decide whether useful information could emerge from any further inquiry at this stage.

I can give the right hon. Gentleman and the House an absolute assurance that there will be no deal with the Libyan Government on the sentence of Mr. Al Megrahi. I do not believe that any Scottish court would wear such a deal, even if we remotely contemplated striking one. As part of the terms of the agreement in 1991, it was agreed that the full sentence would be served in a Scottish prison. At that stage, we rejected the proposal that the person responsible might be sent to a prison in a third country. The United Nations will have access to his prison, because we have nothing to hide or to fear about the standard of Scottish prisons. I suspect that they will be better than those of Libyan prisons.

Finally, I join the right hon. Gentleman in expressing our sympathy and respect for the relatives. I pay tribute to Dr. Jim Swire and Rev. John Mosey, who have led the campaign for the relatives. It is fair to say that, without their vigilant and determined efforts, we might not be where we are today.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): In these early stages, is it the view of the British Government that Mr. Al Megrahi alone was responsible for conceiving and implementing that hideous crime?

Mr. Cook: No, definitely not. Indeed, the charge sheet charges him with conspiring with other persons unknown to carry out the bombing. Mr. Al Megrahi was charged along with Mr. Fhimah because they were the two named and known individuals against whom we judged we had criminal evidence to bring a charge and secure a conviction. In the case of Mr. Al Megrahi, that proved a valid judgment. If we discover criminal evidence that will enable us to charge others, we will do so.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his clear and helpful statement. Does he agree—as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace) said today in the Scottish Parliament—that this trial has been a vindication not only of the Scottish system but of the international agreement to bring it about? Does he further agree that it demonstrates to international terrorists and all criminals that there is a system that can bring them to justice and secure a conviction and that they can no longer expect to get away with crimes with impunity? Does it not confirm the urgent need to follow that model and secure an agreement to set up an international criminal court?

Can the Foreign Secretary say a little more about how the verdict may affect relationships between Britain and Libya? Given that Colonel Gaddafi has at least, in principle, accepted the validity of the court and there has been some co-operation recently on the Yvonne Fletcher case, does he agree that this is the opportunity for Colonel Gaddafi to respond by acknowledging that Libyan officials were involved in that dreadful act; to apologise for the acts of terrorism that he says that he repudiates; and to be prepared to make recompense to those who have suffered so tragically? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that Colonel Gaddafi should co-operate fully in any possible public inquiry? Understandably, the relatives are calling for that. Has not the pressure on the relatives been shown by the emotional reaction of Dr. Jim Swire to the verdict? I am glad to say that he has recovered, but that was a demonstration of that enormous emotional pressure.

Finally, can the Foreign Secretary tell us what co-operation the British Government would give the American relatives should they decide to pursue a civil action—or would he prefer the employment of some other method to ensure that the matter is resolved in a way that gives Libya an opportunity to prove that it wants to be treated as part of the international community, rather than being pushed further to the fringes?

Mr. Cook: I fully share the hon. Gentleman's view on Scottish justice. Indeed, during the past few days, it has

[Mr. Cook]

given me some satisfaction to hear a large number of people from America and other countries who attended the proceedings paying tribute to the proceedings and to the punctiliousness of the court and the panel of judges.

I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman as to the importance of an international criminal court. One of the best ways that we can prevent future atrocities is by making it clear that there is no hiding place for those who commit them. I look forward to the support—of which I am confident—of the hon. Gentleman's party when that Bill comes to the House.

On the Libyan leadership, I entirely accept—as the Libyans, too, would be wise to recognise—that, if they want to prove their new credentials and a new spirit towards the international community, the best way to do so will be by rapidly fulfilling the remaining requirements—accepting responsibility for what happened and paying compensation for it.

It is, of course, entirely up to the American relatives, or other relatives, to proceed by taking a civil action in the courts. Any initial payment of compensation must not preclude the obligation on the Libyan Government to meet an award for compensation in a future civil action.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is it not sheer common sense to conclude that the convicted person can hardly have acted on his own initiative and that the instructions came from the very top in Libya? Does my right hon. Friend agree that justice will be done only when those who gave the instruction for that act of mass murder are also in the dock?

Mr. Cook: I have already indicated that the charge sheet explicitly recognised that Mr. Al Megrahi did not work alone. We have no criminal evidence that we could take into court with the hope of a criminal conviction against any other individual in a fair and open trial. In the fulness of time, this result may produce other leads; if so, we shall certainly follow them up. In the meantime, whether Mr. Al Megrahi acted alone or under instruction, the Government of Libya must accept responsibility for what a senior official did. That is why we require of the Libyan Government a statement accepting responsibility, and accepting responsibility for paying compensation to those who lost relatives in that terrible atrocity.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the outcome is a vindication not only of the Scottish legal system but of those relatives such as Dr. Jim Swire, who campaigned for the third-country option long before it became Government policy? Although I realise that the Foreign Secretary has not ruled out a public inquiry and I accept his point that the time is not quite right for a decision on the matter, will he at least say that he understands the strength of the arguments made by relatives—that there are wider implications to the atrocity, which go far beyond individual guilt or innocence, and that they could usefully be explored in such a forum?

Mr. Cook: On the latter point, of course, there are issues that were not explored during the trial, because the trial focused on the particular question of guilt or innocence. However, it should be pointed out that during the trial, we paraded much evidence and information which for 12 or 10 years previously we had been obliged to keep to ourselves because it would have compromised a trial. In addition to the trial, a fatal accident inquiry took place and the President's commission was set up in the United States.

My colleagues will need to reflect on those matters when they decide whether to order an inquiry. They have not reached such a decision—nor should they until the appeal proceedings are disposed of.

I would absolutely endorse the tributes that the hon. Gentleman and others have paid to Dr. Jim Swire. I was concerned today to hear that he had collapsed, and delighted to hear that he had recovered. It has been a very gruelling 12 years for him and the other relatives. I very much believe that, when they have recovered from an undoubtedly emotional occasion, they can take some satisfaction from knowing that they have played their part in seeing justice being done for their loved ones.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): Will my right hon. Friend take time to remind the House that at the stage when the trial was agreed on, the Libyan Government made it plain that they would accept absolutely and completely the outcome of the Scottish judicial system? It is important to remind the House and the Libyan Government of that statement.

Will my right hon. Friend thank the League of Arab States, which played such a big part not only in impressing on the Libyans the fact that, if they wanted to return to the international fold, they would have to accept requests to give these individuals up for trial, but in convincing the United Kingdom Government and the international community that the individuals would indeed be given up, enabling us to move towards establishing the court in The Hague?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is right that the Government of Libya had indicated that they would accept the outcome of the trial, and I can inform the House that in the course of the day, three very senior figures in the Libyan Administration have gone public saying that they accept and respect the judgments of the court.

I take the opportunity to praise not only the League of Arab States and the Arab nations but the other international bodies that helped us to secure the trial.

I particularly mention the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, who worked very hard to secure the terms under which the two men were handed over for trial. I hope to speak to Kofi Annan by telephone tomorrow, and we shall see how we can follow the matter up in the United Nations.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): The news that the right hon. Gentleman has just given about the three high-ranking officials from Libya is welcome. He is probably not aware that BBC News 24 was quoting, I believe, a Deputy Foreign Minister from Libya, as saying that the result of the verdict had to be an immediate lifting of sanctions and a compensation package for the Libyan people for the effects of sanctions. May I take it that that is not the view that is coming through via

official channels? When does the right hon. Gentleman anticipate receiving an official response from the Libyan Government?

Mr. Cook: We are already in dialogue with the Libyan Government. We shall continue to be so, not only bilaterally but through the United Nations. We should not necessarily expect the two further steps that we require to take place before the conclusion of an appeal, and such an appeal may well take most of the rest of the year; but we do have a guilty verdict, and against that guilty verdict there can be no question of any compensation for Libya for the effect of sanctions, nor, until the Libyan Government comply with all the requirements of the resolutions, of a formal lifting of sanctions.

Mr. Bruce George (Walsall, South): Will my right hon. Friend pass on from everyone in the House our congratulations not only to the police of many countries for this incredible investigation, but to those hundreds—probably thousands—of others outside the police forces who were engaged in the investigation and prosecution?

The disaster led to many changes in airline and airport security, but one suspects that after so many years, some of the memories may have been lost and some of the improvements unmade. Will my right hon. Friend give assurances to the House that he will again contact those of his colleagues, nationally and internationally, inside and outside Foreign Ministries, to evaluate whether further improvements need to be made in airport, airline and transport security? Disasters such as that at Lockerbie could well be replicated, and we do not wish to come to the House five, 10 or 20 years from now to announce the successful outcome of an investigation into another catastrophe such as the one we witnessed at Lockerbie.

Mr. Cook: I absolutely take the opportunity offered by my right hon. Friend's question to express congratulations to all those who have assisted in any way in this outcome. Many hundreds of members of the public did assist. A key part of the jigsaw was provided by a couple walking the dog on the Northumberland moors, who discovered a fragment of the bomb and who had the wisdom to retrieve it and take it to a police station, without which effort we might not be where we are today. All those who have assisted in any way are entirely entitled to their credit for their part in having secured this conviction.

On safety, we should be clear that it is of course 12 years since the Lockerbie bombing, and enormous changes have taken place in airport and airline security during that period. I am sure that my colleagues at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions will carefully consider the verdict, the trial and the evidence to find out whether any further lesson can be learned, but I assure the House and the public that the state of airport security is not as it was 12 years ago when the bombing took place.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): Three of my constituents and the son of Mr. and Mrs. Martin Cadman were killed in the Lockerbie crash. I know from subsequent talks over many years with the Cadmans about the terrible emotional pressures that came from not knowing how the crash could have happened. The court judgment at least begins to piece together how the terrorist route worked and, at last, international justice, based on Scottish law, has brought people to account. Will the Foreign Secretary reaffirm that he and all his European Union colleagues will continue to try to find out what else went on to enable the person who has been convicted today to carry out the atrocity? Will he reassure all the relatives that there will be unceasing liaison with the Libyan Government to try to get them to understand the human catastrophe and emotional pressure that the actions caused?

Mr. Cook: I can certainly assure the hon. Gentleman that we will continue to maintain that pressure, through dialogue in Libya and international forums, until we ensure that we have secured an appropriate response to the terrible tragedy and the appalling mass murder that took place that night. I also have met Mr. and Mrs. Cadman and know exactly from my meeting them and other relatives the intense emotional distress that the tragedy has caused them. I think that, in many ways, not knowing what happened is much more distressing than knowing the worst. I hope that now that some of the information about what happened is available to the relatives, it may in some way help them to come to terms with the appalling loss that they experienced.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): The Foreign Secretary mentioned the possibility of an appeal. I do not seek to trespass into that field, but can he tell me who will hear the appeal and where it will be heard, bearing in mind the fact that the trial was heard in the Netherlands? Perhaps the Foreign Secretary will take this brilliant example of Scottish justice operating abroad as a method of persuading his opposite number in the Bush Administration that the creation of an international criminal court is a necessity and that the American objections to such a court should now cease?

Mr. Cook: First, the appeal will be held in Camp Zeist and Mr. Al Megrahi will remain in detention there pending that appeal, which will be heard by judges of the Scottish Appeal Court. It will not be a formal sitting of the Scottish Appeal Court, which of course cannot sit outside Scotland, but it will be drawn from judges of that court.

Of course I anticipate that, when I see Mr. Colin Powell next week, we will discuss the international criminal court as part of our agenda. We are strongly committed to it and colleagues in the House have drawn attention to the importance of the proceedings for an international system of justice. In fairness, I should record that the statute of the international criminal court does not include acts of terrorism, on the grounds that there is already adequate international law on that point, and already adequate international remedy.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): In recognition of the Foreign Secretary's already great involvement in securing a trial, which many people did not think possible, may I say that it brings tremendous relief to the families involved in the mass murder? I also met Dr. Jim Swire, when I was a junior Transport Minister. Will the Foreign Secretary think carefully about what the right hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) said about re-alerting airports and ports to

[Mr. Patrick McLoughlin]

their security role? One of the dangers is that we become complacent, and we should never become complacent about security.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I can say, now that the trial is over, that there were moments when I wondered whether it would be possible to secure it; but, by perseverance, we got there, and today we can see why all the efforts of so many different people were worth while.

I absolutely endorse the hon. Gentleman's remarks. We have made improvements and changes but, unfortunately, those who seek to threaten the safety of passengers also look for ways in which they can change the threat and examine how they can harness evolving technology. For that reason, we can never afford to be complacent.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I join other hon. Members in paying tribute to the steadfastness of Dr. Jim Swire and the victims' families. The fact that the trial, which took place in difficult circumstances, is seen to have been manifestly fair is a significant tribute to Scots law, to the authorities who investigated the case and to the lawyers and judges who took part in the case. I refer to the prosecuting team and, most important, to the defence team, who played their part in ensuring that the trial was seen to be fair and that the evidence was properly examined.

I remind my right hon. Friend that it was an expensive investigation and an expensive trial. The universal view is that it was worth every single penny. That has been demonstrated today. Will my right hon. Friend remember that point when this House debates the international criminal court, because those who argue that we should resist its establishment because the expense would be too great are marshalling their forces? Some of them are doing that in the other place at this very moment.

Mr. Cook: I endorse my hon. Friend's comments on the strength of Scots law, which were in no way undermined by the fact that he is a Scots lawyer. One of the exports that we identify for Scotland in the future is the Scots legal system and legal process.

I would share my hon. Friend's impatience if anybody were to criticise on the ground of cost what has been an historic legal innovation and a remarkable achievement 12 years after such a brutal mass murder. If anyone was now to say that we should not have done what we did because of the cost, the whole House would blow them out of the water. Nobody could possibly contemplate such criticism. Justice cannot necessarily be bought at a price that we can measure only in terms of pounds, shillings and pence.

The same arguments could apply to the international criminal court, but I assure the House that the Government will take a very hard-headed approach to how the burden is shared. That is one reason why we will be anxious to ratify the treaty in the near future. If we are one of the first 60 countries to bring the court into being, we will have a very substantial say in its administration and the method of payment.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): May I invite the Foreign Secretary to join me in paying a particular tribute to the men and women of the air accidents investigation branch of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, which is based in Farnborough in my constituency? They did a fantastic job in painstakingly reconstructing the remains of the Boeing 747, the nose cone of which rests in Farnborough and is a vivid testimony to the appalling act of terrorism that was perpetrated. Will the right hon. Gentleman recognise the extraordinary skill and professionalism of that group of men and women, whose reputation is revered not only in this country but worldwide?

Mr. Cook: I have no hesitation in endorsing the hon. Gentleman's remarks. The work of the investigation team from Farnborough played a vital role in the overall inquiry. Indeed, it included the construction of an entire life-sized mock-up of the Pan Am flight before it was destroyed. The team played an important part in taking forward our case.

As the hon. Gentleman has referred to the investigation and rescue teams, I pay particular tribute to all those who, on that awful night and the night after, sought to recover the bodies and to deal with the appalling tragedy. A number of police officers from my constituency attended on that night; they were drafted in to provide assistance. The circumstances in which the police, the Army and other rescue services operated were appalling and harrowing. We should remember with gratitude the enormous dedication that they showed.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Although the pursuit of justice in a matter such as this should never be compromised by cost, does my right hon. Friend have any idea of how much it will have cost to pursue the case and to hold a possible appeal? In particular, is there any possibility of recovering any of that cost from the United States, which I know is behind with its United Nations contributions? Perhaps it may want to contribute toward the costs, as this has been a joint enterprise in which it has been involved. Is this a matter that my right hon. Friend may wish to investigate?

Mr. Cook: I think that the frank answer to that is no. We had the legal jurisdiction for where the crime took place and we fully accepted our obligation to ensure that it was investigated and punished. We would not regard the legal costs of the judicial process as appropriate for international compensation. If we can share the burden or anybody else is willing to share it, we will pursue the matter. However, we should accept our obligation to ensure that justice is done, and take pride in the fact that we have now seen it done.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): The Foreign Secretary and other hon. Members have paid generous tribute to my constituent Dr. Jim Swire, whose unremitting efforts on behalf of his murdered daughter have led to today's successful conclusion of the trial. It is important at times such as these to remember the victims. Constituents who remember Flora describe her as a beautiful and talented young woman who was cut down in the prime of her life. Consequently, the Swire family must always live with a great sense of loss. Will the right hon. Gentleman continue not only to pay tribute to Dr. Swire, but to spell out his important role in efforts to bring the murderers to trial and to ensure that one of them

was found guilty? Will he also wish Dr. Swire peace of mind, now that after 12 years he finally has a result and has found somebody who is going to spend 20 years of his life in prison for the murder of his daughter and others?

Mr. Cook: I endorse absolutely the hon. Lady's remarks about her constituent. I have met Dr. Jim Swire many times during the past four years and I entirely respect the enormous vigour, but also patience and perseverance, with which he has pursued the matter.

Two years ago, I attended the service that was conducted in Westminster abbey on the 10th anniversary of the bombing, in which a candle was lit for every one of those who had perished and their names were read out one by one. It was a deeply moving occasion. We should never allow those who died to dwindle into mere statistics. We must remember that each of the victims was an individual and had relatives whose emotional grief during the past 12 years we can barely comprehend.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): As the Foreign Secretary knows, President Gaddafi was head of Government and head of state in Libya in December 1998 and remains in that position now. Does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern that the restoration to normality of relations between the United Kingdom and Libya while President Gaddafi remains head of state could give all the wrong signals to other countries that promote and propagate international terrorism?

Mr. Cook: Diplomatic relations with Libya were suspended by the time of the Lockerbie bombing because of the murder of WPC Fletcher. In 1999, I reported to the House that we had achieved a satisfactory conclusion with the Libyan Government, in which they had agreed to take part in an investigation, to pay compensation and to accept responsibility. Their statement also renounced terrorism. On that basis, we resumed international relations. I point out that the statement was welcomed by the Opposition, who also welcomed the resumption of diplomatic relations.

I should like to clarify that diplomatic relations with a country are not a reward for good conduct, but a basis for communication. They enable us to speak frankly and fully. To be honest, I think that that channel for dialogue might have assisted us in achieving an agreement earlier on the surrender of the two Lockerbie suspects. We will certainly use it in the months ahead, in order to secure a response to the guilty verdict.

WELSH GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 107 (Welsh Grand Committee),

That—

(1) the matter of Building Safer Communities in Wales be referred to the Welsh Grand Committee for its consideration;

(2) the Committee shall meet on Tuesday 13th February at half-past Ten o'clock and between Four o'clock and Six o'clock at Westminster to take questions under Standing Order No. 103 (Welsh Grand Committee (questions for oral answer)), and to consider the matter of Building Safer Communities in Wales under Standing Order No. 107 (Welsh Grand Committee (matters relating exclusively to Wales.))

The House divided: Ayes 334, Noes 0.

Division No. 94] **[4.9 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Colley, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil

Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stret xd)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Hallam)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Aberdns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trussell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. Greg Pope.

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Miss Julie Kirkbride.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Point of Order

4.23 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I do not know whether you have had an opportunity to read early-day motion 272 on today's Order Paper. It states that Adrian McMenamin, who is a special adviser to the Secretary of State for Wales, has been spending much time and, therefore, money from the public purse, downloading and inputting stupid and offensive remarks about Plaid Cymru—the Party of Wales. Is that good use of public funds? Has the Secretary of State for Wales or the Minister for the Cabinet Office said that they want to make a statement about that grossly offensive behaviour?

Mr. Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Speaker cannot be drawn into such an argument. However, now that the hon. Gentleman has put the matter on record, I am sure that it will be duly noted by the appropriate Minister.

Divorce (Religious Marriages)

4.24 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision enabling a court to require the dissolution of a religious marriage before granting a civil divorce.

The idea is not new. Indeed, Lord Lester introduced a similar Bill in the previous Session. It completed all its stages in another place, only to be blocked in the House. The essential provisions of the Bill were previously enacted in part II of the Family Law Act 1996. However, they have not been effected and are to be repealed for reasons that are wholly unconnected with the Bill, which the Government support.

The purpose of the Bill is to remedy a disadvantage suffered by Jewish men and women who are prevented from remarrying because of the refusal of their partner to grant or accept a religious divorce. The basic Jewish laws relating to marriage and divorce are biblical and, therefore, cannot be changed. In Jewish law, marriage and divorce are consensual processes: an individual cannot be married or divorced against his or her will. This creates a problem in cases in which one party seeks to end the marriage and the other refuses to grant or receive a divorce. Such a divorce is called a get in Hebrew.

For a civil divorce to be effective in Jewish law, a get must be obtained. This is a consensual divorce in which mutual co-operation between the parties is required. The husband has to go before a Beth Din Jewish court for a get and deliver it to his wife, and she is required to accept it. If he does not do so, the wife cannot re-marry in Jewish law, although he may be able to do so. Jewish authorities have long been sensitive to the problem, especially when it is the wife who is trapped in a marriage that she seeks to end. In Hebrew, she is called an agunah, meaning one who is chained to a spouse against her will.

In recent years, the Jewish community in Britain has done all that it can internally to alleviate the problem through its rabbinical courts. A pre-nuptial agreement has been instituted, and it is currently signed by the majority of couples, binding them, should their marriage fail, to attend a Jewish court to resolve outstanding differences.

Synagogue bodies have agreed to institute communal sanctions against recalcitrant spouses. However, the first is a voluntary undertaking, and the second may simply be ignored by a determined spouse, driven by the ill-will that often accompanies divorce. A well publicised example of that was a case at the end of last year in which a rabbi took an advertisement in the *Jewish Chronicle* to name and shame a recalcitrant husband, albeit to no avail.

Jewish women who wish to conduct their family relationships within the framework of their religious beliefs have virtually no power to compel a reluctant husband to grant them a get. Without a get, a divorcee who has a child by her subsequent partner is defined as an adulteress under Jewish law. Her child becomes a mamzer, an illegitimate outcast, which is a stigma that carries on into future generations. If a wife refuses to accept her husband's get, he is known as an agun. However, he does not suffer from those same disadvantages. As a result, a husband can effectively hold his wife to ransom, and can demand money, property, or other rights concerning custody or child maintenance in return for a get.

There are no reliable statistics of the total number of women affected, but seven cases in the Hendon area have been referred to me. No doubt there are many more in my own constituency of which I am unaware, and if they are multiplied throughout the Jewish community nationwide, the House can make its own assessment of the scale of the problem.

The cases of which I have heard reveal devastating personal tragedies. For example, there was a case in which a woman left an unhappy marriage. Her husband tried to get their child put into an orphanage. There have been long legal wranglings, and she still does not have her get. Another case involved a husband who left a 26-year marriage soon after the death of one of the children. He subsequently tried to blackmail the father of his wife for large sums of money.

A further case involved a woman who, at a young age, married a man who became aggressive. For example, he brought the garage door down on her head. He would not give her a get. His attitude was that if he could not have her, no one else could. There was also the case of a very young woman with young children who moved from Stamford Hill to Hendon to escape the violent husband who had abused her and the children. After six years of difficult and protracted negotiations, she succeeded in obtaining her get last year. Another case involved a woman whose husband deserted her when she was eight and a half months pregnant. She had to sell her flat and move, with the baby, into a rented room to pay him off in return for the get.

The Bill will provide a real remedy for real women such as these, because it will rectify the serious anomaly in English law that creates that extremely undesirable state of affairs. Under English law, a

> marriage between two persons professing the Jewish religion according to the usage of the Jews

that has been solemnised on the authority of a superintendent registrar's certificate is recognised as a civil marriage, but a civil divorce may take place without a Jewish divorce having been given. That results in a so-called limping marriage, in which the parties are free to remarry under civil law, but not under religious law.

That is why the Jewish community has now sought the assistance of civil law, in the form of a provision that a judge should have the discretionary power to withhold the grant of a civil divorce until a Jewish divorce has been given.

The Bill would enable the court to require the dissolution of a religious marriage before granting a civil divorce. That would provide a lever with which pressure could be brought to bear on the husband to agree to a get. In cases in which it would be unjust for him not to do so, he would not be granted a civil divorce—which would normally be sufficient for his purposes—without agreeing to the religious divorce that his wife needed to avoid the stigma that I have described.

Such provisions have been enacted in our own law, although they have not been brought into force for the reasons to which I referred, and similar ones are already part of Canadian, South African and New York state law and are under consideration in Scotland. They would not

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resolve all cases, but would resolve many—namely, those in which the husband wishes to remarry and thus needs a civil divorce.

It is important to understand that the Jewish community is seeking the assistance of civil law not to solve a religious problem, but, first, to end the anomaly whereby a Jewish marriage is also a civil marriage, although a civil divorce may be unaccompanied by a Jewish divorce; and, secondly, to seek the assistance of the civil courts to bring a couple to a Jewish court, which itself would undertake to resolve the dispute, allowing both parties to remarry according to their religious convictions. The Bill would also empower the Lord Chancellor to extend its provisions by order to other faiths, so it could also provide relief in similar cases within, for example, the Islamic community.

My Bill has the support of all synagogue bodies in Anglo-Jewry, orthodox and progressive, as well as the Chief Rabbi, the Board of Deputies and the agunot campaign. I hope that it also has the support of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Andrew Dismore, Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, Mr. Mike Gapes, Mrs. Louise Ellman, Mr. Ivan Lewis, Ms Linda Perham, Mr. Fabian Hamilton, Ms Karen Buck, Mr. Barry Gardiner, Mr. Stephen Twigg and Mr. James Clappison.

DIVORCE (RELIGIOUS MARRIAGES)

Mr. Andrew Dismore accordingly presented a Bill to make provision enabling a court to require the dissolution of a religious marriage before granting a civil divorce: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February, and to be printed [Bill 37].

Police

4.32 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I beg to move,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2001–02 (HC 156), which was laid before this House on 29th January, be approved.

I am pleased to take part in the annual debate with colleagues on the police grant settlement. This is an important moment. Perhaps I might begin with a small point of procedure and process. I very much regret that the debate will last only an hour and a half. As the House will know, Standing Orders require us to have 90-minute debates on the police grant and each of the two local government grant settlements. In accordance with our practice over previous years, the Government tabled a motion that would have enabled us to have a three-hour debate on the police and to take the two local government motions together. That motion was objected to not by the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald)—I pay tribute to him and his Front-Bench colleagues who want fully to debate these matters, despite the weakness of their case—but by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and one or two others. I can say only that the parliamentary games that Conservative Back Benchers have played have reduced the House's chance to discuss this important question and most Members regret that.

On the procedural point, hon. Members have the right to a vote at the end of the debate, as is convention. However, having just witnessed an absurd vote of 334 to zero, which took up time to no avail, I remind the House—I am sure that the official Opposition will respect this—that a vote against the police grant report is effectively a vote to deny police forces the money that they need to carry out their police work. I would have no hesitation in making that political point were such a vote to take place.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): The Minister is of course right that a three-hour debate on such an important subject would have been better than one of 90 minutes. However, as the names of those who object do not appear in *Hansard* and, in particular, as Ministers have recently curtailed debate day after day after day, is not it a bit rich for him to make that point?

Mr. Clarke: I work on a basis that I can assure the hon. Gentleman is not police practice in this country—usual suspects. The usual suspects for such disruption of the business of the House include those I mentioned.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I understand the point the Minister makes about the numbers voting in Divisions, but is he not being slightly disingenuous in suggesting that anyone who votes against his proposals is opposed to money for the police? As he knows only too well, I shall probably have to vote against them unless he can reassure me later that the grant will be varied so that Surrey gets a decent share. Does he accept that, if I do so, I shall not be voting against all money for the police, but voting against the unfair treatment of my county?

Mr. Clarke: Actually, I cannot accept that. Yesterday a delegation came to discuss the matter with me, and with the hon. Gentleman and his Surrey colleagues. I hope he would acknowledge that it was a friendly debate, in which I sought to deal with some of the points that were made. I shall endeavour to do the same if the hon. Gentleman is called to speak—and, judging by the relatively small number of Opposition Back Benchers present, I should have thought that he had a good chance. He is wrong, however: a decision to vote against this grant is a decision to ensure that Surrey, along with all other forces, gets no money.

The police funding settlement for 2001–02 has enabled us to give a strong boost to policing. Overall, the centrally supported provision for policing will increase by 10.1 per cent. next year to £8.495 billion, with further increases of 6.1 per cent. in 2002–03 and 3.1 per cent. in 2003–04. That is a real-terms increase of 7.4 per cent. on the provision for 2000–01, and we are confident that it is a real incentive to improvement in policing on the ground.

As part of the consultation exercise on the settlement, I have received letters from a number of chief constables and police authorities, as well as from the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Association of Police Authorities. I have also had meetings with Members from a number of areas—I mentioned Surrey a moment ago—and have responded to letters from Members representing many forces. In each case, Members were supportive of their local forces, but raised various concerns about the distribution of funding, overall funding levels for their forces, and pressures on forces to go on delivering service at the same level. I shall deal with those issues later.

The Government's overall spending plans for the police over the next three years were announced on 19 July by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary following the 2000 spending review. By 2003–04, police funding will have risen by nearly £1.6 billion from this year's provision—£9.3 billion as against £7.7 billion. That is a rise of more than 20 per cent. Most will be paid to police authorities as grant, either for general purposes or to support targeted initiatives.

For 2001–02, the total amount of police authority general expenditure to which the Government are prepared to contribute their share of funds will be £7.732 billion. That is an increase of £377 million—5.1 per cent.—on 2000–01. The amount is known as total standard spending. Grant on TSS is paid directly to police authorities, and it is for them and for chief officers to determine how best to allocate their resources, taking into account local operational needs and priorities.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Can the Minister tell us whether the money that he proposes to allocate does any of the following? First, does it guarantee that by the end of the coming financial year there will be more police officers than there were when the Government came to office? Secondly, does it guarantee that all police forces in England and Wales will be able to increase their numbers next year? A couple of months ago, the Home Secretary wrote to me saying that he expected at least four forces to experience another fall next year. Will that still be the case? Lastly, if the settlement is so generous, why was the Home Office allocation for the coming year over 6 per cent., while the allocation for the police budget was only 3.8 per cent.?

Mr. Clarke: I will respond to those points, but I shall do so at the appropriate point in my speech. I have a lot

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to get through, but I shall try to deal with all the hon. Gentleman's points. The only one that I did not intend to cover is his final point, but I can say that the allocation of Home Office central funding includes money to finance a number of significant things we are doing to support the police generally. There is actually a reduction in the amount to be spent by the Home Office on "bureaucrats". We have made efficiency savings in the Home Office as elsewhere, but there have been significant increases in allocations to, for instance, the forensic science service, to enable it to deal with DNA matters.

I shall come to the question of police numbers in a moment.

Additional police funding on targeted initiatives mostly goes to police authorities. The four main schemes are to increase police officer numbers—that is the crime fighting fund; to tackle the problems of policing sparsely populated areas; to pay for new technology in the form of Airwave, the modern police radio system; and to expand the DNA programme to cover the whole of the known active criminal population by 2004.

In July, the Home Secretary announced the expansion of the crime fighting fund, funding an extra 4,000 officers and taking the total to an additional 9,000 recruits over and above those already planned for the three years from April 2000. A total of £151 million will be available in 2001–02 for recruitment and training, of which £129 million will be allocated to police authorities for local recruitment and pay of officers recruited under the scheme.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: May I finish what I am going to say on that point and deal with the police numbers point? Before I leave it, I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman.

The crime fighting fund is ring-fenced funding for front-line policing to help drive forward the Government's campaign to prevent crime and to reduce the fear of crime. The fund was established in response to concerns about falling police numbers. Those concerns are shared by the police, the public and many hon. Members. By operating a ring-fenced fund, we are doing as much as we can to ensure that resources are directed precisely at increasing officer numbers. We are already seeing the turn of the tide after a prolonged period in which numbers have fallen without check. I want the change to be decisive.

I come to the points raised by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). I can offer no guarantees on those matters because, as I indicated earlier, how police authorities, in consultation with chief officers, decide to spend their resources is, rightly, a matter for them. Ultimately, they will decide what they do.

The only guarantees that I can give are on the crime fighting fund allocation, which can be spent only on police numbers. We will definitely allocate the money to the forces to spend if they wish to do so, but, to be helpful, I can say that 13 forces already have a higher strength of police officers than in March 1997, the last figures before the Government came to office. Those are Devon and Cornwall, Dorset, Durham, Dyfed-Powys, Gloucestershire, Gwent, Leicestershire, Northumbria, North Wales, South Wales, South Yorkshire, Thames Valley and West Midlands. All today have more officers in place than when the Government came to power. That is about a third of all police authorities.

I expect that, by the time we get to March this year, about a half of all police authorities will have the number of police officers that there were in March 1997. I cannot tell the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey what the position will be in March 2002, at the end of the five-year term of the Parliament, because the uncertainties are too far ahead, but the Government's intention is that, by March 2002, there will be more officers, taking the country as a whole, than there were in March 1997. I believe that that will be the case.

That is the best that I can do to answer the hon. Gentleman's point. I am sorry that it does not give him the guarantee that he seeks, but it is a categoric statement both of what we have achieved and what we intend to achieve. In a debate this morning on police resourcing in south Buckinghamshire, I was able to point out that the Thames Valley force already had 53 more officers than when the Government came to power. That extends in different degrees to every force.

Dr. Cable: Can the Minister explain the disparity between the amounts that he has estimated will be available to London under the crime fighting fund and the much lower figures that are being used by the Metropolitan police, which have led the Mayor and the Greater London Authority to make what in many people's eyes are extravagant demands for precepting on local authorities, but are based on different assumptions about the amount of money that is available under the crime fighting fund?

Mr. Clarke: I do not like to be an anorak, but I am becoming almost a world expert on the different methods of counting police numbers in the Metropolitan police authority area, in Government statistics and a in range of other statistical areas, so I will not venture into the territory that the hon. Gentleman invites me into, but there is a central issue for the Metropolitan area, which he is well aware of, representing it as he does: the distinction between the amount of money allocated to the Met that would enable it recruit officers and its actual ability to recruit officers at this time. That has been a dominant theme of the discussions both in the House and with the Metropolitan police.

I hope, however, that the pay settlement that we have indicated and the recent announcement on rail travel for police officers is making a difference. Anecdotally, I can certainly say—I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman can confirm it—that our recent announcement on travel on public transport in the metropolitan area has been very positively received by police in the metropolis.

Mr. Heald: Does the Minister agree that there is cause for huge concern in London? Just within the past year, the Metropolitan police have had to revise upwards by 25 per cent. their wastage figures on the number of officers who are likely to leave over the period covered by the crime fighting fund. As for the fighting fund, is it not true that the Metropolitan police have not been able to recruit and

are asking to carry forward to next year about 115 placements that they have not been able to make? Is it not wrong to be complacent about that?

Mr. Clarke: The idea that I was complacent about it is absurd. In fact, in my reply to the intervention from the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), I indicated precisely the opposite.

We have been able to be flexible in relation not only to the metropolis, but to other forces such as Thames Valley police in rejigging the crime fighting fund initial allocations, to meet the particular circumstances of different forces. Therefore, some forces have accelerated and some have delayed their allocations, in a manner that I think is beneficial to those forces.

As we are discussing the metropolis, I also want to express my very strong support for the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, Sir John Stevens, and for his deputy Ian Blair for the work that they are doing to try to revitalise the Met's approach on those key issues.

I agree, however, with the comments of the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire. There is a very serious issue, and I have discussed it very openly in a wide variety of circumstances. However, we believe that we are taking action to address it. Nevertheless, he is quite right. If he wants to make political capital out of it, he certainly should do so. There are issues that have to be addressed. I say that we are addressing them, although there is a great deal to do. He may try to claim that we are not doing that, but I do not think that it would be substantiated.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and the flexibility that he has shown on the issue. However, is there not a particular problem in constituencies such as mine that do not have the special measures provided to the Metropolitan police but are only five miles outside the Met area? He says that Thames Valley has had 53 additional officers, but the fact is that they have not been sent to Slough. What can he do to ensure that Slough gets the officers it needs to police our community properly?

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend makes her point, as always, very articulately. We discussed the matter in her constituency with her police in Slough, because I acknowledge her point. She is right to say that in the socio-economic categories, for example, Slough is more similar to some of the London boroughs than it is to many of the other areas of the Thames Valley force. I can say, first, that we are allocating more resources to Thames Valley.

Secondly, the police negotiating board is currently considering the matter of pay for forces in the ring outside London. I hope that it will come to a decision soon. If it comes to the type of decision that I know that my hon. Friend is pressing, I think that it will make a little bit of a difference.

Thirdly, a process has been taking place in the Thames Valley authority, which has been explained to me, on the allocation of resources within the Thames Valley area.

Today at Prime Minister's questions, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) made some points on the issue of police housing. I tell the Thames Valley police authority that it should take very seriously precisely the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) is making. For our part, we could not and will not overthrow the authority of the chief constable and the police authority. However, we shall try to do what we can to encourage the type of serious attention to the problems in Slough to which she referred. I pay tribute to her assiduous campaigning on the matter.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): The Minister will be aware that the people of Kingston still do not believe that the money that the Government gave to the Greater London Authority was sufficient to increase police numbers to the level that we need. However, he may also be aware that the GLA had a debate on the Metropolitan police authority budget, following which Sir John Stevens sent a letter to Lord Harris in which he said:

"you will appreciate my concern at how difficult any further reductions beyond the full 1 per cent. efficiency savings now required by the GLA would be."

Is the Minister aware that Conservative GLA members have tabled an alternative budget requiring £47 million of extra efficiency savings—over and above the 1 per cent. GLA-required efficiency savings—which would require a cut in police numbers and police resources in London?

Mr. Clarke: I was not aware of that, but I never cease to be shocked by the activities of Conservatives, who try and score short-sighted political points at the expense of long-term investment. That was the story when they were in government, and it is the story now that they are in opposition. I am not surprised, therefore, by what the hon. Gentleman says. I am glad to confirm the entente cordiale—a suitable term between pro-Europeans—that exists between the Liberal Democrats and the Government on these questions.

I shall turn now to the other matters regarding the Metropolitan police that I want to deal with, so that they can all be considered in the round.

On 1 April 2000, the boundaries of the Metropolitan police district were brought into line with those of the 32 London boroughs. That important development has enhanced policing in a variety of ways. It meant that Essex, Hertfordshire and Surrey took over responsibility for policing areas that were previously within the Metropolitan police district.

General adjustments to the grant distribution were made from this year, and we have taken account of transitional costs incurred last year and in 2000-01. I recognise that the three county police authorities will continue to incur transitional costs next year.

We will therefore be making special payments of grant in 2001-02, totalling £2.25 million, in recognition of the additional costs resulting from the boundary changes. Accordingly, Essex will get £14,000, Hertfordshire £627,000, and Surrey £1.609 million.

When I met the delegation of Surrey Members of Parliament earlier this week, I said that I would look at detailed submissions and representations from the Surrey police authority and the chief constable of Surrey if it was felt that the transitional costs were greater than had been allowed for in the grant.

The Government accept that the police funding formula is not sufficiently sophisticated or flexible to respond to the distinct characteristics and responsibilities of the

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Metropolitan police. It is for that reason that the Greater London Authority receives, each year, a special payment of grant on behalf of the Metropolitan police authority in addition to that provided through the funding formula.

In recognition of the Metropolitan police authority's specific needs, the Metropolitan police special grant for 2001-02 will be increased, in line with the increase in total standard spending, from £182 million this year to £191 million. That is paid as 100 per cent. Home Office grant, and is not charged to London council tax payers.

With the establishment of the MPA in July 2000, arrangements for the policing of London have been brought more closely into line with arrangements elsewhere in England and Wales. The Metropolitan police precept is now set by the Mayor as part of the Greater London Authority budget, and is subject to the approval of the GLA.

With that, I conclude my remarks about the Metropolitan police. I shall therefore give way to any hon. Member who has a question about that.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, and for his courteous reception of the delegation from Surrey on Monday. I am pleased that he has put on record the Government's approach to transitional funding, and hope that he will look at extra transitional funding for the coming financial year.

Will the Minister confirm that he will also consider bids for subsequent financial years, especially for Surrey, which is assuming the lion's share of the burden relinquished by the Metropolitan police? That is especially important, given that the wider formula means that, compared to other police forces, Surrey is in a dire position.

Mr. Clarke: I can confirm that, but I reinforce the point that I made to the delegation that I met on Monday, which was led by the hon. Gentleman. The only basis for adjustment will be a clear demonstration that the transitional costs incurred by the Surrey police authority are greater than the sums allocated to meet them. The Government are not offering a type of slush-fund payment: allocations are made in relation to specific and demonstrable additional transitional costs.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I echo the thanks to the Minister expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), for his courteous reception of the Surrey delegation yesterday. I was in that delegation, as was my hon. Friend and other Surrey Members of Parliament, the chief constable of Surrey and the chairman of the Surrey police authority.

However, will the Minister repeat for the record another thing that he was helpful enough to tell the delegation on Monday—that he is prepared to look at the specific issue of the additional costs falling on Surrey police as a result of the house arrest of Senator Pinochet? As he knows, the chief constable has estimated those additional costs at £1.2 million, of which the Government have repaid only £200,000. The Minister will recall that in a written answer he estimated those costs to be £750,000 in total. Has the Minister had an opportunity to look at those figures since Monday? Can he now confirm the chief constable's estimate?

Finally, will the Minister confirm that he will look again at the fact that Surrey will get only £11,000 for rural crime fighting? As he said, that is far too little.

Mr. Clarke: I will deal with rural issues in a moment. I confirm that I said that I would look at the additional costs that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. Unfortunately, I have not had a chance to do so since the delegation, as I have been detained on business in the House. I will look at the issue, but I say to the House what I said to the delegation—the fact that I am saying that I will look at something is not a guarantee that I will agree it.

I announced on 15 June 2000 that the Home Secretary was to make available £15 million from the budget for the remainder of 2000-01 to enhance the policing service in rural areas. Financial provision for future years is now included in the spending review 2000 settlement. Forces policing sparsely populated areas will receive a further £30 million in 2001-02 and in the following two years. The money has been directed towards areas of greater sparsity—31 forces gain from the rural policing fund.

I have listened to widespread expressions of concern about the problems of rural policing, and I want to see concrete benefits from the allocation. The police authorities that receive funding under this scheme will need to show, in their best value performance plans, how they will use this money to improve policing in rural areas. I look forward to police forces using these funds imaginatively.

Two forces have made representations to me about being harshly treated in the allocation. The Northumbria police authority is in the unusual position of having a very sparsely populated part of its area—one of the sparsest in the country—side by side with a very densely populated area. The way the statistics worked out, the Northumbria force did not gain, as it might have hoped, from the allocation. I have said to the chief constable and the chair of the police authority that I am prepared to look at specific bids they might wish to make under targeted policing to deal with some of those aspects in the rural areas. I said exactly the same to the delegation from Surrey, which received £11,000 from the system—not an immense amount of money. It has a case for some of the areas.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): The Avon and Somerset force polices some sparsely populated areas. It was not among the forces the Minister listed earlier whose numbers had gone up. However, violent crime has risen remorselessly in Avon and Somerset, not just in the past three years but in the past 20. Does the hon. Gentleman realistically expect that anything in this document is enough to result in the figures for violent crime going down in the next 12 months, as we all want?

Mr. Clarke: I believe that the allocations will make a difference on violent crime. I hope that the Avon and Somerset force will, over the next 12 months, have more officers than there were in March 1997.

The issues of violent crime are much more substantial than simply police numbers. Violent crime—a term that covers a wide variety of types of crime from the exceptionally serious to the not so serious—is the single biggest problem that we have in the areas of policing and crime reduction for which I am responsible. That is why

the Government have published an action plan and why the police forces are giving great attention to it. It covers a wide range of issues, including dealing with alcohol, the relationship between the police and schools and how we use DNA technology as a deterrent and as a way of giving people greater confidence in the detection of violent crime. Police presence has something to do with it, as implied by the hon. Member for Northavon, but by no means everything. There needs to be an overall approach.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): On the Avon and Somerset force, is there not a specific problem when a force covers a large area that is mixed in character, including the inner-city areas of Bristol and rural parts of Somerset? Is not the formula disadvantageous to a non-homogenous police force area which tends to lose out according to almost every criterion?

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman will be shocked to hear that I have received representations from just about every police authority in the country. They all argue that they lose out because they are homogenous-urban, homogenous-rural or not homogenous. They all say that they are the losers, come what may. To be fair, all that I can say is that there is weight in the hon. Gentleman's argument, as there is in those put to me by many other hon. Members.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): May I say how pleased I was when the Staffordshire police qualified for some of the funding for policing rural areas? They have already announced that they will restore beats in rural areas. They have even announced the completion of a mobile police station, which can be taken to rural locations, which is an innovative development. I heard my hon. Friend say that he would monitor the use of the money in future. Does that mean that those forces that use it well will receive more, and those that use it badly, less?

Mr. Clarke: I can confirm that we are monitoring the use of the money and we expect it to be well used. As yet, we have not established a system whereby performance drives the allocation of money as my hon. Friend implies. Through the targeted crime initiatives, we hope to establish what works. When people ask for funding for something that has been demonstrated to work, they will have a stronger case. There may come a time when we achieve the world that my hon. Friend, as a member of the Treasury Committee, seeks to achieve in everything that he does, but we are not there yet.

I was glad that in Avon and Somerset, to which hon. Members referred, there was a reduction in crime in the year to September 2000 of 2.5 per cent., which is far better that the national average of 0.2 per cent. Violent crime increased, but crime as a whole decreased.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): As the Minister said, an announcement was made about the sparsity element, which was most welcome. There is a crisis in policing in Wales. For the third year running, expenditure on the police forces in Wales has been cut. It was 4.93 per cent. of the budget in 1997–98, 4.92 per cent. in the following year and 4.89 per cent. last year. The North Wales police say that they are not hard done by, as they are getting the average increase, but even taking that into account, given their pension and pay commitments, funding is at a standstill. Therefore, the settlement is not good for Welsh police forces. As no other Member of Parliament for Wales is present in the Chamber I thought I had better raise that matter.

Mr. Clarke: The Welsh police forces have a unique record, I think. I have here the statistics for each region and I see that in the period between March 1997 and 1 September 2000—since the beginning of this Parliament—the number of police officers in Dyfed-Powys increased by 40, in Gwent it increased by 28, in north Wales, which is the hon. Gentleman's area, by 24 and in south Wales by 53. That is an increase in every force area. That does not solve the problem—as I am always pointing out, police numbers are not the only issue.

However, good progress has been made and that is no doubt one reason why crime in Wales reduced by 10.3 per cent. in the last year for which figures were recorded. That is a good performance and I pay tribute to the forces in Wales for what they are doing. I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's argument that more needs to be done. The North Wales force has been particularly creative in its approach to tackling rural policing positively.

We have made available an extra £500 million, including capital provision, over three years to meet the costs of Airwave—the modern radio communication system for the police. It will provide the police with more reliable, better quality radio and data communications. Airwave will give officers fast, secure, digital communications and access to local and national databases.

Payments in each of the three years will be concentrated on police authorities as they take up the system. The alternative would have been to spread the support more thinly across all forces every year. After consultation with the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Association of Police Authorities, I decided that a focused funding arrangement would be more helpful to forces meeting the initial costs of Airwave roll-out. The core service charges for Airwave will be met centrally.

The DNA expansion programme has important implications for violent crime. We are committing £143 million in new money over the spending review years to the DNA project. That is in addition to up to £17 million a year in 2000–01 and 2001–02 in grants to police authorities. It will enable us to expand the national DNA database to hold the DNA profiles of the whole of the active criminal population by 2004. It will also provide support to enable forces to visit more scenes of crime, and to collect and process evidence from the increasing number of DNA matches of crimes to offenders. I hope shortly to announce details of the initial funding allocation to police authorities.

I emphasise that I can think of no more effective way of deterring crime than guaranteeing to potential criminals that if they commit their crime they will be caught by the use of DNA technology. During my time as a Minister, one of the more exciting developments that I see when I visit different forces is their ability to solve vicious, bad crimes—murders and rapes—dating from as long as 10 years before, through the availability of that technology. The more it is clear to criminals that their

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crime will be solved and that they will be punished, the better our chances will be. I attach great importance to that particular investment.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): When I talk to my constituents, the majority of them are delighted that the Government are taking that course. They think that it is common sense to use such information to solve crime. Will my hon. Friend confirm that, whatever happens, he will press on with the programme, despite some of the opposition that we have heard?

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support. He is absolutely right. The concrete results achieved produce a much more unfriendly environment for the potential criminal. That is why the Government are giving that investment such a high priority.

For all those projects, specific payments will continue to be made for all three years of the spending review period. They are key programmes.

In November, when we announced the provisional funding settlement, details of the specific payments were given at the same time. It is the Government's intention to continue that arrangement next year and also to include details of capital and the National Crime Squad and National Criminal Intelligence Service levies. Instead of announcements dribbling out over time, everyone will know exactly where they stand.

Mr. David Heath: Although the capital spends this year are extremely welcome, there is still the problem that national programmes are displacing much-needed essential maintenance and work on the backlog of repairs in forces. Can the Minister persuade his right hon. and hon. Friends of the crying need to release the accumulated capital receipts and to allow them to be used for the purposes for which they were raised from local taxpayers and ratepayers—to fight crime effectively?

Mr. Clarke: That is a fair point and I shall consider it. Although capital expenditure is not part of the grant report, for this year we have been able to raise the sum for capital grant and supplementary credit approvals from £144.3 million to £157.3 million, after several years during which the total remained unchanged. In addition, £75 million will be allocated to those forces taking Airwave; and all police authorities and forces are being encouraged to explore the scope for private finance initiative projects. However, I shall look into the point about capital receipts made by the hon. Gentleman. It would be helpful if he could write to me about the ways in which his force might use such resources; I should be happy to consider that.

We are introducing other funding initiatives. We are providing for a basic command unit fund to support and encourage programmes to prevent crime and fear of crime at the level closest to the general public. An important part of our policy is to strengthen the basic command unit aspect. Details of the scheme will be developed and will be published later this year. Provision has also been made for assistance to police authorities in London and the south-east towards the cost of the pay lead necessary to recruit and retain officers. That point relates to our earlier discussions.

The settlement takes into account the commitment of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to improve efficiency for which we set a year-on-year target of 2 per cent. for each year between 1999 and 2002. The inspectorate assessed all 43 police authorities and forces as having delivered the 2 per cent. efficiency gains; they are on line to deliver further efficiency gains of 2 per cent. The total value was more than £183 million—a serious amount. We believe that efficiency gains will total at least £440 million over the three-year period. I congratulate all the forces on the commitment that they made to achieve those improvements in sometimes difficult circumstances.

On next year's funding settlement, we continue to set considerable store by stability in the grant system to help planning, so we have proposed no changes to the method of police grant distribution. There will thus be no substantive changes to the operation of the police funding formula for next year. Data have been updated as usual. That has had an effect on grant distribution between police authority areas.

Mr. Blunt: When will the results of the 2001 census come into the formula?

Mr. Clarke: The short answer to that question, which I put articulately and effectively, is that I do not know. I will write to the hon. Gentleman on that point. It is a matter for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, not for the police. We are merely subjects of DETR in our police operations at the Home Office.

The main issues that emerged from the consultation and the representations that were received were the implications of ring-fenced funding, the proposed levies for the NCS and the NCIS, the problems of rural policing, the continuation of the old force establishment component in the formula, the costs of Airwave and the costs of police pensions.

I have addressed the issues of ring-fenced funding. We believe that it is important that these funds are targeted more specifically to achieve results—to recruit more police officers, establish the DNA database and so on. I shall not devote more time to that point.

I hope that it will be possible to build on the successes that we have taken forward. The whole settlement is concentrated on improving the policing service on the ground; most of the funds will, as in the past, reach police authorities.

Throughout the country there was a great deal of what I can only describe as scaremongering about the NCS and NCIS levies. I attach great importance to funding the NCS and the NCIS at the proper levels. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary took careful account of the comments made, and the increases in the NCS and NCIS levies, which when added together amount to 10 per cent. of the 2000/01 levy in cash terms, achieve a balance. The increase for the NCS was broadly in line with the average spending increases across the country. The increase for the NCIS was significantly greater, because we need to commit to intelligence-led policing in a variety of ways. The system of funding the NCS and the NCIS is under review and there is legislation before the House on the matter at the moment; we debated its Second Reading yesterday.

I have discussed rural policing.

I have been asked to complete the removal of the police establishments element from the formula. Police establishment levels were originally included to provide stability and continuity. The Government have always intended that those historic manpower levels should be part of the formula on a temporary basis, and should be removed at whatever rate proves compatible with the need for stability. It remains our intention in due course to wind up that part of the formula, which has been progressively reduced from 50 per cent. to 10 per cent. of overall funding, but in the interests of stability we are making no formula changes for next year.

Pensions are a real cause of grievance in many parts of the country. The arrangements whereby pension costs form part of each police authority's budget are long-standing. There are some advantages, but overall there is no doubt that rising costs are a matter of concern to the police service. We are still working on proposals for a new pension scheme for new entrants that will be less expensive for officers and police authorities alike. There will need to be further consultation on that in due course, as part of our long-term strategy.

I take a particular interest in these issues and have discovered for myself how difficult they are. I have joined colleagues in the Treasury in asking officials to provide an assessment of the various alternative ways of providing the finance for police and fire pensions. The options considered will range from establishing fully funded schemes to changing the way in which expenditure on police and fire pensions is presented in the accounts. My officials have been asked to take account of the views of police and fire authorities and other key stakeholders. I expect a report on the alternatives to be ready by the spring.

In conclusion, the Government are determined to reduce crime, to lessen fear of crime and to see more police officers back on the beat. The signs are that that is starting to happen. I will not join in the party political arguments that we sometimes have on these matters, but I believe that the record of this year and of the settlement is one of which the Government can be proud, and which the police service as whole has the basis to develop into the future.

5.13 pm

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): I start, as the Minister did, by paying a tribute to the dedication and professionalism of the men and women of our police force.

When I spoke in last year's counterpart of this debate, I had been shadowing the Minister for three or four hours and was just starting in my present role as Opposition spokesman. After a year, I have had an opportunity to see at first hand the work that the police are doing in their fight against crime. I have spoken to officers of all ranks, and I am more conscious of the value of that work than I was previously, although I have always been a strong supporter of the work that the police do.

Last year, I said that morale was a problem in the police service. There is no doubt that the position has worsened in the intervening 12 months. The chairman of the Police Federation, whom the Home Secretary often criticises on the subject, has said that police morale is the worst that he has ever seen. The Minister said in a parliamentary answer that a good way to judge morale was to look at how many officers were leaving: resignations from the police service have increased by 60 per cent. under this Government.

I shall give a typical example of the comments that I have received. An officer recently e-mailed my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), saying:

"We used to love the job and always did everything we could to keep the wheel on the cart. Now we are taken for granted . . .

Morale countrywide is at all-time low not just from the remuneration situation but the constant abuse . . . and the sheer lack of the Home Secretary coming up with anything useful, just trite schemes that sound good if you know nothing of Policing or Criminal law.

I thank God that neither of my children have expressed any desire to join the police, and were they to do so, I would do all in my power to dissuade them."

That comment is not unique. We often hear very critical comments about what officers regard as Government complacency. They know that 200 offenders, who have been convicted of assaulting police officers, have been let out of jail on the special early release scheme. Those criminals were not fined, but sentenced to prison. On average, they have served about 30 per cent. of the sentences imposed by the courts. Such measures are devastating to police morale.

It is rather rich for the Home Secretary to say today that there is a hard core of about 100,000 criminals in the country and that the courts are at fault for not imposing heavier sentences, given that, whatever the sentence, under the early release scheme offenders are let out after serving less than half their sentence. There is a certain dishonesty about that, and if we are to address the problems of crime, we need to adopt a straightforward approach that can be understood by those who might be tempted into crime.

The police have 2,500 fewer officers and the Minister suggests that the recent one-off boost in recruitment lays a basis for the future, but all the signs show that police officers are leaving in greater numbers and that the crisis will get worse, not better. Targeting some offences, such as car crime and burglary, is a good idea, but too few officers are dealing with those manpower-intensive duties, with the effect that insufficient officers are available in our town centres to deal with violent crime and to prevent it from happening simply by their presence. There is no better way to stop trouble in a town centre than to have a strong, visible police presence.

Mr. Charles Clarke *rose—*

Mr. Heald: I want to finish the point, and then the Minister can answer all my questions at the same time.

During Jonathan Dimbleby's programme on ITV on Sunday, the Home Secretary kept saying that the Government

"made no promises about the total number of police officers."

He said that they had

"said nothing at all about increasing the total number of police officers".

When the Minister of State, Home Office, the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), used to do the Minister's job, he used to say that talking about police numbers was "sterile and simplistic" and that that was not

[Mr. Heald]

the issue. Will the Minister tell us how committed the Government are to the question of the total number of police officers?

Mr. Clarke: I am very committed to it, which is why I said in response to an earlier intervention that I was confident that, five years after the Government were elected, we would have more police officers across the country than we inherited. A third of police authorities in Britain already have more of them.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman about violent crime and wonder whether he will join me in congratulating, for example, the Merseyside police. They have used the extra money that we have given them to deal with robbery and to raise their profile in the city centre—for example, with mounted police—precisely to inhibit the alcohol-related violent crime to which he refers.

Mr. Heald: Nobody is more prepared than I am to pay tribute to the work of officers who tackle crimes such as robbery. It is difficult to deal with such crimes effectively, and it is right that we should pay such a tribute. Anti-robbery initiatives and high-visibility policing in places such as Hillingdon have had a good effect. However, the Minister should consider whether it is good enough to have the high-visibility policing that we need only in certain areas. Should not such policing take place everywhere when it is needed? The problem is that there are just not the officers to do the job.

The Labour party pledged in its manifesto that it would

"get more officers back on the beat."

The Home Secretary now seems to be saying that there was never a promise or a pledge about an increase in police numbers. However, the Prime Minister should know and, in response to a challenge by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, he said that

"every single promise that we made—on getting waiting lists down, getting class sizes down and increasing police numbers—will be met by the next general election, as we said they would be."—[*Official Report*, 10 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 948.]

That is completely wrong. His words prove that there was a promise, but it will be broken just like the promise on youth justice.

Mr. Wilshire: My hon. Friend paints a correct and gloomy picture, but the position is worse than perhaps he realises. In Surrey, the grant is being cut in real terms after allowing for inflation. The chief constable tells us that, if something is not done over the next three years, he will have 250 fewer officers. It is not a question of a promise of more police officers being broken, because Government policy is forcing one force to cut police numbers.

Mr. Heald: The Surrey chief constable's comments no doubt apply to other forces and show that the Home Secretary and the Minister need to tackle particular problems.

Mr. Clarke: I did not intend to intervene often, but the hon. Gentleman refers to other forces. Has he had a chance to see last Friday's statement by the chief constable of North Yorkshire and the chair of his police authority, who said that, in March 2002, they will have more police officers than there have ever been in North Yorkshire? I refer to that force, because it covers the constituency of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague).

Mr. Heald: The Minister must accept that taking one isolated example does not mean that one has won the argument. I know that he has not had updated projections from many forces, but the projections for wastage that were made earlier this year show that, by halfway through the year, many forces had much more than half the wastage that had been projected. We know that the Metropolitan police has had to revise its figures upwards by 25 per cent, and that resignations have increased by 60 per cent. since the general election. There is nothing to be complacent about.

My point about the Prime Minister was that he admitted both that there had been a promise to get officers back on the beat and that his promise was to increase police numbers. By the time of the next general election—assuming that it is this year, as everyone expects—there will not only be 2,500 fewer officers, but 6,300 fewer specials. This is an example of the spin that the public are getting sick of—all spin, no delivery.

On the details of the settlement, there is certainly more money this year than there was last year in terms of the rate of increase. Last year, the Opposition voted against the increase, because it simply was not enough. It is true that we also made that criticism in earlier years. The position is a bit better this year—

Mr. Wilshire: Not in Surrey.

Mr. Heald: But not in Surrey, as my hon. Friend says. Although the position is a bit better this year, it is sad that the year in which the increase comes is an election year. What happens after that? The real-terms increases are 3.5 per cent. for next year and 0.6 per cent. for the following year. The Minister must put this year's settlement in context.

Mr. Blunt: Bearing in mind that the largest increase has been made in an election year, my hon. Friend might want to note that the three police forces whose areas are represented entirely by Conservative Members—the City of London, Surrey and Dorset forces—have, for some reason, received the lowest increase in the country.

Mr. Heald: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, which reminds me of another issue. The Minister speaks a great deal about the crime fighting fund, but he fails to remember that many forces have found it impossible to recruit more officers. If a force does not recruit, it does not get the money. In respect of the forces in Hertfordshire, the City of London and another area, not one single crime fighting fund officer has been recruited, although 118 places were allocated.

Mr. Edward Davey: I am disturbed that Conservative Front Benchers are happy with the Government's grant for the police. Will the hon. Gentleman support the police grant report on that basis? The Metropolitan police have had to recruit and train 2,000 officers in order to recruit a net increase of 1,050 officers next year. That will require a 16 per cent. increase in the precept from the Greater

London Authority. Will the hon. Gentleman explain why his Conservative colleagues on the GLA proposed a 4 per cent. precept? Are the Conservatives in favour of police cuts in London?

Mr. Heald: As the hon. Gentleman spoke, I was thinking of the circumstances in London. He suggested that it was as easy as anything to recruit, but the crime fighting fund allocated some 115 places that remain unfilled. In the past two or three years, the Government's impact on police morale has made recruitment very difficult. The ability to recruit police will not be regained until morale is improved, which means having the will to support the police and not to take the easy options.

The Minister referred to a 7.4 per cent. overall settlement. However, in terms of actual police allocation, the budgets are set to increase by about 5 per cent. *Public Finance* magazine states:

"Police authorities are warning of a tight year ahead".

It points out that

"police forces face increased costs of 5.6 per cent just to keep their heads above water".

He mentioned Northumbria, but the chief constable of Cumbria says that his force will face cuts again this year.

Will the Minister comment on the likely rise in police authority council tax precepts, which is a matter of concern to the Association of Police Authorities? He mentioned best value, but is not that concept creating huge bureaucracy? The chief constable of Lincolnshire makes this complaint:

"In my force Best Value bureaucracy is costing over £400,000 a year . . . and we are in danger of sinking under a sea of targets and measures."

How does the Minister intend to reform best value so that it is not merely a charter for bureaucracy and red tape?

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) referred to the three forces—Essex, Hertfordshire and the City of London—that will not receive one single officer as a result of the crime fighting fund. Will the Minister give some assurances about the ability of those forces and others to meet the continuation criteria that will allow them to access the funding next year? Have all forces met those criteria?

The Association of Police Authorities refers to the

"bureaucracy and difficulty in accessing the various pockets of funding now held by the Home Office".

What does the Minister have to say about that? The APA also expresses concern about the mounting pensions bill. Just now, the Minister said a few words about addressing that issue. Last year, he said:

"Pensions were mentioned by many hon. Members, who made legitimate points. That issue is difficult to deal with across government, not only in the police. As has been suggested, we need to sort it out."

He went on to say that

"it has not yet been fully addressed, and it needs to be dealt with."—[*Official Report*, 3 February 2000; Vol. 343, c. 1261.]

At the Police Federation conference, the Home Secretary said that the Government were

"working on proposals for reform"

and that

"no serving officer will see his or her pension entitlement reduced."

It seems that, a year on, nothing has happened. Does the Minister have proposals on that issue, or is he planning to kick it into the long grass?

Mr. Kidney: Staffordshire has the money for recruits and the applicants to recruit, but the big obstacle is the huge proportion of the base budget that is spent on pensions. The hon. Gentleman asks whether the Government have any proposals; is he suggesting that the Conservatives would remove some of that burden from authorities such as Staffordshire?

Mr. Heald: Clearly, pensions are an ever larger part of the budget. The Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but I think that pensions took up about 7 per cent. of the budget in 1990, and now take up about 14 per cent. *[Interruption.]* I am grateful for the Minister's indication that I am about right. Those figures are for the national average; the proportion may be higher in Staffordshire.

One of the reasons for that trend is falling police numbers. In a "pay as you go" scheme, the effect of having fewer contributors—we have 2,500 fewer—is that less money goes into the scheme and less comes out. There is a case for seeing what the effect would be if police numbers were restored and if police officers wanted to continue their careers for longer. That could contribute to a solution. I agree that we must consider those issues. The Government have access to actuaries and other experts who could tease out more detail. It is about time that the Government took action or explained their thinking in more detail.

Before the last general election, police capital was an important issue. This year, too, the APA has said that it is concerned about capital expenditure, saying that it

"is still over 30 per cent. lower than in 1995-96"—

under the Conservatives. At that time, the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) said:

"It is fine for Ministers to say that they will provide extra money for police officers, but, if they keep cutting the capital budget every year, how on earth is the force expected to keep up with increased expenditure on more police, uniforms and police cars . . . ?"—[*Official Report*, 29 January 1997; Vol. 289, c. 464.]

Given that the Minister and his colleagues were complaining at a time when capital expenditure was 30 per cent. higher than it is now, will he explain what he will do about capital expenditure, or is this another case of complacency?

Earlier this week, my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins) made a powerful speech on rural policing and the difficulties that Cumbria faces. I have referred to the remarks of the chief constable of Cumbria. It is time that the Minister gave a more detailed answer about what he will do to help rural areas such as Cumbria.

The Government have promised to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime, but instead they have been tough on the crime fighters. The test for the Government is whether the funding settlement will better enable the police forces of England and Wales to fight crime. The key to that is whether the Minister can tell us that there will be less bureaucracy and red tape and a more positive approach. There must be a serious effort to achieve the visible policing that we all want.

[Mr. Heald]

Many people would say that, so far, the Government have been complacent and have not taken the right approach to law and order. It is no surprise that the Prime Minister is not prepared to have a television debate during a general election campaign in which these issues could be teased out and in which he would be seriously challenged to explain why, when he promised that there would be rising police numbers, those numbers have not risen: he is frit.

5.34 pm

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): I want to be brief because I know that other Members want to speak. I thought that the contribution of my hon. Friend the Minister of State in opening this important debate was, as usual, of a very high standard. He outlined some of the difficulties and challenges that face the Government, as well as some of the measures that they are taking to solve problems.

I want to pay tribute to the work of Nottinghamshire police and the police authority chairman, Councillor John Clarke. The police authority, along with Nottinghamshire police, were pleased to receive a grant increase this year of 4.7 per cent., which will enable them to continue the work that they have been doing to tackle crime in the county.

Since 1997, recorded crime in Nottinghamshire has decreased by 9.9 per cent. It is worth emphasising that figure. Although there are problems, as we have heard, with violent crime and other crimes that we all deplore, real successes are being achieved through our crime-fighting initiatives.

We know that police morale may sometimes be under strain. As well as confronting the police with problems that they must deal with, we ought to congratulate them on their success in tackling certain types of crime. Considerable success has been achieved in respect of domestic burglary and car crime, and through changes to police practices and procedures for dealing with domestic violence. If we spoke about such successes, as well as the challenges that still face the police, there would be fewer problems of low morale and feelings of not being valued.

There has been a problem with police numbers. No one is disguising the fact that police numbers have fallen. In my constituency and in Nottinghamshire generally, they have fallen, but with the money that the Government have made available, particularly through the crime fighting fund, we can see that that is changing. The latest figures that I have show that in the six months from 31 March 2000 to 30 September 2000, Nottinghamshire police numbers increased by the full-time equivalent of 28.

A report to Gedling borough council's crime prevention committee showed that up to March 2002, in the divisions that cover my constituency, there will be an increase of some 60 officers. My constituents will be pleased because, as my hon. Friend the Minister and others have said, people want to see police on the street to tackle some of the problems that they see.

It is incumbent on us all, however, to support our chief constables when they say that putting police on the street is not the only way to deal with the problems that they face. Although we all like to see police walking down the street, it is targeted policing and police intelligence that reduce crime.

Mr. Hawkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He takes a serious interest in these matters, as I know from debates in Westminster Hall. Does he recognise that chief constables throughout the country are telling his Government's Ministers that it is ridiculous for an organisation to have 58 performance targets? Any serious business organisation would have no more than three targets, and preferably only one. How can the hon. Gentleman urge the House to support chief constables, when his Government are not listening to chief constables asking them to scrap the monstrous 58 performance targets?

Mr. Coaker: My interpretation of the remarks of my hon. Friend the Minister is that he is listening to chief constables and doing what he can to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy. My point was that chief constables often have a difficult task in persuading members of the public that having a policeman or policewoman walking down the street may not be the most effective use of police time, and that the best way of tackling crime is often through police intelligence.

There is a conflict between the need to have police officers walking down the street, thereby reducing the fear of crime, and the more effective use of resources to bring crime statistics down. That is a difficult choice for our chief constables and local area commanders.

Painting a gloomy picture of the situation does not help police There are problems with police numbers, as the Government have acknowledged through establishing the crime fighting fund to increase the number of recruits and get more police on the street.

Violent crime presents challenges. No one wants violent crime, and we acknowledge that it has increased. However, we should recognise successes in tackling other forms of crime. Targeted policing, work on improving police morale and tackling the fear of crime will lead to a reduction in violent crime. Although I do not have the latest figures, I understand that they show that violent crime has decreased in some parts of the country.

Of course, police numbers, prison sentences and locking more people up are important. However, those measures alone will not reduce crime. Several hon. Members have mentioned the need to tackle the causes of crime. We should also take account of the police grant. If we do not tackle social exclusion, poor housing and other general problems in society, it will be difficult to win the battle against crime.

Mr. Llwyd: Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that community penalties can be as effective as locking up?

Mr. Coaker: That is a good point. It is incumbent on us to ensure that the public do not perceive community penalties as a soft option, which is the current view. However, they are a genuine alternative to prison. We lock up more people now than ever, but do we feel safer on the streets? The answer is probably no.

Let us talk up our police and remember that they have achieved significant successes in tackling a wide range of crimes. That applies to my constituency in

Nottinghamshire as well as throughout the country. If we talk about the successes of the police as well as the challenges that remain, we will do much to increase the morale of police forces throughout the country.

5.41 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The hon. Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker) spoke a lot of sense. I join him and others in paying tribute to the police. We must talk up the police and their work, and we must talk up policing as a career and as a job that the country needs doing.

The hon. Gentleman rightly said that there is no simple connection between police numbers and crime clear-up rates. However, I want to begin by giving an example that is linked to the debate. I have come to the House almost directly from the funeral of someone who was hacked to death nearly 14 months ago by three people—now convicted—in a flat in my constituency. He left a widow and six children; the youngest was under five. At the funeral service in Bermondsey, the widow and the family paid tribute to the police, whose dedication meant that, although they were unable to prevent the crime—it was probably immediately unpreventable because the perpetrators were so evil—they ultimately also found the pieces of the body, which had been buried. That at least allowed a funeral to take place and the family to start the next process in their lives.

Such debates are not just about numbers and budgets but about ensuring that there are adequate forces in our society to deter people more from committing crimes—and that when crimes are committed, we catch the perpetrators. That is where the police come in. Our clear-up rate for the crimes listed in the British crime survey is only 3 per cent. Our electors want us to do much better, so our police service must be adequate to the task.

I welcomed the statement on the comprehensive spending review made some months ago and the considerably greater allocation to the police for next year than for the past three years. It is a definite improvement. However, when my colleagues and I vote on the budget grant that has been proposed today, we must consider whether it is enough for the coming year.

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is never enough.

Mr. Hughes: I accept also that the Government would like to do more. However, as an opposition party, we must decide whether the allocation is enough for next year in the light of the evidence of the past three years. We have formed the view that it is not. That is not simply a subjective, party-political view; it also reflects advice from the Association of Police Authorities and others. That is why we will vote against the motion. If it is defeated, the Government will have to present a proposal for more money. That will not mean that there is no money for the police; it will mean that the police settlement has not found favour with the House. That is the way in which Opposition parties have to register their concern about the service.

I find it surprising that, when it comes to voting on the proposed budget that pays for the coppers to go out on the beat, the Conservative party—which, most of the week, is full of sound and fury about the issue—is going to vote in a way which says that it is happy with what the Government have proposed. If the Conservatives were logical, from today on, they would stop their ranting and raving and realise that they are taking an inconsistent position. I am sad that they have bottled out just when they were expected to put their votes where their voices so loudly were.

Mr. Wilshire: Some may do so.

Mr. Hughes: To his credit, the hon. Gentleman said earlier that some Conservatives might have to register their discontent with the settlement for their counties—Surrey, in the hon. Gentleman's case—by not supporting the motion. I pay tribute to those hon. Members who do that.

Like the Minister, my colleagues and I are angry and frustrated that, through no fault of the Government or the Liberal Democrats, we have only one and a half hours for this debate. The person who objected and caused that to happen is not even here to take part. That is particularly galling. I shall be as quick as I can: I just want to make a few points on the issues that the Minister properly put before the House.

First, some parts of the country still have a very low number of police officers per head of the population. There are 43 police forces in England and Wales, some of which have fewer than 180 officers per 100,000 people. The two forces with the lowest ratios are West Mercia and Suffolk. They have little else in common: one is a partly built-up area, the other is very rural. Police numbers in the forces in Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Norfolk, North Yorkshire, Thames Valley and Warwickshire are all below the ratio of 180 officers per 100,000 people. People in those areas have always said to me that they want an increased police presence. One of the tests, for us, is whether there are enough police on the ground across the country. In many parts of the country, the answer is no, there are not.

Mr. Edward Davey: While my hon. Friend is dealing with per capita comparisons, is he aware that comparable capital cities such as Paris and New York have far higher numbers—calculated on a per capita basis—of police officers than London? Paris has twice as many officers as London, although its population is a similar size. Does my hon. Friend not regret that, under successive Conservative and Labour Governments over the past 10 years, the numbers in the Metropolitan police have fallen?

Mr. Hughes: I do regret that. My hon. Friend—who now speaks on London matters for the Liberal Democrats, having taken over from me—has exactly the same concern in his outer London borough and constituency as I have in my inner London borough and constituency. The police in my constituency, currently coping with cases such as the Damilola Taylor murder inquiry, tell me that their numbers are down. The new Commissioner, like his predecessor, makes that case, and wants to speak to the Greater London Authority, to make the point that the police need more resources so that he can deliver what the public expect of the Metropolitan police.

There have been significant reductions in police numbers. I shall not elaborate on this in great detail, but I want to illustrate the point. In London, the figures for

[Mr. Hughes]

the Metropolitan police have fallen from a little more than 26,500 in March 1997 to a little more than 24,500 in September 2000—the last date for which figures are available. That decrease in numbers will not deliver the policing that the public want.

The lists of police numbers have been published, and I have selected these statistics from ministerial answers, each for five police forces which have had a fall in numbers during the period that I mention. Sixteen forces have experienced falls in police numbers during the last six months for which figures are available, including Cumbria, Essex, the Metropolitan police, Suffolk and North Wales. There are 23 forces that have had a fall in the last year for which we have figures. They include Avon and Somerset—my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) intervened earlier on that subject—Dyfed-Powys, Greater Manchester, Sussex and Thames Valley. Twenty-eight forces out of the 43 have had a fall in numbers since the previous election. In addition to others I have mentioned, they include Cleveland, Derbyshire, Merseyside, Norfolk and Hampshire.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman place on record his acknowledgement that, over the six months to September last year, there was an increase of 444 officers across the country? I accept the ups and downs that he has described, but does he accept that police numbers are now going up?

Mr. Hughes: Of course I do, and the Minister knows it. He will remember that the figures were corrected on about 23 December. They at last begin to show that, from a very low base represented by a drop of thousands, numbers are beginning to climb.

There is another general point about numbers. I asked a direct question and the Home Secretary gave me an answer, which was that a reduction was expected in four forces next year—Humberside, Merseyside, the Met and West Yorkshire. Is a reduction in those forces still expected? *[Interruption.]* The Minister, in all honesty and perfectly acceptably, says that he does not know the answer. One reason why my hon. Friends and I will vote against the proposed settlement is that it does not even guarantee that in every force there will be an increase in the coming year. We have a duty to ensure that there is growth—not only in our constituencies, but in all places in England and Wales.

Mr. Clarke: Can the hon. Gentleman explain what he means by guarantee in that context? Is he saying that we should take back the power for the Home Secretary to determine police numbers in every force in the country?

Mr. Hughes: The Minister and I have had that debate before. The Government came to office saying that it was up to police forces to decide police numbers, but changed that view by allocating ring-fenced money so that more officers could be recruited. I keep asking whether there will be more officers at the next election—nationally or locally in each police force area—than there were at the previous one. That now seems highly unlikely, which is another reason why we shall vote against the allocation. This budget grant is unlikely to change that. The Government came to office saying that there would be more bobbies on the beat. That failure represents a failure to meet the promise that they made not to me alone, but to all our electors who want crime to fall and the number of police to increase.

It is obvious that not enough money has been provided, if we consider the figures for precepts likely to be levied by police authorities. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) has given me the projected figures for the south-west. The increase for Avon and Somerset is likely to be 7.5 per cent., with 5 per cent. for Devon and Cornwall, 9.7 per cent. for Dorset, 6 per cent. for Gloucestershire and 9.6 per cent. for Wiltshire. Those police authorities are having to add to the money that the Government give.

In London, the Mayor wanted a precept of 31 per cent. My colleagues wanted between 16 and 21 per cent. The Commissioner seems to want a similar figure. Bizarrely, the Tories seem to think that we can get away with 5 per cent., which no one else has been able to justify. Such a figure is entirely inconsistent with all their ranting and raving.

Mr. David Heath: My hon. Friend refers to the expected 7.5 per cent. precept increase for Avon and Somerset. A large component of that increase is down to changes in the area cost adjustment and the council tax benefit subsidy limitation scheme, which rubs salt in the wound. They do not pay for more police officers or better crime fighting, but simply apply the Government's formulae for the purposes of the rest of the country.

Mr. Hughes: Absolutely. A range of similar issues should also have been sorted out after nearly four years of Labour government. One example is the urban-rural mix, which has been raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) and acknowledged by the Minister. Forces such as Northumbria and Avon and Somerset, which police city and rural communities, clearly have an averaging out that does not reflect either their sparsity or the intensity of inner-city areas.

Furthermore, 14 per cent. of what we give to police forces is taken back to be spent on pensions for retired coppers, although a proposal for change seems to be on the table. That is a difficult issue, but I tabled a written question to the Minister almost a year ago to ask when he would tell us what he would do about police pensions. The answer was:

"I hope to publish specific proposals in the spring."—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 50W.]

That meant spring 2000, but spring 2001 is almost here. So far, there ain't nothing to see. That is a big issue and another reason why we must be dissatisfied on behalf of police authorities.

There is another difficult issue. Police forces are still rewarded for failure, not success. If crime figures decrease, forces are likely to get less money, not more. That is unsatisfactory. In addition, answers have not been provided to the difficult allowances questions. The Met has had an additional allowance. The Tories, of course, made a complete hash of allowances through the implementation of the Sheehy report, which completely ruined Met recruitment. The Government have sought to correct that and, on behalf of people in London, I am grateful to them. The home counties and counties such as

Hampshire, however, about which my hon. Friends keep asking questions, also have high living costs, but do not pay the allowance that would enable them to hold on to officers and recruit the police they need.

Although I hope that the Minister will make an announcement soon, there is still no funding package to keep officers on at the end of their 30 years' service or to bring recently retired officers back. We still have not had any correct and full answer in explanation of the fact that the Home Office allocation across the next three years is 6.4 per cent. but the police allocation less than 4 per cent. Even if extras such as forensic science are included, the police figure will still not reach the Home Office average. If policing is so important, why does it not receive as great an increase as the Home Office in general? When will there be the review of the police funding formula for which police authorities around the country have been asking for about 10 years? The formula does not manage to allocate money in the way that the authorities want.

Is not that litany reason enough to vote against the settlement? If not, there is no reason to do so. I am grateful that the Government have at last realised how important the public consider adequate funding of our police to be, but, as some of us said before the election and have said every year since and although the settlement is more generous than in previous years, thank God, it does not make up for the fact that the blue line has been stretched to breaking point. Every time the police are stretched to breaking point, they become less likely to deter, less likely to detect and less likely to bring crime figures down, and it is that which all our electors want.

5.56 pm

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I shall do my level best to precis my long and beautifully honed speech into the four or five minutes available. Luckily, a lot of the points that need making about the settlement as it affects my county of Surrey have been made.

The settlement for Surrey shows once again that the Government's claims are hollow—they are simply spin. The truth, at least in my county, is not as the Government claim. The truth in Surrey is simple. After allowing for inflation, there will be a 2.8 per cent. cut—not increase—in the money that Surrey receives. If that is translated straightforwardly, without other changes being made, that represents a £4 million cut over the next three years. If we cannot find other ways to handle that, it will equate to 250 fewer police officers available to fight crime in Surrey.

The truth of Labour government in my part of the world is not what the Government say through their spin. The truth is simply that Labour government in Surrey means less money for the police and fewer police officers. In fairness to the Minister, I do not blame him for that. The villains of that sorry saga are the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who I most certainly blame, and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, which administers the absolutely absurd standard spending assessment system. The Minister has no choice but to work within the constraints that are forced on him.

Indeed, the Minister has been kind enough to acknowledge that Surrey has a problem. In fact, he has gone further by undertaking to consider whether he can accept at least some of the suggestions made by Surrey MPs when we saw him a day or two ago. It would be churlish not to place on record the thanks of all Surrey MPs for the hon. Gentleman's kindness and the positive way in which he listened to us.

The "my constituency is being treated unfairly" theme is common in the House. Sometimes it is a soundbite; sometimes it is true. I would argue that in this case it is true. In absolute terms, Surrey's grant will increase next year by 0.2 per cent, which is why, after taking account of inflation, there will be a cut. Surrounding forces will receive an average increase of 5 per cent. or perhaps more. That is unfair, and there are other examples: the grant, considered by head of population, has fallen in Surrey for four years in a row.

There is another theme that rumbles around the House—the "things are different in my constituency" theme. However, in this case, things really are different in Surrey. Again, let me be fair to the Minister. He was good enough to acknowledge that the police boundary change that has moved the whole of my constituency, and other areas, from the Metropolitan police district to the Surrey district has produced turmoil and cost.

Mr. Charles Clarke *rose—*

Mr. Wilshire: I have no time to give way.

In the context of turmoil, the Minister referred to 500 officer movements. The Government have tried to help, and I thank them for that. Indeed, I am doubly grateful, because the Minister said he would give careful consideration to the information that the chief constable had promised to send him. The hon. Gentleman also kindly said that he would consider the General Pinochet case again. That cost us £1.2 million, although it was not our choice to put the general under house arrest in Surrey: the matter was a national issue for which we had to pick up the bill.

We in Surrey are being treated unfairly. Ours are special circumstances: we are different. I am grateful to the Minister for recognising that. The reality in Surrey is the opposite of the Government's claim: it is "less money, fewer police officers." I repeat, however, that this is not the Minister's fault. He is trying very hard to help. Indeed, I suggest—to ruin his career—that he is too nice to be a Labour Minister. Let me end by urging the hon. Gentleman—in order to enhance the reputation that he has gained with Surrey's MPs—to think about what we said to him, look back on the proposals that we made, accept that they are reasonable and sensible, and agree with them.

6.1 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I have two questions. First, why is less being spent per head on policing in Wales than in England? In 1999–2000, England received £140.39 while Wales received £125.49. In the current year, England has received £147 and Wales £132. Perhaps the Minister can tell me why—

It being one and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Standing Order No. 16(1). —*

The House divided: Ayes 309, Noes 49.

Division No. 95] **[6.2 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canin, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malleber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*

Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Wooles, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gidley, Sandra
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Randall, David
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil
Wishire, David

Tellers for the Noes:
Sir Robert Smith and
Mr. David Heath.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2001–02 (HC 156), which was laid before this House on 29th January, be approved.

Local Government Finance (England)

6.17 pm

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): I beg to move,

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2001–02 (HC 158), which was laid before this House on 29th January, be approved.

We would normally debate the two motions on local government finance in one debate, but I understand that some Conservative Members objected to that idea. I apologise to the House for that because I know that many Back Benchers want to speak on the main motion, but that is not in the hands of those on the Government Benches. Juvenile games seem to be the order of the day among Conservative Members, so we will just have to indulge them.

High-quality public services are the foundation of strong communities. The investment that we are announcing today will help ensure that councils throughout the country can continue to improve the quality of our local environment, to help tackle crime, to raise standards in our schools and to care for the most vulnerable members of our society.

The Government believe in the value of public services and are committed to ensuring that all our public services have the investment that they need to meet the aspirations and expectations of the public. That is why, since we came to office, we have invested an additional £8 billion, an increase of 14 per cent. in real terms, in grant support, compared with a 7 per cent. reduction during the last four years of the previous Administration's period in office. It is why I am pleased to announce that this year's settlement—£44.6 billion in total support from Government grant and business rates, an increase of £3 billion, or 7.2 per cent.—represents the best settlement for local government since the introduction of the council tax.

That does not mean that I am oblivious to the difficult choices that many authorities have to make and the challenges that face local communities.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): The Minister seems to be judging the quality of services by the amount of other people's money spent on them. In that case, will she comment on the fairly strong story that the new Mayor, a monster that she has unleashed on London, proposes to put his precept up by some 33 per cent., bearing in mind that, at the referendum, the Government said that the increase would be 3p a week for Londoners?

Ms Armstrong: I made it absolutely clear that budget setting is for local councils; it is not for the Government to determine what those budgets should be. We seek to provide sufficient resources for authorities to budget in a manner ensuring that, with best value, services improve annually. I also know that the Greater London Authority is considering with great alacrity the Mayor's budget proposals.

We are also providing for substantially increased capital investment by local government in long-term infrastructure improvements. Total local authority capital investment is planned to be £6.1 billion in 2001–02, increasing to £8 billion in 2003–04. That has been welcomed across local government. Furthermore, we have replaced the boom and bust and cuts climate of the

[Ms Armstrong]

previous Conservative Government, which undermined local public services, with economic stability and reasonable certainty about future funding. To be wise spenders, councils need to be able to plan ahead.

We already publish three-year plans for total general grant and limit the extent to which the grant formula will change. From this year, we are going further and providing information on the majority of capital allocations and specific grants on a three-year basis. Councils across the country have welcomed that change.

As I made clear to the House in November, the operation of the general grant distribution formula for 2001-02, if left unchecked, would produce an unacceptably wide range of outcomes. Some authorities would receive grant increases of about 10 per cent., whereas others would see their grant cut in real terms. That cannot be right. The reasons for the variation are large changes in the estimated population of local authority areas and changes in the earnings data used to calculate the area cost adjustment.

We have always made it clear that we shall take new data into account in the formula. However, as I also explained to the House in November, to prevent those changes in data from undermining delivery of the Government's priorities of education and social services—I believe that people and their local councils agree about those priorities—I announced that I would set a floor and a ceiling on the general grant increase received by any authority with education and social services responsibilities.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): May I thank my right hon. Friend for the floor that she introduced which has given Plymouth an additional £2 million over and above what it would have received under the formula invented by the Conservative Government? However, may I ask her to nail the story being put about in Plymouth by the leader of the local Tory-controlled council, who claims that Plymouth is always at the bottom of the pile when it comes to local government finance? *[Interruption.]* Will she also nail his claim—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Lady must know that there is very limited time for this debate. Interventions must be extremely brief on this occasion.

Ms Armstrong: I am very happy to nail that claim, and suspect that other hon. Members in the Chamber have nailed it fairly effectively. Almost every authority that comes to see me claims that it is at the bottom of the pile. The reality is that all local authorites have benefited significantly since this Government came to power. We have reversed the cuts that were made by the previous Administration and built on the available new investment.

In November, I proposed a floor increase of 3.2 per cent. and a ceiling of 6.5 per cent. As expected, a broad range of views emerged from consultation on that proposal.

Sir Paul Beresford: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms Armstrong: I suspect that I am about to hear another view.

Sir Paul Beresford: I thank the Minister for giving way. The reality of the floor and the ceiling is of course that the floor is just a damping system—a continuation of the system operated by the previous Administration and dealt with, as I understand it, in the next report on special grant. As a result of the ceiling, however, those councils whose standard spending assessments reveal greater need than others will lose out. Moreover, those authorities will lose again because of the funding reshuffle between the ceiling and the floor. Approximately 400 authorities across the country will receive less than that necessary to deal with their problems, as revealed by the needs indices.

Ms Armstrong: The hon. Gentleman—for reasons that I totally understand—has absolute faith in the SSA system and the distribution system, but I do not. I think that there are still flaws in that system, and that the use of the mechanism of floors and ceilings recognises that system's problems and tries to ameliorate them. He is right that the previous Conservative Government—he was an Environment Minister in that Administration—introduced damping grants. However, they never introduced anything like a base level grant increase of at least 3.2 per cent.

There was broad agreement on the concept of the floor, but views differed on how it should be paid for. Given that the overall total for distribution is fixed, I could not agree to proposals for funding the floor with extra resources. I considered carefully the proposition that the burden should be shared among local authorities by top-slicing the total grant—which was the method usually used by the Conservative Government—but that would require authorities to contribute in proportion to their council tax base. In other words, the authorities that were not receiving a large increase would have had to contribute even more to the floor than they would using the scaling factor that I propose.

I therefore concluded that a better approach was to allocate contributions to the floor in relation to the size of the increase received by authorities above the floor. It is still my view that it would be best to set limits on what would otherwise be a very wide range of grant increases because that would have made service planning very difficult for authorities.

I am therefore confirming my proposal to set a floor of 3.2 per cent. and a ceiling of 6.5 per cent. on general grant increases for authorities with responsibility for education and social services. A 6.5 per cent. increase in general grant should be sufficient for most ceiling authorities, even after allowing for the fact that they have growing populations, and particularly when many of them are receiving substantial sums in other grants. A 3.2 per cent. increase is reasonable for floor authorities, taking into account the fact that most of them face population reductions. Those increases will be topped by significant increases in other grants.

Sir Paul Beresford: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms Armstrong: I do not think that it is fair simply to have a debate with the hon. Gentleman. I am sure that he will attempt later to catch the eye of the occupant of the Chair.

Following careful consideration, I proposed to make one exception to the ceiling rule. Quite exceptional circumstances apply to the Isles of Scilly council, and it is always treated separately within the settlement.

It cannot avoid substantial capital expenditure to maintain essential waste disposal services. That capital expenditure should receive revenue support in the usual manner, through Government grant. If I treated the Isles of Scilly council on exactly the same basis as all other authorities with education and social services responsibilities, however, that extra revenue support would take its grant increase above the ceiling. Its annual budget is extremely small, and it would clearly have exceptional difficulty accommodating the expenditure. I shall therefore not limit its grant increase this year.

For local authorities that do not have education and social services responsibilities, no floors or ceilings will be imposed. I intend to continue the guarantee provided for the past two years that no such authority will receive less central support from the Government in 2001–02 than in 2000–01.

Of course, I know that the grant distribution system that we inherited attracts a lot of criticism—not least from Labour Members. It has not made it easy for authorities to plan ahead to improve their services. It does not encourage authorities to take responsibility for their budget choices. It is also very difficult for people to understand. It is small wonder that authorities continue to doubt its fairness.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for receiving representations in regard to Gloucestershire's fire and rescue service, but will she listen again to our special plea about our standard spending assessment? Having managed to negotiate an increase of 1.4 per cent. down to 1.3 per cent., I hope that I can be more successful when I lobby her in the future.

Ms Armstrong: There are special problems in Gloucestershire that I discussed with my hon. Friend earlier today. They result from a blip in the figures this year. It is not right that the formula should respond in the way that it has, and that is why we are reviewing the distribution system. I hope, by taking account of matters such as that, that we can create a fairer system.

We are not rushing to hasty solutions, as some would urge. We are building a consensus on the way forward with local government and other stakeholders. We have received a massive response to our Green Paper—more than 16,000 replies. We are currently finalising our analysis of those responses and the details will be published on the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions website by the beginning of March.

However, this settlement must not been seen in isolation. The Government have responded to specific pressures in four areas. First, we have looked again at the funding position of authorities with the most serious deprivation problems. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced on 24 January a doubling of the provision for the neighbourhood renewal fund in 2001-2002, from £100 million to £200 million. These additional resources will help local authorities improve their mainstream services in the most deprived neighbourhoods.

Secondly, in some areas where there have been serious floods this year, authorities faced the prospect of an increased levy from the Environment Agency to cover the co[illegible]red in dealing with them. My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, who has responsibility for the countryside and fisheries, announced on 26 January that he will provide an additional £11.6 million for the Environment Agency, to limit the burden falling on local authorities.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Is the £11.6 million genuinely new money, or is it part of the £51 million over four years announced by the Chancellor some months ago?

Ms Armstrong: I understand that £11.6 million was included in the spending review, but not in the £51 million announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor.

Thirdly, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), announced on 26 January additional funding of £25 million to help local authorities facing significant increases in the cost of housing homeless households in temporary accommodation. This will help all authorities that are in that position, including those accommodating large numbers of asylum seekers.

Finally, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced on 29 January a new grant of £52 million to provide help in meeting education spending pressures to those education authorities with the lowest increases in education funding from other sources.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): In recent years, Leicestershire has languished at the bottom of the county league table in respect of the amount of SSA granted per pupil in both primary and secondary schools. The extra £100,000 announced just days ago compares with a shortfall of £12 million. On that basis, it will take more than a century for us to reach the average county level. By the time that gap has been fully bridged, children in Leicestershire will probably be rather too old to benefit.

Ms Armstrong: I understand the concern of my hon. Friend, who has constantly paid attention to these matters and made representations about them on behalf of his constituency. However, he has not taken into account the ring-fenced grants that Leicestershire has received this year. They amount to an increase of about 24.6 per cent. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment took that into account in calculating the money from the £52 million.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): Before she moves away from the subject of the money announced on Monday, will the Minister explain the exact mechanism by which Bristol council received £700,000? None of the other three former Avon authorities, which include South Gloucestershire, are Labour controlled. They received only £100,000. What formula lay behind those allocations?

Ms Armstrong: I have already said that other funding that councils have received was weighed against the pressures that they face. *[Interruption.]* The Department for Education and Employment gave a clear indication of the criteria that were taken into account when calculating the amounts disbursed. It allocated £100,000 to all authorities that have not benefited from the

[Ms Armstrong]

neighbourhood renewal fund. The sum involved totals £8 million. Those authorities that face the greatest pressure as a result of the transfer of adult education funding to the Learning and Skills Council were also compensated.

I suspect that gains and losses would have been equally distributed among the authorities that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. A note from the Department for Education and Employment shows that consideration was given to the way in which pressures on authorities from pay, prices and increased contributions to the standards fund compared with their increase in education SSA and the funding that I have outlined. It is clear, therefore, that the Department for Education and Employment took into account pressures faced by authorities, and the moneys that they had already received. It made its calculations on that basis.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): It is clear that the formula has produced some anomalies. For example, outer-London boroughs facing severe teacher shortages are not getting significant sums in additional benefit under this formula, but neither are they getting it from funding under the education action zone or excellence in the cities schemes.

Ms Armstrong: My hon. Friend must take that up with the Department for Education and Employment. Under this settlement, outer London did especially well overall.

No doubt Conservative Members will predict council tax increases, as they have every year since we came to office. I understand that they are talking about an increase of 9.1 per cent. Every year they are proved wrong. The rate of council tax increase continues to decline. They were miles out last year, and I suspect that they will be miles out again this year.

The Government will not indulge in such fruitless speculation, and it would not be right for me to make predictions about what are essentially local decisions made by authorities accountable to local people. What is important is that local authorities consult local people and consider fully the scope for cost effectiveness before setting their budgets.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): Will the Minister give way?

Ms Armstrong: I am anxious to make progress.

Mr. Waterson: I should have thought it customary to give way to the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman in a debate such as this. The Minister cannot get away with what she has said. She has suggested that she expects increases to be below 6.1 per cent. Will she give the House some idea of how much below that figure the increases will be?

Ms Armstrong: I have continually said that I expect that, for most authorities, the rate of council tax increase will continue to decline. Labour authorities have the lowest council tax bills, whereas councils controlled by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties cost people £100 a year more, on average. In line with our commitment to local accountability, we abolished crude and universal capping and no longer set authorities' spending limits in advance. In general, councils have responded well to this approach in the past two years. Local authorities also made representations on council tax benefit subsidy limitation. I have considered these carefully, but have decided to make no change to the scheme that I proposed on 27 November, as amended on 15 December.

This local government settlement forms an important part of the Government's commitment to public services. We are working together with local government to provide a stable financial and planning environment for delivering better services. We have consistently put additional investment into local government and, by managing the economy in the way that we are, we will continue to seek to do so.

Our proposals for 2001–02 have been widely welcomed by local government because they complement the reform and the work in which local government is involved. It is true that local government continues to want to do more and the Government will work with it to ensure that that is possible.

I commend the motion to the House.

6.41 pm

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): This is a Government who live and will die by spin. As we have seen in the events surrounding the second resignation of the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), this is the Government of the short cut, the quick fix, the nod and the wink.

The Minister would have us believe that this financial settlement for local government is arrived at gravely and deliberately, with no political input. She talks about stability and even of a freeze in standard spending assessment methodology. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The plain truth is that the Government have found themselves in a tight corner over the new earnings data for the area cost adjustment. So before the recent statement, we had the introduction of floors and ceilings, despite the fact that we are supposed to be having a freeze while Ministers mull over the reaction to their Green Paper.

There are three real concerns about the floors and ceilings. First, they provide the prospect of distortion by introducing these mechanisms, complicating an already complex system. Secondly, if the statistical data are reliable and show that a particular council has sustained these extra costs in their area, they should be fully reflected in the grant system. The system would surely be more defensible if it related to what happens in the real world. Thirdly, there is the real possibility, now and in the future, of political interference by Ministers in how the grant is distributed between one part of the country and another. We see the system as a way of shifting resources to some Labour-run authorities and marginal seats around the country.

We must remember that shire counties will have lost out in this Parliament to the tune of £700 million as a direct result of changes in methodology at the beginning

of the Government's term in office. All this talk of stability merely cements in these unfairnesses. The London boroughs have lost out by some £350 million.

Ms Armstrong: I thought that the hon. Gentleman was interested in the plain truth. The plain truth is that if we had continued with the Tories' figures, all authorities would have lost substantially more. What the hon. Gentleman means is that by changing methodology, we achieved a fairer system of distribution. All authorities have gained by substantially more than the figures that he has quoted, including London and the shire counties.

Mr. Waterson: Somebody who does not agree that we have a fairer system is the Mayor of London, the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone). He said

"the faceless bureaucrats normally hidden in the bowels of John Prescott's super ministry deserve a good kicking because of the Government's whacking cuts to the poorest London councils."

Ever since the statement on the provisional settlement, the ground has shifted again. *The Times* reported that there were crisis talks between the Secretary of State and the Chancellor. It said:

"the package was agreed on after crisis talks between Mr. Prescott and Gordon Brown, the Chancellor. There had been fears that the impact of projected increases of up to three times the rate of inflation would cost Labour dozens of seats at the election."

I see that some of those seats are represented in the Chamber tonight.

Lo and behold, Ministers rushed out an announcement of a £100 million emergency package—money diverted from the neighbourhood renewal fund—to keep down council- tax increases in a large number of marginal Labour seats such as Enfield, which has a majority of 1,433, Bristol, West, where the majority is 1,493 and Hastings, where it is just over 2,500.

Mrs. Gilroy: I am following the hon. Gentleman's argument with interest. Is he saying that the Tory-controlled Plymouth city council should not have been given the £2 million that it received as a floor for the area cost adjustment, and that we should not have the neighbourhood renewal fund?

Mr. Waterson: No, of course I am not saying that. I am simply saying that it is curious how a significant number of Labour marginal seats seem suddenly to have benefited from this largesse.

Another £25 million popped up so that some councils could tackle homelessness. It is interesting that the problems caused by asylum seekers featured prominently in the relevant press release, despite the Government's dismal failure on this aspect of their policy.

Another £11.6 million was suddenly found to help councils that have suffered particularly badly in the recent flooding. Similarly, a sum of £52 million has been found for education. There are concerns as to whether that is all new money or merely recycled or reheated announcements of old money.

We all know about the problems faced across the country, including in my area, with regard to bed blocking and the crisis in social services. That is addressed only partly by recent extra funding in some areas for the national health service.

This all amounts to what some commentators have called a pattern of behaviour in the context of the resignation of the right hon. Member for Hartlepool. As *The Times* put it, this brings to £189 million the amount of cash the Cabinet has rushed together since the Government unveiled their initial local government settlement in November.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Is the hon. Gentleman saying that under a Conservative Government, that money would not have been provided to those areas where it is clearly urgently needed?

Mr. Waterson: I think that the answer is clear: we need to look at the settlement in the round and see the unfairnesses that are being created across the country.

Sir Paul Beresford: Does my hon. Friend agree that the muddle between the floors and ceilings has enabled the Government to have more money to distribute by selection rather than by an assessment of needs?

Mr. Waterson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Mr. David Taylor *rose—*

Mr. Waterson: No, I will not give way any more at the moment.

What comments have come forth on this extra largesse? Sir Jeremy Beecham, the Labour head of the Local Government Association, said:

"we do regret the increase of expenditure being passed through specific grants, which are too tightly controlled by Whitehall, and therefore limit the degree of choice in assessing particular local needs."

The hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney), who I see is in the Chamber, is one of a number of Labour Back Benchers who feel that their areas have been treated unfairly. He said in a recent letter:

"Outrageously, the data benefits those authorities already gaining from Area Cost Adjustment . . . To deflect criticism of this further injustice, DETR has put forward the 'floor and ceiling' proposals."

The hon. Gentleman makes the obvious point, made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) a moment ago, that as a result of bringing in the ceilings and floors, all other authorities must receive less grant to pay for the difference. This means that the 103 authorities between the floor and the ceiling lose about 4 per cent. of grant that they would have received under the old system. *[Interruption.]* The Minister says no, but she must sort out her differences with the hon. Member for Stafford in some other place.

The hon. Gentleman talks about making representations to the Minister. He said:

"It was evident that the DETR has a block of money to distribute. The Minister can slice the block one way or another way".

Clearly, a decision has been taken to slice it in a way that might help electorally.

The hon. Gentleman talks about meetings with the Secretary of State and the Chancellor and ends on a forlorn note:

"I doubt that we will persuade them to meet us in person".

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): In areas such as Staffordshire, the great anger is that the area cost

[Mr. David Kidney]

adjustment has nothing to do with need—it is not a proven figure on which to rely. Will the hon. Gentleman say on behalf of the official Opposition whether he will stand by the area cost adjustment as a legitimate way to dispose of money to local authorities?

Mr. Waterson: The hon. Gentleman makes a reasonable point. When we find out what situation we have inherited, with all these floors and ceilings, we will take a view on the matter.

Mr. Kidney *rose—*

Mr. Waterson: I will not give way again.

Of course, some areas benefit substantially from the area cost adjustment, as the hon. Gentleman knows.

Those are the verdicts of some people who ought to know about the figures. Why are Ministers and Labour Back Benchers panicking so much in the run-up to the election? It is because we are talking about yet another broken election promise. When the Prime Minister said,

"we have no plans to increase tax at all",

he clearly hoped that people would assume that he was not talking about council tax. The fact is that the average band D council tax increased this year from £689 in 1997-78 to £847, or by 23 per cent. On average, it has soared by three times the rate of inflation. By the time of the next election, the average British family could be paying an extra £200 in council tax alone.

This year, the Minister for Local Government and the Regions is being coy, but last year she predicted that council tax would rise by an average of 4.8 per cent. It rose by 6.1 per cent. Have we any reason to believe that her predictions this year would be any more reliable? The Department talks about a 5 per cent. increase in the coming year. The Minister declines the opportunity to predict the rise, talking about "fruitless speculation".

Incidentally, the Minister trots out the old chestnut, trying to suggest that comparing band D bills is not appropriate. Peter Kellner—not exactly a Conservative commentator—said:

"Homes in Labour areas tended to fall into lower council tax bands and this was why average council tax was lower . . . The proper way to judge the figures was to compare like with like . . . Band D figures, council by council".

He went on to point out that Labour's

"claim is as misleading as it ever was . . . On this issue, Labour is wrong and Tories are right."

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on tax increases?

Mr. Waterson: No.

Mr. Davies: I thought not.

Mr. Waterson: The hon. Gentleman can try to catch the Deputy Speaker's eye.

The Minister will not engage in what she calls "fruitless speculation", so we have been doing some research of our own. We have done a sample survey of councils throughout England. Our survey reveals—it is early days, as councils are still setting their budgets—that council tax could increase by 9 per cent. this year, putting £77 on the average band D council tax bill.

What is particularly worrying—it may worry the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) as much as anyone—is that council tax has risen by 25 per cent. in the past three years in Labour's top 25 marginal constituencies. The projected percentage change in council tax in those seats, from 1997–98 to 2001–02, is a staggering 33 per cent. That is a staggering extra stealth tax on the British people. For all the hon. Members whose names are on that list of marginal seats, it is a worrying development.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I am sure that my hon. Friend wants to hear from Worcestershire, where there are three marginal Labour seats and three Conservative-held seats. A Labour council has been in charge for the past four years, during which time council tax has risen by 50 per cent. This year everyone has a choice. On a Worcestershire council website one can choose a council tax increase of 7.5 per cent., 10.5 per cent. or 13.5 per cent. Only with the latter figure will there not be a cut in services.

Mr. Waterson: That says it all about what is happening in the real world.

Ms Armstrong: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that matter?

Mr. Waterson: In a moment, but let me finish on this point. There is no need for the Minister to get aggressive.

I enjoyed meeting my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) recently with the delegation of head teachers from Worcestershire, who brought to this place all the concerns of hundreds of teachers and thousands of parents about the massive problems being caused in the education system by lack of Government funding.

Ms Armstrong: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that he wants to encourage large tax increases? I refer him to Essex, which is a county that the Conservative party runs, although only just. The leader of that council said that this year it would have the largest council tax rise of any county council. That is against the background of Essex county council receiving a total increase in spending of 7.3 per cent. this year, and that does not include the extra £100,000 that it is getting in education money. Should any authority be talking about high council taxes and rises when it is getting an increase of 7.3 per cent. from external funding?

Mr. Waterson: That shows what the Minister is seeking to achieve. By starving Conservative-controlled councils of the funding that they need, she is trying to provoke a situation in which they are blamed for having to increase the council tax beyond what is reasonable.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Waterson: I will not give way any more at the moment.

Those council tax rises hit some of the most vulnerable people in our society. The figures show that one third of the increase in the state pension under this Government has been eaten up by soaring council taxes. In the past three years, the state pension has risen by £421, whereas the average band D council tax bill has risen by £158, which is equivalent to 38 per cent. of the pension rise. That is a staggering amount for elderly people to have to find.

Despite what I was saying about the Government starving many Conservative-dominated areas of funding, Conservative councils still have the lowest council taxes. In the coming year, a typical band D household is paying £724 under the average Conservative-controlled council compared with £124 more—almost £2.50 a week—under a Labour-controlled council.

In case the Liberal Democrats think that they are going to escape scot free, I should point out that the average band D tax in the councils that they control is £803, which is over 10 per cent. more than in Conservative-controlled councils. Of course, the Liberal Democrats now preside over Liverpool, which is the council with the highest council tax in England. A band D tax payer there now pays nearly £100 a week.

That is not the end of the bad news for ordinary citizens, as it is evident for all to see that, far from delivering greater efficiency and accountability in local government, the Government's best value regime is producing a bloated bureaucracy and heavy additional costs for already hard-pressed councils. The Government have allocated £40 million for best value and the Local Government Association has demanded an extra £175 million.

The Government are forging ahead with their centralising agenda for local government. They are busily imposing the cabinet system on the majority of local authorities. Only a few days ago, they forced through the House their misguided plans for greater secrecy in local government. The inexorable rise of specific grants as a proportion of Government grant means the tightening of central Government control over local government—there has been a rise in just one year of 18 per cent. in the proportion of specific grants.

On top of that, we have the Minister's continued boast that capping has been abolished. Of course, no such thing has happened. The Government have not scrapped crude and universal capping—I notice that in last year's *Hansard* that came out as "cruel" and universal capping, but in the Minister's lexicon, that amounts to the same thing. That remains as a reserve power. There is also the so-called "refined" capping on the council tax benefit limitation scheme.

As if all that were not bad enough, the Labour Government are planning a raft of new taxes on local communities: congestion taxes; workplace parking taxes; and supplementary business rates. The Government have been an unmitigated disaster for local government and for the communities served by local government. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to vote against the report.

7 pm

Mr. Jeff Ennis (Barnsley, East and Mexborough): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in the debate. I am sure that many other Members want to speak, so I shall try to keep my contribution brief. I must point out, however, that the amount of time allowed for this important debate is scandalous; many hon. Members will not have an opportunity to contribute.

Members on both sides of the House will agree that what local government needs more than anything else is a fair funding grant system, based on definable need. I am sure that one thing that will emerge from the debate is that the current system does not fulfil that basic criterion. I imagine that the reactions of hon. Members to this year's settlement, which was announced in the House on 18 December, will largely depend on the class of authority that they represent.

The average settlement for metropolitan authorities outside London was 3.8 per cent; for shire and unitary authorities, it was 4.9 per cent; and for London authorities, it was 6 per cent. Barnsley received an additional 3.2 per cent. and Doncaster received 3.6 per cent.—both of which are below the metropolitan average.

I know that the Minister for Local Government and the Regions has received many representations from all classes of authority, especially from non-London metropolitan authorities, about this year's settlement. There is no doubt that the Government have listened to their representations. They can be proud that they have increased standard spending assessments by an average of 4.3 per cent. in each year since taking office. The average of the last four years under the Tories was a paltry 1.5 per cent.

Additional support outside the rate support grant settlement has been found so as to ease specific pressures on councils. The Government have increased by £100 million the first-year allocation to the new neighbourhood renewal fund; that is targeted support for local authorities representing the 88 most deprived neighbourhoods. Indeed, Barnsley received an additional £1.3 million and Doncaster received an additional £2.2 million in such funding.

There is no doubt that my constituency is one of the most deprived in the country. Last year, it was calculated that the gross domestic product per capita in Barnsley, East and Mexborough was only 62 per cent. of the European average. I understand that is the lowest in the UK—no wonder Barnsley and Doncaster and the rest of South Yorkshire qualify for objective 1 funding from Europe.

Barnsley and Doncaster will also benefit from the additional £11.6 million flood relief funding allocated to the Environment Agency to relieve pressure on council tax payers in flood-affected areas. They will share the additional £52 million education budget support grant for local authorities that received more modest increases in education funding from the RSG. Doncaster will receive an additional £880,000, but unfortunately Barnsley will receive only an additional £180,000.

The Government have thus responded positively to local authority concerns, but local authorities such as Barnsley and Doncaster, languishing at the bottom of the SSA league, need not additional pockets of grant aid but fundamental changes to the local government funding system. I know that the Government are committed to such changes. Until we address the inherent problems embedded in the current SSA formula-funded grant system, local authorities at the bottom of the SSA league will always struggle.

[Mr. Jeff Ennis]

Next year's budget for Barnsley and Doncaster—the two local authorities that I represent—will be extremely tight, but of the two, Barnsley's position is by far the more difficult to address. Data changes and the area cost adjustment have resulted in a loss of about £2.2 million to Barnsley.

The Government's ceilings and floors concept is good in principle, but, as it operates at present, it does not close the gap. Indeed, it has a perverse impact, as the poor pay for the poor. Barnsley pays £100,000 into the fund to ameliorate Liverpool's losses and Doncaster pays back £218,000. Even after those additional resources, Barnsley still faces estimated cuts of about £11 million over the next two years.

I fully support the Government requirement to passport moneys to key priority services, such as education, social services and highways, but it means that nearly all the reductions under consideration will fall on the "other services" block. By how much will the "other services" block grant be increased next year?

That block covers general community services, so the impact of cuts will be felt in reductions in, for example, welfare rights—a service that Barnsley can ill afford to cut. One in three households in my constituency include at least one disabled person. As a Government, we are trying to encourage the take-up of initiatives such as the minimum income guarantee. If we cut welfare rights officers in Barnsley, we shall not achieve that.

Barnsley is having to consider reductions in land reclamation. Our reclamation programme is extremely large because of the legacy of the former mining industry. The need to clear up our industrial eyesores is drastic if we are to succeed in attracting new inward investors to Barnsley. We shall have to consider reductions in economic development and regeneration initiatives. Barnsley and Doncaster are in an objective 1 area, yet no additional resources can be allocated to meet councils' contribution to capital and revenue schemes.

We might have to consider reducing services such as trading standards, environmental health and street cleansing. The irony is that those reductions would fall on the very services that have been determined as priorities by the local community, through local area forums and strategic local partnerships. The Minister is aware that Barnsley has probably led the way in adopting the cabinet system; we did so long before it was made compulsory, as it were. We are working hard to the Government's modernisation agenda.

Significant job losses are expected because of Barnsley's budgetary position. It is anticipated that about 225 full-time equivalent posts will be lost, with an associated cost of about £1.8 million. Unfortunately, such costs cannot be prudently met from balances; the authority's external auditor has already determined that they are inadequate, so such additional one-off costs will have to be met from further cuts. Will the Minister consider our authority for additional help—for example, via the capitalisation of such one-off costs with an appropriate allowance from supplementary credit approvals?

I know that the Government are wholly committed to the successful future of local government and the valuable services that it provides. The Government must realise, however, that the current SSA system was set up by the previous Conservative Government specifically to disadvantage certain classes of local authority, which include Barnsley and Doncaster in the traditional Labour heartlands. The only way in which we can successfully address the bias inherent in the existing system is to introduce a more transparent and simpler funding regime based on local need. The sooner after the general election that the next Labour Government bring in such a system, the better it will be for all concerned.

7.10 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Mr. Ennis). I share his concerns about the lack of time allocated to this very important debate and about the current mechanism for funding local government, which, as he rightly pointed out, was introduced by the previous Government but which many of us hoped would have been changed by now.

I do not want to belittle some of the improvements that the Government have made to the funding arrangements for local government, not least the significant improvements in capital funding, but I do suggest that the Minister over-egged the pudding in her statements tonight and over recent days.

How can it be, as the Minister tells us, the most wonderful settlement for local government ever, when her hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough told us about the cuts in services that his local council will have to make, which I fear will be reflected in many other councils around the country?

We welcome the money that has been announced in the past few days, in addition to the amounts that were announced in the statement in November 2000, but even the recent announcement contains an element of hype. For example, the Minister tells us that there will be an additional £100 million for the neighbourhood renewal scheme, which she would argue brings the total to £200 million. She does not tell us that when the Chancellor initially announced £100 million for the scheme, the Red Book shows that he was also cutting £160 million from the new deal for the communities scheme, which was designed to do the same thing. As a result, even with the additional £100 million that has just been announced, the net increase is £40 million.

Similarly, when I intervened on the Minister a few minutes ago, she acknowledged that the £11.6 million of so-called additional money to help with flood defences was not new money at all, but was from some pot—she could not quite recall which—that the Chancellor had previously announced.

Despite all the arguments that we could have about likely council tax rises, the reality is that increases will be significantly above the inflation rate, despite what the Government are doing. The electorate want to know how that is the case.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: I will give way if the hon. Gentleman promises to be quick.

Mr. Bercow: I understand and sympathise with the thrust of the hon. Gentleman's argument, but in judging

the adequacy or otherwise of revenue spending will he tell us what assessment he has made of the effect of the change in the rules on the use of capital receipts from the sale of council houses on the size of interest repayments on local authority debt?

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point, but I do not want to be drawn into discussing all the details. One of our current problems is that the capital financing system for local government is hugely complex. The one thing that I would love to see more than any other is the introduction of a system that enables our local councils to borrow the money that they judge they need, pure and simple, without all the bureaucracy and complexity. Our problem derives from the decision by the current Government and the previous Conservative Government to adopt a model that is designed to keep as many hands on the tiller as possible, denying local authorities freedom.

That observation leads me very nicely to the subject of freedom for local government, and the problems associated with funding mechanisms. Increasingly, central Government want local government to do more and more—for example, with personal social services—but do not necessarily make available the necessary resources. Our social services departments had already decided that, in the current financial year, they would have to spend well above standard spending assessment, especially on children's services. On average, social services departments are spending 27.4 per cent. more on children's services than the Government expected them to spend. That amounts to £550 million.

Only yesterday, the Local Government Association completed a survey of social services departments, which showed that they budgeted to spend much more than the Government expected. Those departments, collectively, are already £205 million overspent at this stage of the financial year. No wonder local councils up and down the land are unconvinced that the settlement for next year, as described today, will be sufficient to help them to repay the losses that they are making this year, let alone take account of their rising costs.

Rising costs are certainly not being funded by the Government. My local authority, Bath and North East Somerset council, has drawn my attention to the fact that a huge inconsistency between the capital asset thresholds determined by the Department of Social Security and by the Department of Health is to be introduced. That inconsistency will cost my local authority £100,000 in additional costs, which will not be met.

It gets worse. I welcome the Government's announcement in their NHS plan that they intend to boost the quality and availability of intermediate care to reduce the phenomenon of bed blocking. They say that, over three years, that will cost about £900 million, but they expect local government to provide most of the services to meet that aspiration. I have checked today with the Local Government Association, which has analysed the Minister's statement today and can see no evidence of any resources being made available in next year's settlement to help personal social services departments to pay for the boost to intermediate care. It is a further additional burden that local authorities are obliged to fund from their own budgets, which are already stretched to breaking point.

The Government will undoubtedly make an announcement about the teachers' pay award in the next few days. I hope very much that it will be a good settlement; we desperately need it. Last September, we were 4,000 teachers short. Pupil-teacher ratios in secondary schools are now at their worst for more than 20 years. We desperately need to do something about that shortage. However, if that good teachers' pay award—some are now talking of figures as high as 3.7 per cent.—is not fully funded by the Government, it will impose huge pressures on our local councils, whose education budgets, too, are already massively overstretched.

It is no wonder, given those additional pressures, that council taxes are set to increase by significantly more than the rate of inflation. The Minister is not prepared to put a figure on it. The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) put a figure on it of about 9 per cent. I shall place on the record our figure, because I gave it last November and the evidence suggests that I am yet again likely to be right. I predict an increase of 6.7 per cent., but time will tell. However, the Minister, with her indication, the hon. Member for Eastbourne and I all predict that council taxes across the land will increase by more than the rate of inflation. That is the fault not of local government but of the local government finance settlement from this Labour Government.

The speech of the hon. Member for Eastbourne fascinated me. He says that we should deal with what is out there in the real world, but when he trots out the figures he uses council tax band D figures when it suits him and percentage increases when it suits him better. Let me choose one measure at random—the percentage increase—and remind the House that, for the financial year that has just been completed, the average council tax increase was 6 per cent. under a Liberal Democrat authority, 6.2 per cent. under a Labour authority and 8.5 per cent. under a Conservative authority.

I was staggered that the hon. Gentleman chose to introduce Liverpool into the equation. Of all the councils that he could have chosen, he should not have chosen to attack Liverpool, where, in the two years since the Liberal Democrats took over, the council tax rise was 0 per cent. and 0 per cent. I should have thought that he would welcome that.

Mr. Waterson: Surely the hon. Gentleman accepts that all the experts and pundits agree that the fairest comparison is the band D council tax. If he does, he must also accept that on average it is much more expensive to live under a Liberal Democrat or Labour-run council than under a Conservative council.

Mr. Foster: I said that when the hon. Gentleman wanted to attack authorities, on some occasions, he chose to use percentages and, on others, council tax band D. I therefore chose one of those methods at random. I am sorry if he does not like the figures, but they are correct.

Another important issue relates to the point made by hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who referred to the global settlement for local government. The amount of money available is part of the problem, but the strings attached to the sum allocated is the second part of the problem. I agree with the hon. Member for Eastbourne that there has been a significant increase in the sums provided by special and specific grants—the strings that central Government attach to local government—but I slightly dispute the figure that he gave. I understand that the increase from the current year to next year is more

[Mr. Foster]

than 20 per cent. I hope that he will agree that the proportion of local government money that came from specific grants, with strings attached, was 4 per cent. in 1997, but that it will increase under a Labour Government to about 10 per cent. next year. In some areas, the increase is considerably more than that.

Specific grants for education amounted to £250 million in 1997, but next year, under a Labour Government, £2.6 billion will be constrained in that way—a tenfold increase. The problem is worse than that, because if a local authority reaches out and takes some of that money, with all the strings attached, it must also find matching funds. Therefore, about £3.3 billion is effectively tied up in specific grants. All evidence clearly shows that the Government talk about reinvigorating local government, but simply cannot let it go. Rather like old, imperial Britain, they are trying to run a huge empire from the centre. They have decentralised tax raising without decentralising the power to match.

As the hon. Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough said, no progress is being made in distributing the money more fairly. I shall choose some examples at random. Why is a secondary school pupil in Westminster worth £4,271, when a child in Warminster is worth only £3,077? Mr. David Laws of Yeovil has advised me that a child in Somerset is worth more than £200 less than the national average. Many hon. Members acknowledge that there are real problems in urban areas, but there are real problems in rural areas, too. We have not yet devised an area cost adjustment, or another funding distribution mechanism, that truly takes account of real need, so I agree with the hon. Gentleman on that point.

Mr. Kidney: The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) could not say that, as a matter of policy, the current area cost adjustment should be reformed. Will the hon. Gentleman at least say that the Liberal Democrats believe that it should?

Mr. Foster: I say absolutely categorically that the area cost adjustment should be reformed. I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough that we need a simple, fair funding system that takes account of local need.

A redistribution mechanism is necessary, but other proposals would make life much easier. For example, why cannot local councils raise a far greater percentage of the money that they spend, with a corresponding reduction in national income tax, so that the local piper can call the local tune? Why has the current, unfair council tax been continued? Elderly people, for example, live in much larger houses, which are more expensive, yet their income is much lower. Why do not we adopt a much fairer system of local income tax? As other hon. Members have said, why is local government expenditure capped in any way? Why must we have this so-called sophisticated system under which the nearly poor pay for the really poor?

I welcome the introduction of floors because it makes sense to ensure that the councils that will lose money are given time to prepare, but why do ceilings need to be introduced? Surely that means that councils with real and immediate needs will not be provided with the support that they require.

The net effect is that, after four years of a Labour Government, Whitehall's tanks are still on our town hall lawns. The tanks may have changed colour, but they are still as heavy and powerful as ever. Local people want to feel more, not less, in control of the issues that are important to them. If all the decisions that count are taken hundreds of miles away, is it any wonder that people lose interest in the political process?

7.26 pm

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): The time allocated to this motion is pretty short to say the least, which is a shame because this was developing into an interesting debate. Both sides of the House have their positions to defend; nevertheless, my hon. Friends have not been afraid to say where we would like to see improvements and, for that reason alone, this has been a useful exercise.

The Opposition say that the Government have somehow used the area cost adjustment for political purposes, but I seem to remember from my time in local government that we could have argued the same way when they were in government. I met various Ministers to discuss the issue. In fact, I used to deal with someone who now sits on the Opposition Benches.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Mr. Ennis) that the SSA issue must be addressed. I am glad that the Minister says that she is doing so, but I urge a little caution. Anyone who knows anything about the formula—no one knows everything about it because it confuses everyone—says that any change in the SSA must be dealt with carefully. We must be careful, and people both inside and outside local government have debated that often.

I sometimes think that it is dangerous to come from a local government background, certainly when debating the issue in the House, but I am struck by the fact that, even with the best of intentions, those in local government, especially the employees, feel constantly under attack. More should be done to improve the morale of local government employees. A bit of dignity should be reintroduced, because they have all been at the butt of competitive tendering by successive Governments. We have all seen the experiments of the past 20 years, and it is about time that they were called to a halt.

It is time to build up public confidence in our local services because, in one way or another, most of the major political parties are committed to public services. Whether we are talking about teachers' bargaining rights or ordinary local government workers' concerns about the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981 and being transferred into the private sector, we must rejuvenate public confidence in local services. Those are some of the issues that concern me.

Having said that, I welcome the Government's £8 billion increase in local government expenditure, but there could still be a £3.5 billion shortfall. The Government cannot put such matters right overnight, and we must bear in mind that there are still major problems. For example, during the past two or three years, the social services department in Coventry has found itself with a shortfall of £4 million or £5 million. The projected shortfall is £5 million and £6 million for the next year or two.

There is a trend to move social services away from local government control. We must give social services, especially the personal service aspects, more serious

consideration than we have given them in the past. We must consider the impact on services for various age groups, including those for children and elderly people, and the fact that it is difficult to recruit social workers and people to provide other services, such as home care for the elderly.

I return to a point that I made earlier. We must stop knocking local government and start supporting the people who work to deliver the services. I draw my hon. Friend the Minister's attention to the problems in Coventry, which have created two or three crises in the past two or three years in the delivery of social services. The increase in the assistance that Coventry has received for social services is about 2.6 per cent. below the national average. I readily acknowledge that the Government have provided assistance, but we must deal with such problems.

I welcome the £6 billion for capital investment. That will help to some extent. Although I know that things cannot happen overnight, I would like to see more done.

I also welcome the £52 million that will be spent on teachers' salaries to aid recruitment. As a trade unionist, I have always thought that teachers should have the same negotiating rights as everybody else. I know that the review body is due to report shortly, but I hope that it will consider not only salaries, but negotiating rights and the way in which performance-related pay is working in practice and affecting teachers' morale.

Time is short, but I want to say in concluding that we must do more about training in local government and about capital investment for data changes and computer equipment. We should want everyone to participate in service delivery. I would have liked to mention a range of other issues, but I know that other hon. Members wish to speak.

7.31 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): This has been the year of the sticking plaster. The fact that the Government have had to put so much sticking plaster on to their original settlement should not disguise the real thrust of the settlement. The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) was right: there has been a remorseless advance in direct grants at the expense of unhypothecated expenditure.

The Government proclaim that they like local government and local government freedoms. They say that they are giving more liberty to local government, but every year the amount of money that is directly controlled by the Government increases as a proportion of the settlement. As the hon. Gentleman said, it has increased by £2.6 billion for education alone this year, so the Government's proclamations of independence for local government are entirely hypocritical.

Labour Members have been wailing about the area cost adjustment, but when the Minister and the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) were in opposition four or five years ago they told us how easy it would be to sort out the area cost adjustment. They said that it was a matter of lack of will on the then Government's part and that anyone who applied a couple of iotas of intelligence to the matter would soon sort it out. After four years of a Labour Government, the solution has not advanced by a single comma. We have had a series of fertile little ruses—a sort of "petite astuce"—to make the settlement work.

Of course, the settlement does not work, which is why we have had improvisations. No one would object to additional money for neighbourhood renewal, except for the fact that that money has not had to be bid for; it is allocated at the Minister's pleasure. As several hon. Members have pointed out, it is curious to see the local authorities to which it has been allocated.

No one would object to additional money to meet the teachers' pay settlement. In the inner cities and London in particular, retaining teachers is a gargantuan problem. If the pay increase is to be 3.5 per cent. or thereabouts, it will go only a tiny way to helping with that problem. In addition, no one objects to helping local authorities to deal with asylum seekers.

Another bit of sticking plaster is the attempt to deal with the problems of the Environment Agency and the cost of flooding. The Government need to do a little more, and it is not just a question of money. They have failed to address the issue correctly in three respects. First, the Bellwin scheme comes in only when spending is 0.2 per cent. of the whole of an authority's budget. It is a curiously perverse phenomenon that the mass of teachers' salaries governs how much an authority would receive from the Bellwin scheme. Secondly, no help has been given to make good the damage to roads and bridges.

Thirdly, the increase in the Environment Agency levy is accounted for not in the year in which the increase bites, but subsequently. Thus there is a cash-flow hit on local authorities that can only come out of the council tax or services. That is particularly true of my authority of North Yorkshire. Of course, we are pleased with the additional money, which has meant that the demands on the council tax will be rather less than they would otherwise have been, but the announcement was about meeting historical costs, and the Government have to do that in any case. The sum is £500,000 short of the cost, and it is not all new money. The Government are recycling £2 million of the £51 million, and there is no provision for future investment.

The commitment to increase the rate of grant support for new capital works to 65 per cent. is welcome. However, the need to carry out enhanced maintenance as a result of the floods and to fast track capital schemes in areas that have been flooded not once but twice means that more cash is needed. The Government must pay attention to that problem and I draw their attention to the report published today by the Select Committee on Agriculture, which deals with it.

In the little remaining time that I have left, I wish to focus on the crisis facing social services departments. The Government have fast tracked and tried to passport money into education departments over a number of years. That is part of the business of untying the non-hypothecation of local government funding and making sure that Ministers control the money. However, the ragbag at the end of that process has been personal social services departments that have been asked to co-operate with health authorities and which have faced new demands from the housing authorities. It is no surprise that the members of personal social services departments are deeply demoralised.

As the hon. Member for Bath said, the Local Government Association has made calculations about the national scene, but the position in North Yorkshire is even worse. In North Yorkshire, a third of the elderly people who go into care have put themselves into care.

[Mr. David Curry]

They become a charge on the local authority when they run out of money, and no account is taken of that charge in local government funding. That is entirely unfair, and we know about the consequences that it has for bed blocking.

In my local authority, there is an overspend of £300,000 on children's services, and the costs of placements in foster care and secure accommodation are 29 per cent. over the SSA. The overspend on the placements of adults and older people in residential and nursing home care is £1.3 million. There is a £1.6 million overspend and a funding gap of £3.5 million in personal social services. That is not because the local authority is inefficient—the inspectorate said that it was rather good at delivering social services—but because the Government do not take account of demography and the increasing propensity for some social workers to err on the side of caution for reasons that we all understand in the face of the habitual barrage of criticism that they receive.

Therefore, there has been a 10 per cent. increase in the number of children who must be looked after. We have lost £600,000 in the children's SSA to fund the leaving care grant. As I said, 30 per cent. of older people who are newly referred for assessment have placed themselves in homes and reached the capital limit. That limit will rise, which will place an additional burden on local authorities.

The health service is demanding speedy discharge, because the number of blocked beds obviously causes concern. However, a couple of weeks ago, 108 older people were waiting for placements because of the phenomenon to which I have referred.

On the costs of rural care, a community councils network study, which was undertaken this year, considered the cost of delivering domiciliary care and suggested that North Yorkshire could justify an additional 2.8 per cent. of funding—or £600,000—for these services.

The social services department is under strain; there is no point pretending that it is not. Of course, the settlement is higher than previous settlements and money is being passported to education, but when that happens the focus inevitably shifts. For the same reasons that demographic changes make life difficult for the health service, they are also making it more difficult for personal social services departments. The Government rightly wish to see the two integrate much more effectively, but the pieces of sticking plaster are tinkerings with the system. They do not deal with the fundamental distribution problems and the Government have backed off from giving councils more freedom. Despite all the rhetoric, the apron strings are being tied tighter and tighter.

The Government claimed that they would provide more freedom, but the settlement is more interventionist. They said that the settlement would be simpler, but it is more complex. They said that the settlement would be fairer, but, as result of the famous topping and tailing, it is more arbitrary. We have a veneer of generosity, and the reality of prescription and inadequacy.

7.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): We have had an interesting debate and some worthwhile contributions have been made, but our discussion has been all too short because of the antics of some Opposition Members. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Mr. Ennis) that Opposition Back Benchers have done little more than sabotage this debate. *[Interruption.]* I beg the Liberal Democrats' pardon; I am speaking only about Conservative Members.

However, despite the Opposition's entirely predictable rhetoric, hon. Members clearly recognise that this year's settlement continues the sustained and substantial investment in local government services that the Government have provided during the past three years, notwithstanding the pressures. That investment is but one strand of the wider and more fundamental reform of local government. That reform will put local government back where it should be. I agree with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) in that respect.

We have a clear programme of reform for local government. We want it to plan for community well-being in the broadest sense, consult local people and work out the best way of providing services at a price that they are willing to pay. As our performance during the past few years demonstrates, we accept that local government needs a stable platform of adequate funding to achieve those aims. It must be able to rely on sustained real growth in funding so that it can plan for some years ahead.

As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions said, this year's settlement is the best since the introduction of council tax. Total support from Government grant and business rates will constitute more than £44 billion. That is an increase of £3 billion, or 7.2 per cent., which comes on top of the substantial increases that have been made every year since we formulated the budget. In those four years, Government grant to local government has risen by 14 per cent. in real terms. That investment contrasts starkly with the 7 per cent. real-terms cut made by the Tories in the four years before the last election.

I have been concentrating on the general grant because the House is considering the overall settlement, but I should point out that it comes in addition to substantial ring-fenced grant increases this year. There has been a total increase of 34 per cent., with a 48 per cent. increase in the ring-fenced grant for education.

During the consultation period, we listened carefully to what local authorities, their associations and hon. Members from all parties told us about the difficulties faced by local government. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions mentioned, we took the view that there were four problem areas. It is curious that the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) called that response to pressures "sticking plaster". That says a lot about the Tories' view on what consultation should be about. Indeed, when they were in government, they never listened or did anything in response to what people told them about their experiences. We are not like that. On top of providing a good settlement, we think that it is right to respond to the four problem areas.

It will be up to local authorities to finalise their budget plans. The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon did not seem to understand that point. Whatever protestations Opposition Members make, we expect that this year's very good settlement will enable council tax increases as

a whole to continue on the downward trend that we have established. The majority of local authorities will be able to set a lower council tax increase this year than they did last year.

Let me put the increase in context. The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon described a litany of problems, but North Yorkshire has been given a 4.8 increase in the general grant and a 26.2 per cent. increase in the specific grant. That constitutes a total increase in Government funding of 6.5 per cent., plus £100,000 from the extra £52 million education grant. North Yorkshire county council has received a minimum increase of £19 million this year.

Obviously, any big organisation must make decisions on priorities and on the pressures to which it wants to respond, but let us make no mistake: this Government are continuing to give local government the best settlements that it has ever received, certainly in my memory. Local government needs the ability to manage its budgets.

Mr. Curry: Does the Under-Secretary accept that, three years ago, North Yorkshire lost £3 million because the social services formula was changed? That was an enormous hit against a county with a rising demographic trend. More elderly people needed care and more children were being taken into care—issues on which the Government claim to want delivery.

Ms Hughes: The right hon. Gentleman's presentation of the circumstances that existed three years ago is completely erroneous. Investment in local authorities was increased at that time. That included North Yorkshire, where total Government investment increased.

Mr. Curry: There was a cut.

Ms Hughes: It was not a cut. Many councils' aspirations on total income are not met, in terms both of Government contributions and their own charges.

Mr. Curry: Will the Under-Secretary give way?

Ms Hughes: No, I shall not give way again.

Every year, the Opposition have predicted that local authorities would act irresponsibly and introduce huge average council tax rises. Each year since this Government have been in control, councils have proved Opposition Members wrong. The increase in average council tax has fallen as a result of our additional investment.

I was surprised at the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), who is usually sensible, for falling into the trap on council tax. He should know that council tax rises are the result not of Government funding, but of councils' overall spending decisions, for which they will be accountable to their electorates. On the comments made by the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) about political interference, I can say nothing more than that his arguments were breathtakingly shameless and that we shall take no lessons from Opposition Members on local government matters.

Under the previous Government, local councils were battered and bruised and their money and powers were systematically removed. It is this Government who have provided stable and substantial funding to all councils. This year's settlement continues our commitment to invest.

It being one and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Standing Order No. 16(1).*

The House divided: Ayes 292, Noes 167.

Division No. 96] **[7.47 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*

Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thom[illegible] Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Tim[illegible]ephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Bread, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John

Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Luff and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2001–02 (HC 158), which was laid before this House on 29th January, be approved.

DEFERRED DIVISION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I now have to announce the results of the Division deferred from a previous day.

On the motion on Social Security, the Ayes were 382, the Noes were 138, so the motion was agreed to.

[The Division List is published at the end of today's debates.]

Local Government Finance (England)

8.2 pm

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): I beg to move,

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) Special Grant Report (No. 72) (HC 159), which was laid before this House on 29th January, be approved.

To complete the picture of local government funding, we need to tackle two other issues, in addition to those covered by the previous motion. These are any substantial continuing effect on a local authority's grant entitlement arising from past changes in the method of calculating the grant distribution formula; and the arrangements to provide a measure of funding stability for other authorities, such as shire districts, not covered by the floor and ceiling arrangements.

The special grant report covers three special grants: standard spending assessment reduction grant—SSA review; SSA reduction grant—police funding review; and central support protection grant.

The SSA reduction grants deal with past changes in methodology. As there have been no methodology changes to SSAs or to the police grant formula since 1999-2000, other than some minor changes to reflect the introduction of the Greater London Authority and the transfer of nursery grant funding into SSAs, the number of authorities receiving these grants has been diminishing over the past few years. This year, only one authority remains protected by these grants—the City of London. The total cost of the grants has consequently reduced from some £16 million in 2000-01 to less than £2 million this year.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): I am grateful to the Minister. She said that there had been no substantial changes in SSA over the past year. Can she tell us whether there have been substantial changes over the past three years?

Ms Armstrong: I said that there had been no changes since 1999-2000. *[Interruption.]* As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have maintained SSA methodology over a three-year period. I read to him the areas in which we have changed methodology over the past three years.

On a like-for-like basis, the grant guarantees that no shire district authority—no relevant authority—will receive a reduced general grant from central Government.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Will the Minister give way?

Ms Armstrong: The number of relevant authorities receiving the grant this year has again declined as a result of the more generous funding levels for shire district councils.

Mr. Chope: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Armstrong: Ten shire districts will receive central support protection grant this year.

Mr. Chope: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Armstrong: The cost of this grant for relevant authorities—

Mr. Chope: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Armstrong: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am seeking to uphold your injunction to keep my introduction brief. However, I give way to the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope).

Mr. Chope: I am grateful to the Minister. She just said—if she looks back at her notes, she will be able to read it again—that there would be no reduction for shire districts on a like-for-like basis. Taking into account the additional burden placed, for example, on East Dorset district council, which features in the report, does she agree that a new burden has been placed on East Dorset as it now has to pay for concessionary fares, so there is not a like-for-like basis for comparing this year and the coming year?

Ms Armstrong: We are dealing with SSAs. There is no substantial change in SSAs this year. However, additional funding has been put into the settlement, in order to deal with the matter that the hon. Gentleman raises. We are comparing SSAs on a like-for-like basis.

There are only 10 shire districts that will receive central support protection grant this year. They are listed in the report. The cost of this grant for relevant authorities has consequently fallen from more than £4 million in 2000–01 to £1.4 million this year. The reductions are reflected in the overall grant settlements that we discussed in the previous debate.

The report completes the Government's allocation of general grant to local authorities for the year 2001–02. It will help to provide stability of funding so that the authorities affected can plan ahead for better service delivery. It is therefore an important part of our commitment to public services. I commend the special grant report to the House.

8.7 pm

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): As the Minister said, we are discussing special grant report No. 72, which covers SSA reduction grant, SSA police grant and the central support protection grant.

On one view, the report is narrow and technical. It deals with transitional grants for the authorities concerned. Essentially, it deals with anomalies that may affect certain local authorities.

Part of the report deals with the City of London. As I understand the position—the Minister is welcome to correct me if I have it wrong, as I am sure she would be the first to agree that, for anyone without a degree in mathematics, it is difficult to follow some of the formulae—the City of London is sensitive to demographic changes, and so may require extra grant attention at this time in the cycle.

The main issue, as far as I can see from the report, involves certain shire districts which are not eligible through the relevant mechanism for the new floor arrangement. We debated the matter earlier this evening, but the report raises general as well as specific issues.

As I said, the report is limited to specific authorities and the anomalies that apply to them. They are set out in detail. The report highlights all the distorting effects of the new floors and ceilings that the Government have introduced. It is strange that we are debating the effects on the authorities of floors and ceilings when the Government claim that there is a freeze on standard spending assessment methodology and that they are still considering the thousands of responses to the Green Paper on local government finance. It is odd that the Government are embarking on piecemeal reform of local government finance and a sticking-plaster approach—as my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) described it in the previous debate—when they are in the process of thinking the unthinkable about local government finance and future mechanisms.

Comments from Liberal Democrat Members, Conservative Members and Labour Back-Bench Members in the previous debate made it painfully apparent that there is much dissatisfaction with the operation of existing mechanisms. Some local authorities are on the wrong side and others on the right side of the area cost adjustment fence. No matter how the mechanism is supposed to operate, some councils always seem to be bottom of their given league table. I do not expect the Chamber to fill up with hon. Members whose local councils are more than happy with their allocations, but plenty turn up for the opposite reason, doubtless after being lobbied by their constituents.

It is odd that the changes are to happen this year of all years, when there is supposed to be a freeze and what the Minister insists on describing as stability and predictability—as if those two things can be intrinsically good when the basis for calculating the initial figure is unfair in relation to some local authorities. There will be a clear change in the operation of the formula for some councils. The Government argue that, without some change, the existing formula would result in, to paraphrase the Minister, an unacceptably wide range of outcomes next year. Some authorities, especially in the south-east and London, would receive larger increases because of population movements and higher living costs. Hence the Government have devised a system of floors and ceilings on grant increases for authorities with responsibilities for education and social services.

The minimum floor increase for an individual authority will be 3.2 per cent., and the maximum ceiling will be 6.5 per cent., as the Minister said earlier. The debate is about authorities other than the City of London precisely because they do not provide education or social services. Left to themselves, they would not benefit—if that is the right word—from the new ceilings and floors. In a nutshell, that is the theme of the report.

However, neither the report nor the Minister explained why the Government believe that the system should be introduced now. As hon. Members know from the previous debate, we have three basic objections to the introduction of ceilings and floors at this stage. First, they distort a system that is already complex. A constant theme of such debates is the difficulty of understanding the formulae. It is no good Ministers complaining about the complexity of the system and the difficulty of explaining it to the taxpaying public—I presume that that is why they are considering other methods of calculating the amounts that local councils should spend—while simultaneously introducing an extra distortion to the system.

Secondly, the Government were presented with statistics, especially the new earnings data, for many authorities in the south-east and London, which suggested a substantial increase in the area cost adjustment. That is why they face a difficulty this year. Whatever the arguments for or against that mechanism, whether it is good or bad—

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Bad.

Mr. Waterson: I hear cries of "bad", and I appreciate that we are holding a genuine cross-party debate. Opinions depend on the area that one represents. In East Sussex, we believe that the area cost adjustment is good.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): Now that the hon. Gentleman has had a little more time to think about it, will he outline Conservative party policy on the future of the area cost adjustment? He appears to like it. What is his party's view?

Mr. Waterson: In East Sussex, we like the area cost adjustment, because we happen to benefit from it. I understand why the hon. Gentleman takes the opposite view.

I repeat that we will wait and see the sort of mess in local government finance that we inherit after the general election before we make up our minds. The hon. Member for Stafford and I agree that once a mechanism such as the area cost adjustment is in place, people become dependent on it. It is difficult to wean people off such measures, and they become part of the system.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): My hon. Friend made a pertinent remark about the complexity of the formulae. Does he agree that it would be revealing if Ministers were obliged to go into an examination room to answer questions of which they had no advance knowledge, about the function and implementation of section 88B(3) of the Local Government Finance Act 1988, with no guidance from their officials, and declare the results to the public?

Mr. Waterson: My hon. Friend makes a telling point if I only knew what it was. He reminds us clearly and eloquently of the sheer complexity of the formulae. I am sure that we jobbing politicians all rightly rely on officials when we become Ministers. Many Conservative Members are looking forward to that experience in two or three months. However, we will rely more on officials for guidance on local government finance than for any other subject.

At least Conservative Ministers tried; they saw a constant stream of delegations about local government finance. I have taken delegations from Eastbourne and I am sure that other hon. Members from all parties have done that for their local councils. The Labour Government are much less willing to receive delegations from councils. I do not claim that our Ministers always gave councils the answers that they wanted to hear, but at least they were prepared to listen and to take account of people's comments.

I was making a point about reflecting the real costs to councils. If costs have genuinely increased in a specific local authority area, they should be reflected in the area cost adjustment, as long as that system remains.

As the hon. Member for Stafford pointed out in slightly unguarded but acutely observed correspondence, most local authorities will lose out. A few will benefit from the floors while 12 will suffer from the ceilings. I suspect that the Government are simply trying out a new weapon. However, the mass of local authorities in the middle will continue to lose out because of the mechanism. I challenge Ministers to challenge that statement. We will watch future developments with great interest.

Mr. Kidney: For the hon. Gentleman's information, as a result of the Government's announcement about changes since the provisional settlement was announced to the House, Staffordshire will not lose out because of the floor provisions. The extra money that it now receives takes it back past the amount that it gave up under the floor provision. We are not losing out in Staffordshire.

Mr. Waterson: I am delighted to hear it. No doubt the Government are hoping that that will save the hon. Gentleman's seat and others in the area, although I somehow doubt that it will be enough.

I shall finish on our general worries about the floors and ceilings concept, particularly the fact that it is being introduced at this stage, when we are meant to be having a freeze on any such changes. The Local Government Association Conservative group, which is well on its way to being the dominant group in the Local Government Association, states:

> The LGA Conservative Group is strongly opposed to the proposal to introduce grant ceilings. There seems little point in having an elaborate system of SSAs, dependent on the collection of large quantities of data, if that data is subsequently ignored because it does not suit the Government.

That is the truth behind all this. We find the proposals in the document as objectionable, in many ways, as those in the earlier document because they bring in the idea of floors and ceilings. Having said that, although we voted against the earlier report, it is not my intention—subject to how the debate develops—to invite my right hon. and hon. Friends to divide the House on the Special Grant Report No. 72.

8.21 pm

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a brief contribution on the report.

I want to follow the comments of the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) about floors and ceilings. I was surprised, when reading the report, to find that my local authority did not come within the SSA reduction grant, in view of the 1991 census information. I recall speaking in previous debates on this issue, and drawing attention to the fact that, even with the changes that had taken place, we lost revenue support grant in the same way that we have under this settlement. In this case, we have lost revenue support grant through data losses.

The report relates mainly to ceilings and floors. My local authority, Barnsley, is at the floor level of settlements throughout the country. It received a 3.2 per cent. increase in revenue support grant, which is at the lower end of the scale. I appreciate that other amounts of money have been received in relation to the neighbourhood renewal fund and to education. Unfortunately, those amounts of money are not adequate to address the problems that we face as a result of the low settlement.

There are restrictions on how the neighbourhood renewal fund money can be used. It cannot simply be transferred across into other sectors, in which my local authority is currently struggling to meet its responsibilities. In fact, Barnsley remains 30th out of the 36 metropolitan authorities in terms of its level of RSG funding. The data changes, and the area cost adjustment factors, have resulted in a loss of some £2.2 million, and the ceilings and floors have resulted in a further loss of some £100,000.

As for the additional moneys from the Department for Education and Employment, Barnsley received £180,000 of the total, while neighbouring Doncaster received about

[Mr. Eric Illsley]

£880,000. That equates to about 79p a head for Barnsley, compared to an average of £2.63 a head across all the metropolitan authorities. Once again, we appear to have come off badly regarding all the extra funding that the Government have provided.

The effect on Barnsley's budget, as my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Mr. Ennis) pointed out, is that it will lose £11 million over the next two years. That is nothing new for our local authority, because it has faced many cuts since the SSA methodology was introduced in 1990. It was capped in 1990, together with 19 other authorities, one third of which were in coal-mining areas. The SSA methodology simply does not address the difficulties of coal-mining villages, because they are always equated with rather nice villages with duck ponds and village greens, which are doing quite well. We tend to lose out as a result.

There will undoubtedly be redundancies in Barnsley as a result of the settlement. The local authority has already issued compulsory redundancy notices to the employment department. That will obviously cause some difficulty, in particular because the local authority does not have the money to fund the redundancies that are being imposed on it as a consequence of the local government settlement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough asked whether the Government would consider a supplementary credit approval for £1.8 million, to cover the difficulties that the local authority will encounter in funding those redundancies and employment cuts. My hon. Friend mentioned that the job losses could be equivalent to about 225 full-time posts. The local authority has issued an HR1 notice that calls for 450 redundancies. That is a substantial number of job losses.

The methodology used for the ceilings and floors is rather flawed, as was mentioned earlier. The proposals rely on the scheme being self-financing, which has the perverse effect of penalising those authorities that have already lost resources through data changes. Authorities such as mine have, therefore, lost twice: once through the data changes, and again through the ceilings and floors mechanism.

Ms Armstrong: There are one or two misapprehensions about this matter. My hon. Friend's local authority will contribute to the special grants that we are debating. Those special grants are top-sliced from the settlement, and he does not, therefore, know how much his authority will contribute to them. Had that money not been top-sliced, it would have been distributed through the general grant. By opting for that system, we have simply made more open the contribution from each authority. However, instead of that contribution coming from the authority's base grant, according to the scaling factor, and the floors and ceilings, the contribution is only part of the increase that it is receiving. Barnsley is, therefore, contributing less, because we have calculated the amount using floors and ceilings, than it would have done if we had done this by top-slicing, through a special grant.

Mr. Illsley: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, but we are still contributing £100,000 in respect of ceilings and floors. That is simply a case of the poor funding the poorer, which has happened with previous RSG settlements.

The "other services" block, which my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough mentioned, is the one that seems to have been neglected. Although we passport money for social services and education and although I agree with education being a priority, "other services" funding seems to have been slightly neglected even though our local populace clearly told the local authority through the community plan that they want issues such as the environment, street cleaning and road repair, which the block covers, to be addressed. Even education and employment did not feature as a priority in the community plan survey, but factors relating to the "other services" block did.

I should like to mention housing revenue accounts and stock transfer, but time does not permit. However, such issues are having an impact on our local authority's problems in respect of the funding that it needs and best value, and a demonstration about that took place in the town only a few days ago. Although that money will not come out of this settlement, we ought to target local government funding at the areas that particularly need it.

8.30 pm

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I have been trying to work out the simultaneous equation that leads to what Z means in Annex B, before *Hansard* records hon. Members as zzzzz!

Mr. Don Foster: My hon. Friend informs the House that he has been trying to work that out, but can he explain why, when C plus D minus A over T is not greater or equal to two times S, the grant is T into Z minus S whereas if the grant of C plus D minus A over T is greater than two times S, the grant is half TZ? Why should there be a difference?

Mr. Sanders: When I sum up, I shall try my best to explain precisely why that is. The equation is an example of, "Whatever you put in, you can get out whatever you like so long as you confuse everybody in the process as to how you got there." The Minister said that this is the best settlement ever.

Ms Armstrong: Since the council tax was introduced.

Mr. Sanders: Every year since the council tax was introduced, the Minister has been able to say, "This is the best settlement." Every year, the money going into local government increases, so there is no lie there. The problem is that the extra money does not always meet the costs incurred on the ground by different local authorities. That is why we have formulae and why we have floors and ceilings. However, the floors and ceilings that we have been debating represent an admission that the data on which the standard spending assessment are based are out of date and, for some authorities, almost meaningless.

In effect, whatever controls the Treasury determines decide who wins and who loses in each year's settlement. The view of Members on the Liberal Democrat Benches is that radical reform is necessary. The legitimacy of local decision making to meet community needs should not rest on the political colour of the Government in control at

Westminster, but that is what has happened to local government over the past few decades. Irrespective of who was in power, the Government were able to tweak the simultaneous equations to support those authorities that they wanted to support at the expense of those that they perhaps did not want to support.

It is argued that councils should be free to raise their own taxes and that any distribution grant to assist those areas that cannot raise as much money locally as others should be determined by local councils acting collectively. Before hon. Members jump up and say, "What would the Lib Dems do?", I should point out that we consider the legitimacy of local government to come from the roots—from communities themselves. Local government in this country is like a dog kept on a tight leash. The minor reforms made by the Government, which we welcome, only lengthened the lead while continuing to keep local government on a tight choke. However, if local government is the dog, the SSA system and the damping arrangements are the dog's breakfast.

Those authorities that missed out in the past continue to miss out. Historically, low-spending authorities face the double-edged dilemma of having to cut services while increasing council tax as the Government tell them that they have never had it so good. More money is given to local government year after year, but something does not add up. Surely if the grant regime was fair and if central Government believed in local government, council tax would not have to rise at three times the rate of inflation.

The truth is contained in the pre-Budget book, under the heading relating to central Government receipts. Apparently, in the next financial year what Government coffers receive from council tax will rise by 6.9 per cent. That is remarkably close to what the average council tax rise will be. By shifting the tax burden to the council tax payer the Chancellor has been able to get a pat on the back; while councillors have got it in the neck.

Central Government seem to mistrust local government. I do not for a moment include this or other Ministers in that; it is, I think, the Treasury that mistrusts local government, because it controls how much local government can spend, borrow and even, in some cases, charge for a given service. If councils want or need additional funds, they must apply for grants or credit approvals, with no guarantee of success. The shift towards money being available through competition is an incredible waste of officers' time and of local government resources, given that not all councils are able to succeed. A widespread view is that some authorities gain grants not wholly on the basis of need, but on the basis of their officers' ability to put in good applications. It seems that the skills of officers are more important than the genuine needs of some authorities.

I want to refer briefly to my council, Torbay unitary authority. A preliminary announcement by the council—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Order. Will the hon. Gentleman confine his remarks about his local authority to the matter under debate?

Mr. Sanders: The impact of the standard spending assessment is factor A in the simultaneous equation. It means that my authority faces cuts of 9 per cent., and a 7 per cent. council tax rise.

The crux of the matter is this. My local authority, which is Conservative-controlled, says "We are £30 million short of what we believe we need to spend, and what the SSA says we need to spend." I happen to think that that is probably the officers' estimate of what the council would like to spend, but I have no doubt that there is a difference between what Government say it needs to spend and what it has available to spend. That is having an impact on council tax rises, and on cuts in services.

Let me give one example of a service area to which that applies. Children's services spending is part of the SSA formula. Since 1998, the SSA for children's services in my unitary authority has risen by 15.7 per cent. Over the same period, spending on this service has been forced to rise by more than 50 per cent.—not because the council has chosen to increase spending, but because agencies outwith the council are referring clients to the council, and the council has no control over that.

The grant system takes a long time to catch up with the amount that is having to be spent, if indeed it ever does catch up. I strongly suggest that Ministers should be sympathetic to councils whose costs are increased, which enable through no fault of their own, in areas as important as children's services and social services enabling people to be cared for under local authority jurisdiction.

Local Government finance is too complex. My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) made that point very well, and I shall write to him later with the answer to his mathematical question. The system is not transparent, and in the case of some services in some authorities it is unfair. It seems that which authorities find it unfair depends on the colour of central Government.

The tax burden has been shifted from central Government to the council tax payer, and radical reform introducing a power of general competence, including fiscal competence, is long overdue. It is time that local government was set free.

8.39 pm

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): Whoever split the debates has done the House a grave disservice. The contributions in the first debate and, to a certain extent, in this one need to be heard. The debate needs to be had in the House. I will certainly be one of those calling for the House authorities to have a further debate on the whole subject.

I hope that the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) does not have a similarly friendly intervention for me on the formula because I could not answer it. That is the root of the problem. I realise that we are talking about special grants. I recognise the increase in the level of settlement this year generally, in contrast with earlier years: a £3 billion, or 7.2 per cent., increase in total Government grant and a 4.9 per cent. increase in the general grant. We should not pursue the debate without recognising that positive.

I recognise, too, the extreme difficulties that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions and her colleagues in the Department face in trying to satisfy every council, let alone every hon. Member. She surely has one of the most difficult jobs in government. However, I am dissatisfied with the overall settlement, including the special grant arrangements. The roots of that dissatisfaction lie in the settlement's effects on my borough, the London borough of Havering, and in the method by which central Government fund local government.

[Mr. Keith Darvill]

I should add that, prior to the 1997 general election, my local authority suffered a 1.8 per cent. decrease in its settlement in 1994–95, followed by a 1.2 per cent. increase in 1995–96 and a 0.7 per cent. increase in 1996–97. That contrasts with the four years of the present Government, when there have been increases of 4.1. 4.5, 4.2 and 6.4 per cent. this year. The average increase in the four years before 1997 was 1.5 per cent. The average increase in the past four years has been 4.8 per cent.—a significant increase.

None the less, there is an element of tinkering with the system. Councils that benefit from that tinkering have initial comfort for a number of years, but it does not deal with the fundamental flaws, as my right hon. Friend said in the earlier debate. I echo the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Mr. Ennis). To avoid the complexities of the special grant and the system generally, what is needed is a fundamental review. I was happy to make a contribution to the Green Paper. I will be interesting to read the contributions of hon. Members and others when the results of the Green Paper consultation are published.

The problem is that the settlement does not recognise historical factors, including the difficulties following the post-poll tax debacle in the early 1990s. That is when the fundamental problems that exist arose in my local authority. We can plot them from that debacle.

The settlement does not recognise adequately the area cost adjustment, or the area cost adjustment does not adequately recognise needs, whichever way one looks at it. I know that there have been a number of reviews. The Elliot report a few years back specifically helped outer London boroughs. My local authority made representations to the previous and present Governments on that point.

The current settlement does not recognise adequately the increasing demands that local government has to deal with. That is a fair point, which we often debate. We often put obligations on local authorities, but we do not properly fund them. There needs to be a review of that.

The settlement does not particularly well assess the needs of areas, certainly not of my own area. My area's ageing population, for example, is not reflected in the settlement. As an area's age balance changes, demands on social services change. A proper needs-based system should take account of that and fund the demands, but that is not happening. If that does not happen over the years, local authority finances become diminished. The settlement—in the special grant and elsewhere—also does not necessarily recognise high wage costs.

All those factors have led to the likelihood that, this year, my local authority will increase council tax by 11.5 per cent. That was the figure predicted a couple of weeks ago, but it may be decreased on the basis of this final settlement and the decisions of the precepting authorities, primarily the Greater London Authority. Nevertheless, we anticipate a council tax increase that is well above inflation, of between 9 and 11.5 per cent.

As council taxes are being increased, services will be cut. I should say that the local authority has been under that financial strain for about eight to nine years. Eight or nine years ago, however, there was some fat in the system that enabled the council to cope. The local authority has made efficiency gains in service delivery in the intervening period. However, if councils have to make cuts and increase council tax year after year, eventually it becomes very difficult to deliver the improved public services which we all want. One can already see diminution in marginal services such as road resurfacing.

The borough's reserves are now well below those recommended by the Audit Commission. Consequently, it is unable to make adjustments to cope with difficulties in a particularly bad year. The consequence of that is that our constituents are affected by service cuts and a reduction in their overall quality of life.

I appreciate that this is a narrow debate on the special grant report. I believe, however, that we urgently need a review of the overall system, and I hope that the Government will begin one as quickly as possible.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): My hon. Friend makes a powerful case. However, even without a fundamental review—which would be very difficult to conduct because of the factors that he mentioned, such as an ageing population and the fact that different age groups have different levels of need—does he not accept that floors and ceilings are a good way of addressing the needs issue? This year, even councils that were subject to ceilings still received a real-terms increase. Is not that approach also the best way of dealing with the needs of those who have essentially been pulled up to the floor?

Mr. Darvill: I broadly accept that the floors did help. Had they not existed, we would be discussing far greater difficulties across the country. Therefore, to that extent, the system must be welcome. If there is not a fundamental review of the system in the next 12 months, we will undoubtedly be considering other devices and ways of tinkering with it, perhaps by increasing the floor, to ensure that greater difficulties do not arise.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): By the very same logic that the hon. Gentleman has just used, is it not clear that the many authorities that have lost out because of the ceiling will be losing not only bonus money, but money that is essential to cover additional spending on social services, flooding, best value and everything else? As authorities will now not be receiving that money, money will have to come out of spending on other core services.

Mr. Darvill: The hon. Gentleman gave the example of flooding, but I understand that financial provision has been made for it. I cannot deal specifically with the point, but I have seen in the papers various figures on provision to deal with flooding. The hon. Gentleman is undeniably right, in the sense that those local authorities will have their ceilings reduced and will therefore have to adjust their services downwards.

However, the fundamental problem was created in the broad post-poll tax settlement, when the present complexity was created. Admittedly, it is this Government's job to do something about it. Until they do, the debate on these matters will continue, as it has this evening.

The underlying message that I want to give to Ministers is that, although the overall benefits enjoyed by councils must be recognised, there are councils around the country

that are suffering. The delivery of services in those areas is becoming increasingly difficult. I shall support the Government generally this evening, but I want to draw Ministers' attention to my concerns in this area.

8.51 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): The hon. Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) said that he did not think that adequate time had been allowed for the debate. I agree: I am surprised that the Minister has so little influence with the Government that she was unable to secure a whole-day debate on the matter. *[Interruption.]* I think it important to discuss the orders before us separately, but the Government were prepared to offer only three hours for debate on the subject of the revenue support grant for England.

When I was a local government Minister, the debate used to go on all day. Hon. Members would stand up and complain on behalf of their area, saying that they had been done down by the Government. It was traditional in those days for hon. Members worried about their area to vote against the Government, even when they were members of the Government party. I do not know whether that will happen tonight, but I suspect that the Government's agenda is to try to restrict the debate so that they are exposed to less criticism from their Back Benchers than they properly should be, given the injustice of the arrangements that now prevail.

There is a set amount of money to be distributed, and the Government's method of distribution is very unfair for some councils. I shall deal in my remarks with the case of East Dorset district council, which covers about half of the area of my constituency.

Mr. Darvill: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that in my contribution I contrasted the very low settlements received under the Government that he supported with the much higher settlements received under this Government?

Mr. Chope: I know that that is what the hon. Gentleman said. However, what I have to say about East Dorset will show that his proposition is not accurate in relation to particular councils. Moreover, I doubt its accuracy as a generality. The pre-Budget report produced by the Treasury shows that the Government expect the yield from council tax to increase by two to three times the rate of inflation this year. That is the same rate of increase as occurred last year and the year before that.

That means that the Government expect council tax payers to pay a higher contribution to the costs of local services than they did under a Conservative Government. That is now causing real hardship. In a written answer that I received yesterday, I was told that, in 1998–99, 6 per cent. of pensioner households were in what I would describe as council tax poverty—that is, they were paying more than 10 per cent. of their income in council tax.

Hon. Members of all parties have been concerned for many years about people in fuel poverty. They are people who spend more than 10 per cent. of their net income on fuel. I submit that it is horrendous for pensioners to have to spend more than 10 per cent. of their income on council tax. Those figures are increasing, but the Government have not been collecting the data for the past year—no doubt because having them revealed would be rather embarrassing. I know from my constituency, which has a large number of pensioner households, that the burden of the council tax is becoming unbearable and that increasing numbers spend more than £1,000 a year on council tax.

Annex A of the report shows that East Dorset district council is identified in part III as a receiving authority area. It will receive £51,647 as a result of this report. I shall therefore not be voting against this report because the people of East Dorset are grateful for small mercies.

Underlying that figure is the fact that East Dorset district council will receive in Government grant this coming year no more than it has received in the current year, despite having to take on extra burdens and responsibilities imposed by the Government—indeed, by this House—through legislation. I refer in particular to concessionary fares, about which I have been in correspondence with the Minister on a number of occasions. When the Government announced that they would introduce a mandatory minimum standard for local authorities in relation to concessionary fare schemes, they said that they would put aside sufficient money to meet the additional costs. I have no reason to doubt that they did just that. However, they have not distributed that money in a fair and equitable way. Not a penny of that extra money has come to East Dorset district council, so other councils are receiving money over and above what is necessary to pay for the extra burden.

Only two district councils—East Dorset and Hart—receive no revenue support grant. The Minister and the Government know that. They know that if they use the RSG as the mechanism for distributing resources when they impose new burdens on local authorities, none of the extra resources will go to East Dorset or Hart. Obviously, I am more concerned tonight about East Dorset than I am about Hart, but the principle is fundamental. The Government are imposing new burdens; they make general propositions, saying that they will fund the costs of those extra burdens out of taxpayers' money and then expect some councils to meet the full costs themselves. In East Dorset, where about 25 per cent. of the population are pensioners, that effectively means that pensioners—many of whom live in difficult circumstances—will have to pay substantial increases in council tax to meet the additional burden of the concessionary fares scheme which many of them will not wish to use.

In East Dorset, it is estimated that the additional cost of the concessionary fares scheme, even in its minimalist state, will be £150,000. That probably represents an 8 per cent. increase in the council tax in East Dorset on band D and for all households, simply on account of the extra burden imposed by the Government. Then there is the extra burden of best value audit fees, which is a particularly heavy burden on the smaller and smallest councils—an issue that has been raised on both sides of the House but has not received a sympathetic response from the Government. There are something like 300 new best value inspectors, who are being funded through best value audit fees by the citizens of East Dorset and elsewhere. Frankly, it is impossible to see any benefit accruing to the people of East Dorset as a result. Dame Helena Shovelton, who used to be in charge of deciding who would run the lottery—she has given that job up—is the chairman of the—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that this debate concerns the purpose, needs and adequacy of the special grants.

Mr. Chope: Absolutely, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I hope that that is the issue with which I am dealing.

In the introduction to the annual report of the Audit Commission, which was published in July, its chairman, Dame Helena Shovelton, said:

"We are committed to make sure that our Inspection Service will work with authorities to help them to seize the opportunity best value brings and achieve real improvements to the quality of local services and the quality of local people's lives."

In East Dorset, the reality is that because of the burden of the best value inspection and audit system, the council will have to cut services and increase council tax. That outcome is totally inconsistent with what Dame Helena Shovelton said would happen. Another burden has been placed on East Dorset district council for which it is not getting any additional funding. As I said, part III of the report makes it clear that it will get only £51,647.

This is a narrow issue, but it is important. How can it be fair that a council should get no cash increase—we are not even talking about an increase in real terms—in Government support at a time when the Government are imposing major new financial burdens. As a consequence, the level of service will be reduced and there will probably be substantial increases in the council tax. As a result, an even higher proportion of pensioner households will pay more than 10 per cent. of their income in council tax every year.

The Minister said in her introductory remarks that the report would ensure stability of funding. That expression will go down like a sick joke in East Dorset.

9.2 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I will keep my remarks short so that as many hon. Members as possible may contribute to the debate. I will also try to keep them to the subject, which is narrow, given the fact that the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), seemed to repeat the remarks that he made in the previous debate, but I will say no more about that.

I wish to reinforce the argument that I made in an intervention on my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions in the previous debate, but with reference to the special grant. Fire and rescue services in Gloucestershire will face particular problems because as a result of the standard spending assessment they will not be able to access the special grants. The services work with the police and ambulance service in the county. We want a tri-service emergency centre, but it will be put at risk unless we can find some additional moneys. Likewise, we are working with the fire and rescue services of other authorities in the south-west to establish a joint training centre. Both projects require special grants from the Home Office, but will be put at risk unless we can obtain additional funds to pay our contribution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) will no doubt point out, if he has the opportunity, that the education standard spending assessment is inadequate. Many hon. Members on both sides of the House want the area cost adjustment to be removed because of its gross unfairness.

The sins of the father are visited on the sons and daughters; that is never more true than in local government, where the Government are increasingly having to address, through additional direct grant, the problems that we were left with. Much as one welcomes the money, if we could sort out the formula, we would prefer to find the amounts from within local resources, so that our schools and social services could be funded more adequately without having to rely on—

Mr. McWalter: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Drew: It is only fair to other Members who want to speak that I do not give way, as I am sure my hon. Friend understands.

We need to sort out local government funding sooner rather than later. Clearly, that will not happen before the election, but I hope that soon afterwards we shall see light at the end of the tunnel—with the excellent Green Paper and the opportunities that are available.

My hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) pointed out that we continue to suffer from the effects of the poll tax. Another such factor is the early retirement scam. Many of my friends took early retirement for genuine reasons—sickness or job cuts—but the Conservative Government never predicated the long-term implications of getting people off the payroll in any of their calculations. We see the effects of that in the problems with police and local government pensions; many people who left their employment for genuine reasons still have to be paid for through top-slicing. Until we can grapple with that pensions problem, we shall all be at a serious disadvantage. That is why we need to reform the formula and the funding system.

9.7 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Like the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) and other hon. Members, I have concerns about the area cost adjustment and its operation in my local council—the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames—and, especially, about the need for long-term reform. This year, a short-term fix—the floors and ceilings idea—has caused hardship in many councils, especially in outer London, as the hon. Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) pointed out.

The ceiling will significantly affect my council. That is a shame because the council was hit in last year's settlement, when the new earnings survey figures—plugged into the area cost adjustment—worked against us. This year, when the new earnings survey figures would have worked in our favour, the benefit was not allowed to flow to councils such as Kingston in outer London.

I am disappointed that the Government continue to persist with the ceiling approach, because when I led an all-party delegation from Kingston council to see the Minister for Local Government and the Regions she listened politely and asked the right questions; today, unfortunately, we find that she has not acted. It is interesting that in today's *Evening Standard*, Professor John Howson estimates that London needs another 9,000 teachers. That is especially relevant, because the part of the area cost adjustment that is not being fed through because of the ceiling relates to the higher salaries that councils such as Kingston are having to pay to ensure that there are teachers in our classrooms.

Given such huge teacher shortages, I am concerned that the Government are pursuing that policy. I raised the issue with the Chancellor at a meeting of the Select Committee

on the Treasury. He acknowledged that London has a problem with teacher shortages, but that recognition does not appear to have fed through to the local government settlement, especially for outer London boroughs that are hit by the ceiling.

During the debate, the Minister has made several sedentary interventions. What I am about to say will please her. I welcome the fact that she did listen with regard to the homelessness issue and housing benefit. There is a point that perhaps should have been raised in the previous debate, although it is relevant to this one because it relates to "A" in the equation.

The Minister announced today that rent levels specified in the housing benefit subsidy regulations will be raised, so more housing benefit will be payable in areas where rents are higher. That will significantly help people on low incomes with housing difficulties. I see many such people in my surgery every week, so that measure is particularly welcome. In high-cost areas such as Kingston, the homeless and those in poor housing have been hit severely by the regulations, which I believe the present Government introduced as a left-over from the previous Government. This change makes it better. It certainly does not make it perfect, because Liberal Democrats would like the regulations to be abolished.

Although I welcome that change, I am concerned that this grant settlement does not help boroughs, such as mine, that are having problems with teacher shortages and with attracting teachers. Interestingly, the Kingston share of the £52 million grant is only £0.1 million. That is nowhere near its fair share. I wonder whether the criteria that have been used to share out the £52 million grant could be published, because I do not believe that they would stand up to proper scrutiny.

9.11 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): I look forward to the day when we no longer need to debate and vote on special grants—when we have a system for distributing the Government's central grant to local government that is transparent, easy to understand and, above all, fair. The Government showed the way forward by publishing a Green Paper last year, which some hon. Members have mentioned and to which I shall briefly refer.

Those who say that the Government acknowledge the unfairness of the previous system of distribution introduced by the Conservatives but have been slow to do something about it are wrong: the Government have made efforts to do something about the unfairness, injustice and disparities in distribution that that system created.

At first, the Government tried methodological changes each year. That is borne out by annexe B of the report, which says that special grants were introduced partly as a result of changes to the methodology for calculating standard spending assessments for the financial years 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000, among others. However, the Government found—the point was well illustrated in the previous debate by the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), who mentioned a change that was made in, I believe, social services that disadvantaged his council—that making piecemeal changes, even with the best of intentions, had unintended consequences elsewhere in the system because of the complexity and lack of transparency. That attempt was abandoned.

The Government made a second attempt to achieve fairness. They devised 21 more thoroughgoing options for change, and asked members of the Local Government Association whether they could reach a consensus on which option would be better than the current system. Sadly, they did not rise to the challenge. They could not agree, so that option, too, was ruled out.

Plan C was for the Government to suggest their own changes as a prelude to consultation, and they did so by publishing the Green Paper. The great interest in change among the public outside the House is shown by the fact that, as the Minister said, there have been 16,000 responses to the Green Paper—a tremendously high number. I look forward to hearing the Government's response when they have considered them all.

The elements in the Green Paper that I believe will do away with the need for special grants are, first, the introduction of a formal system of ceilings and floors, which would ensure that there were no great winners or losers in the distribution of central grant from one year to the next and would bring certainty and an ability to plan local government's finances.

Secondly, I look forward to the introduction of minimum entitlement for each pupil in education. I realise that that is too simplistic on its own. That is why the Green Paper refers to making adjustments for deprivation and for recruitment and retention. The key to those elements is preventing future Governments from dabbling in those adjustments for political reasons.

The Office for National Statistics will have an important role. It is already charged with developing ward-based statistics, which will help to establish factual deprivation figures. I know from my experience of serving on the Select Committee on the Treasury that the office is working to ensure that its figures on recruitment and retention are more accurate.

If the proposals in the Green Paper eventually form the new system, we will not need the special grants that we debate and vote on each year. We will then have a fairer system, and I will be able to look teachers and parents in the eye and say that we have a system that treats schoolchildren in Staffordshire as fairly as pupils in other parts of the country.

9.16 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): In the previous debate, the hon. Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) said that he sometimes thought it a disadvantage to have a background in local government when speaking on such matters in the House, and I agree with him. First, it creates the illusion of partially understanding the formulae used. Secondly, hon. Members find themselves making exactly the same speeches that they have made for decades past in local government and in the House, because the message does not seem to get through, and I am afraid that this subject is no exception.

This special grant report deals with the floors, not the ceilings, in the system. I can well understand why the Government think that a system of floors is necessary. In fact, it is not a new concept; previous Governments introduced safety nets—as the floors were then called—to prevent local authorities from losing money because of changes to the system. The basic unfairness of the system creates the difficulty. We argued time and again about

[Mr. David Heath]

such matters with the previous Government. That is why I find it difficult to accept the comments of Conservative Members, who now proclaim the unfairness of the system that they invented and implemented for years.

By implementing the special grant report, the Minister is at least trying to reduce at the margins the enormous disparities thrown up by the system between the funding of one authority and another. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) in the debate because we have worked on the problem during recent months. We recognise that we are not alone and that many local authorities, such as Leicestershire, Gloucestershire, South Gloucestershire and Northampton, are very badly treated under the present formula. That is especially so in the allocation of education SSAs, which are, after all, the key to county council spending. If the education SSA is wrong, it has a knock-on effect throughout the system and money has to be diverted from social services, highways maintenance and so on to keep schools going.

I cannot accept a system that produces a disparity between Somerset and a leafy London borough of £1,500 a year per child. We have only to calculate how much the accumulated £1,500 per child disparity is worth to realise what an enormous difference it makes to the funding of a secondary school. We know that the problem exists partly because the SSA formula does not take account of children's basic needs. We know that the area cost adjustment has a huge effect, which is amplified by other factors that have been introduced recently.

I shall cite as an example the area cost adjustment's effect on my own police authority. We discussed the police grant earlier today. No less than 3 per cent. of the 7.5 per cent. precept increase is down to the adjustments of the area cost adjustment. That is £1 million of spending that could otherwise go into policing Avon and Somerset, and another £566,000 goes on the council tax benefit subsidy limitation scheme.

Those sums are top-sliced. The Minister intervened elegantly on the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) when he suggested that we have a system under which the poor subsidise the poorer. She rightly said that the money is sliced from the marginal increases rather than from core funding, but that makes not a ha'p'orth of difference to authorities that do not receive their entitlement because of the ossification of the system, which has nothing to do with stability. It is about maintaining basic injustices in the system.

I am disappointed by the report because it does nothing to deal with the huge disparities between authorities and it does nothing to create an entitlement to a basic level of funding for children in authorities such as the one that I represent. After four years of this Government, I would have expected that entitlement to be in place. For years under the Conservatives, we argued that it should be, and we are bitterly disappointed with this Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) referred to the difficulties of hypothecated funding for education authorities. That is one way in which the Department for Education and Employment tries to get round the system, but it is extraordinary that it recognises the problem but has to get round a rigid formula that is imposed by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. It is time that the Government dealt with the problem and that our children had a fair deal from the funding system.

9.21 pm

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): What a fascinating but odd debate this has been—and it is getting odder. Alas, I hazard the guess that it will not feature in the Commons sketches in tomorrow's press. Theoretically, the debate has been all about the Special Grant Report (No. 72)—a masterpiece of plain English it is not. It certainly is not a gripping and all-consuming read that is mesmerising and enthralling. I suspect that it will not reach W. H. Smith's top 10 list, even at the knock-down price of £4.10.

The first undertaking that I shall give is that the next Conservative Government will do something to simplify the nonsense that are the formulas that make up the 13 pages of the report and that have been produced all for the sake of £3 million. The two SSA reduction grants that originated under the previous Government were applied for historical reasons to the City of London, which is very sensitive to SSA changes because of its small residential population. Given that the figures were based on the census of 1991, will that arrangement continue after the new census is published this year? At what stage will that census kick in?

We are confronted with the formulas that the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) mentioned. As if it is not enough to be confronted with formula B minus A over T, which extends to T(Z minus S) to $\frac{1}{2}$TZ, the second formula involves B minus A over T, C plus D plus E and T(Z minus S) and $\frac{1}{2}$TZ. If that were not bad enough, the new formulas that apply to the new central supply protection grant steal the show. They refer to B minus A, but then page 13 of the report states:

3. Grant is payable if the amount M calculated under paragraph 2 is greater than zero.

4. The amount of grant is calculated in accordance with the following formula: B minus A where A and B have the same meaning as in paragraph 2.

That is all quite simple.

We understand that the formula means that 10 shire districts will supposedly benefit from the year-on-year reductions in total Government grant. Because those counties do not provide educational and social services spend, they do not benefit from the floors that we have heard so much about and to which the Minister alluded.

I readily admit that I am not always the sharpest knife in the drawer, but will the Minister explain to me—other people and the House of Commons Library have not been able to—why no fewer than 103 district authorities fit the criteria for the central support protection grant, but only 10 of them will benefit from it? They range from Brentwood to Weymouth and Portland, and include East Dorset district council, as my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) mentioned. What about the other 93 authorities? The list starts with Bromsgrove, which received a 0 per cent. increase in total external support. St. Edmundsbury received a 0.3 per cent. increase, Tewkesbury received a 0.4 per cent. increase and Chester received a 1 per cent. increase. The list extends to North East Derbyshire. It is not clear how those authorities will benefit, although we are assured that the central support protection grant will ensure that any

authority that does not qualify for the grant floor will none the less receive a Government grant no lower than that which it received in 2001-01. Will the Minister explain that point?

Some interesting contributions have been made. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch pointed out that his council will, on the face of it, be a beneficiary of the CSPG. However, he told us that the extra pensioners in his constituency are a great expense for the council and that benefits such as concessionary fares, which the authority will now have to fund, are not being refunded by the Government. The hon. Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Mr. Ennis) was concerned that his constituents had missed out, and the Minister did not allay his fears. What the hon. Member for Torbay called his dog's breakfast speech was concerned entirely with the formula of Z.

I agree with the comment made by the hon. Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) about the need for a fundamental review of the whole system. Interestingly, the 11.5 per cent. council tax increase that he foresaw is out of sorts with the Minister's figure. I agreed also with the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on the inaccessibility of special grants. In my authority area, West Sussex, 72 per cent. of the extra education funding received by the county council is not for it to spend as it wishes, as it has been provided in specific grant form.

This debate has been about floors and ceilings. It is the flaws within those floors and ceilings that are yet another example of centralisation by the Government. What is the point of introducing an elaborate system of SSAs that depends on the collection of large quantities of data, if those data are subsequently ignored because they do not fit the Government's dogma? That is all part of the Government's funding fiddle.

9.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): For the past hour and a half, we have ostensibly been debating the special grant reports. Of course, those reports raise a number of other important distribution issues, many of which have been mentioned.

Two specific points were made about the special grants themselves. I shall deal first with that made by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton). I assure him that it was entirely wrong. The grant ensures that no council receives less on a like-for-like basis. That is the basic criterion on which 10 councils qualify. The hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) said that the inclusion of the 10 councils reflected political bias. Had he done the most basic research, however, he would have found that they comprised one Labour council, one Liberal Democrat council and five Conservative councils. Three of them are without overall control. I fail to see how that reflects political bias towards Labour authorities. If the hon. Gentleman can identify such bias, he will have to explain it to me after the debate.

The second and main issue was the problems associated with the standard spending assessment and distribution. This is an entirely vexed question, on which the three main parties do not agree. The problems relate not to data, as the hon. Member for Torbay alleged, but to methodology. There is no consensus on the area cost adjustment. Indeed, the whole system is complex and is neither transparent nor understandable. Some would argue that it does not take account of the different trends that apply in different places.

The previous Government failed completely to tackle any of those problems and simply reduced funding year on year. They did nothing at all about distribution.

We have instituted a fundamental review and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) pointed out, we were grateful for the large number of replies. As the contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) and for Stroud (Mr. Drew) and the hon. Members for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) and for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) showed, once we start debating the matter, it turns out that every Member wants different changes that would benefit his own area. I do not blame them for that, but it reflects the difficulty inherent in the issue. I am not convinced that, as one of my hon. Friends maintained, if we introduced a new system, we would completely eradicate all complaints. I think that hon. Members would still want more for their own areas.

This year, because of the huge skews produced by applying the current methodology to the data, we have introduced floors and ceilings. I am sorry that Conservatives Members do not feel that they can support that proposal. Their basic premise was of course wrong. In the previous system, under the central support protection grant, which we have debated tonight, all authorities above the minimum contributed to the minimum guarantee. That will work in the same way in the system that we have introduced this year. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions said in an intervention, the main difference is that the new system is transparent. People can see what they are getting and whether they are contributing to the floor.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) raised a number of issues, but I must point out that there are no restrictions on the use of the neighbourhood renewal fund. It is intended to drive up standards in the most disadvantaged areas, and provided that Barnsley demonstrates that it is hitting the targets, it can use its extra £2.7 million as it wishes.

Although distribution is important, the real issue is the overall investment in, and the commitment to, local government. I say to Conservative Members that it is this party—

It being one and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Standing Order No. 16(1).*

Question agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) Special Grant Report (No. 72) (HC 159), which was laid before this House on 29th January, be approved.

Science and Technology Committee

9.32 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I beg to move,

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest.

The motion proposes that the Commons Science and Technology Committee should have the power to meet with the Lords Science and Technology Committee. In general, Committees with analogues in the Lords, such as the European Scrutiny Committee, have powers to meet with their counterparts. All Lords Committees have powers to meet with Commons Committees. In its second report last Session, the Science and Technology Committee asked that it be given the power to meet with its Lords counterpart.

I know that the motion has the strong support of the Chairman and members of the Science and Technology Committee, and I am delighted that the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) has joined us. I am pleased to move the motion to give the Committee the power that it desires.

9.33 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): This interesting motion, which is not without its controversial elements, provides us with an opportunity to pause and consider the merits of the approach that is suggested. I confess to a feeling of unease at what I detect as a trend, which has emerged recently, and of which this is just the latest example, for joint meetings with Committees of the House of Lords.

I want modestly to praise the Minister for doing us the courtesy, as ever he does—I wish his colleagues would do the same—of coming to the House and giving us a succinct and rather elegant exposition of why he thinks the motion necessary. I have a number of questions that I want to ask him which relate directly to this seemingly innocuous motion and to the principle behind it, which is that of a joint approach. I also have a number of practical questions that are relevant at this stage.

Standing Order No. 152, which is the foundation of our Select Committee system, states:

"Select committees shall be appointed to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the principal government departments as set out in paragraph (2) of this order"—

straightforward enough, one would have thought. That applies, of course, to the Commons Select Committees, one of which is the subject of the motion. Item 11 in the table that forms part of the Standing Order shows that the Office of Science and Technology is the relevant Government Department.

We know, therefore, that the Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology is tasked under Standing Order No. 152 with giving its attention to the Office of Science and Technology and with examining its expenditure, administration and policy. We are all familiar with that territory, so it should not give rise to any difficulty.

However, I am mystified by the form of words used in the motion. Recently, we have dealt with motions referring to Joint Committees of the Commons and the Lords. The motion does not use that form of words. It rather intriguingly uses a different form of words and states that

"the Select Committee on Science and Technology"—

of the Commons, it is taken for granted—

"shall have leave to meet concurrently".

I do not want to quibble excessively or be too pedantic. That is not in my nature, as the House knows, but I am intrigued as to why the motion is framed in that way. The word "concurrently" can imply a number of different things. It can imply meeting at the same time, or meeting in the same place, or both. I am not sure that the motion is sufficiently clear to give any guidance as to what it might mean. Perhaps the Minister can clarify that when he winds up the debate.

That is the immediate difficulty—the lack of clarity for which one would hope in such a motion. The motion goes on, even more confusingly, to state that our Select Committee will meet concurrently

"with any committee of the Lords on science and technology".

I confess that I am not sufficiently familiar with the way in which the other place works to know whether—*[Interruption.]* I am educating myself.

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): Perhaps I can help the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Forth: I should be delighted.

Dr. Kumar: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He said that he does not want to quibble. That is precisely what he is doing. He is quibbling all the way. He indulges in his song-and-dance tradition of quibbling with everything, and reads into everything far more than is meant.

Perhaps I can help the right hon. Gentleman. The spirit of the motion—*[Interruption.]* I am trying to be helpful. The right hon. Gentleman is struggling, and I want to educate him. He could benefit from education. *[Interruption.]* As a member of the Select Committee, may I explain to the right hon. Gentleman that the spirit of the motion was that we would try to make progress in the way that we take evidence. Rather than duplicating effort and wasting the resources of both Houses—the right hon. Gentleman never stops lecturing us about wasting resources, so I am trying to be helpful to him—

Mr. Speaker: Order. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will be helpful to me. His intervention is too long.

Mr. Forth: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar). I hope that he will feel free to intervene again and again. He anticipated one of the later points that I intended to make. If he is patient, and waits until a little later in the evening, I will come to the point that he was so helpfully trying to make. I am genuinely grateful to him.

I was trying to probe the reasons for the form of words in the motion, which refers to working,

"concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof".

The flexibility that that allows is over-generous. Although I appreciate the reasons for the motion's focus on our Select Committee on Science and Technology, which we all know, love and greatly respect, the motion's open remit for concurrent meetings,

"with any committee of the Lords on science and technology"—

whatever that means; it could mean literally any Committee—

"or any sub-committee thereof",

places us in potentially difficult territory about who decides with whom the concurrent meeting will be held.

To whom will we give the remit and for what purpose? We must be clearer about that. The motion continues helpfully,

"for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee"—

the wording is again less clear than I should like. I now wonder to which Committee the phrase refers. I presume that it refers to our Select Committee communicating with "any such committee". But the Committees are already meeting concurrently. In that case, why should our Select Committee seek such communication? The motion includes several confusing elements. I fear that it has been drafted rather sloppily. Indeed, I may suggest later that the Parliamentary Secretary should withdraw it and redraft it to make it much clearer.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Does my right hon. Friend accept that, if the two Committees—and potentially more—met at the same time, in the same place and took evidence before the public, the proceedings would be largely indecipherable to those attending?

Mr. Forth: I am glad that my hon. Friend made that point. Before I go deeper into the helpful points that the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East raised, I want to cover the more mundane considerations that arise from the motion, and to which my hon. Friend referred.

On previous occasions when we have discussed joint or concurrent Committees—and I deal with both in the same way for the purposes of tonight's debate—we have rightly concerned ourselves with who presides over the Committee, the role of advisers and support staff and the procedures—those of the Commons or of the Lords; they are not necessarily the same—that will be followed. The quorum is crucial in tonight's debate. I am anxious to reach motion 7 because I really want to have a go at it. I have tabled an amendment on the quorum, and you will tell us later, Mr. Speaker, whether you have been kind enough to select it. I have become increasingly alarmed of late that the quorum that is set, especially for Select Committees, is inadequate to maintain their credibility.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman knows that the motion does not affect the quorum.

Mr. Forth: Indeed, and I regret that. I am grateful to you for pointing that out, Mr. Speaker, but I wish that the motion covered the quorum. Perhaps I should table a wee amendment to it; I accept the blame for not doing so. However, I learn as I go along. It has taken me nearly four years, but I am getting there. I shall try to do better next time.

Let us consider the extent to which the concurrently meeting Committee will be able to commit the House or another place to travel. On whose budget will it draw? It may be assumed that such matters are easily subsumed in the word "concurrently", but one has only to consider the brief list of who presides, the procedures and the quorum—I shall not go into that—and the travel and the budgetary arrangements to perceive the difficulty into which we may fall by accepting the motion in its current ill defined, or undefined, form. None of those matters are, therefore, satisfactorily dealt with, and we need the Minister's guidance on them.

A more fundamental question was raised by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East in his intervention, for which I am grateful, and I shall characterise it in the following way simply to move the debate along. What added value shall we get from joint or concurrent meetings? The assumption seems to be growing, of late, that a joint or concurrent meeting is automatically better than separate meetings of the Committees of the two Houses. I want to challenge that.

I want to challenge the whole basis on which the motion is predicated, because it assumes that the Committees will produce better results by meeting concurrently. I am not sure that we have yet convinced ourselves of that. The two Houses of Parliament have traditionally different roles. The House of Commons has its elected accountability and its Members' responsibility to their constituents, and we are often told that the House of Lords is the repository of expertise that is often not available in this House. One could, therefore, argue that a fusion of those two elements would produce a better result. I am not sure that that would necessarily be the case. Whether it would be the case in the important, focused area of science and technology is another matter.

Dr. Kumar: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that most of the members of the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology are scientists, former scientists and engineers? They therefore complement the Members of the House of Lords in building up its progress on the issues.

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman was trying to be helpful, but he has alarmed me considerably. If we are now faced with the prospect, as apparently we are, of a number of self-appointed experts sitting together concurrently, I shall be really worried. I was about to concede the point that some gifted amateurs from this House, with their elected accountability, and some experts from the other House, with their expertise but no accountability, might have provided added value. Now the hon. Gentleman has worried me, because he tells me that all the members of the concurrent Committee will be experts. I wonder whether there is, therefore, a real risk of a conflict of expertise.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Forth: Here is another one who is going to help me.

Dr. Gibson: The right hon. Gentleman will remember the debate on stem cell research. He sat in the Chamber

[Dr. Gibson]

and listened to expertise from both sides of the House. He probably also read what was said in the House of Lords on that issue. He was, I'am sure, persuaded by the technical expertise and scientific excellence of the arguments put forward on the Labour Benches in explaining the issues.

The right hon. Gentleman must understand that there are sincere people in the House of Commons who have some understanding of science. We recognise his expertise, although it fails me now to describe it. Labour Members must have persuaded Opposition Members that the arguments in the stem cell research debate were worth supporting. We can take science and technology forward to ensure that the United Kingdom is foremost in that area of endeavour.

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman's example is a relevant one. However, there is a problem. Of course, expertise has a role to play in many debates, although one wonders how many hon. Members—particularly on the Labour Benches—who participated in the debate on the Hunting Bill have ever been on a horse or chased a fox. I do not know the answer to that, just as I do not know how much expertise they were bringing to bear.

I shall pursue the hon. Gentleman's point. I query whether it would be of the greatest value that only people with expertise could legitimately participate in such a debate.

Dr. Gibson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Forth: I will give way in a moment.

Some of the contributions made during those debates arose from passion, conviction and a sense of moral values. Therefore, my point is that we must decide the relative role that we expect the Committee to play—first in terms of expertise and/or representation and, secondly, in terms of Commons and Lords.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way because there is a particular significance, which will certainly not have escaped you, Mr. Speaker, in the fact that the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) has intervened. Is my right hon. Friend aware that, as long ago as 28 November 1997, the hon. Gentleman made it clear that his judgments are based not in any way on scientific evidence but on his insatiable thirst for class struggle?

Mr. Forth: Well, I am of course grateful to my hon. Friend, but I do not know whether matters of class or struggle came into the hon. Gentleman's consideration of stem cell research.

Mr. Bercow: They came into his consideration of hunting.

Mr. Forth: On this matter, I shall give the hon. Gentleman the benefit of the doubt.

I do not want to be diverted or deterred in any way from my central and focused purpose, which is to try to bring to the attention of the House the question whether joint or, as the motion says, concurrent, meetings of Committees of the Commons and the Lords would give better value to the taxpayer. That is an open question that has yet to be proven. What worries me is that, time and again, we plough on with the assumption that such an approach is better. The Minister said in his opening remarks, for which I am grateful, that the Chairman of the Committee is apparently very keen on such a development, but I look in vain for the Chairman of the Committee. I do not see him.

Mr. Tipping: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will accept that the Chairman sends his apologies. I know from personal discussions with him that he is extremely keen for the motion to be passed. I am sure that he will read the right hon. Gentleman's words with great interest.

Mr. Forth: Well, I am impressed—I really am—by the Minister saying that a Member of the House who is so keen on the motion sends his apologies.

Dr. Gibson: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it would be better for a Joint Committee to go to Porton Down tomorrow to consider issues of great purport to many people in this nation, and perhaps even some in his constituency, than for two Committees to undertake consideration independently?

Mr. Forth: No, I do not accept that. The hon. Gentleman is making the same assertion—I shall not call it a mistake. He is simply saying, as a matter of fact, that surely it is better for two Committees to travel together and consider the same issues together. I do not necessarily agree with that proposition. That is the point that I am trying to make, although it is obvious that I shall have to labour it further to impress him and his colleagues.

I put a proposition to the hon. Gentleman and to the House: the two Committees, rather than travelling together, could sit separately and under different chairmanship, use different staffs, consider the same proposition from different perspectives and reach more valid conclusions in their different ways. If that were not the case, it would be logical to merge all the Committees of the two Houses to achieve the improvement or added value that has been suggested.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): The right hon. Gentleman believes in this place passionately, but does he recall that, only a matter of days ago, the House passed by 486 votes to three a motion to establish with the Lords a Joint Committee on Human Rights? I presume that he was among the three. Against such a background, does not he think that he is a little out of touch?

Mr. Forth: Well, no. The 400 were out of touch with me. I try to be consistent in these matters and I recall that I was indeed one of the three. On human rights, I argued on a similar basis and for similar reasons that I doubted the validity of the approach, as I do in this case. It occurs to me, as it did in connection with human rights—perhaps, if anything, even more than in connection with this—that the perspective that might be brought to this matter from another place could, legitimately, be very different from the perspective from which it might be viewed here, and that therefore the two Committees might reach differing conclusions.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): There is, of course, a strong argument for suggesting that the Select

Committee on Science and Technology should be part and parcel of the Trade and Industry Committee, given that the DTI is the Department in which the Committee should interest itself. Is it not significant that tomorrow there will be a debate on a Trade and Industry Committee report on space policy? Many would assume that that was a science and technology matter.

Mr. Forth: I do not want to become involved in a discussion of that kind at this stage, because I suspect that, in a sense, the question is settled by our Standing Orders, to which I referred at the beginning of my remarks. However, what my hon. Friend has said is relevant in one respect.

Let us examine the wording of the part of the motion that deals with—if I can put it like this without sounding disrespectful—the Lords end of things. It is proposed that meetings should take place concurrently with

"any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof".

In that context, my hon. Friend's point is highly relevant. Although we can be clear in our own minds about the role played at this end of the building by our Committee, governed by our Standing Orders, real doubts must arise about exactly which other Committee will "meet concurrently" with our Committee, and under what auspices and what chairmanship it will meet.

Mr. Bercow: Is it not intellectually unsatisfactory, to put it mildly, for the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) to cite a much earlier vote in support of the passage of motion 6? Does my right hon. Friend agree that Conservative Members, at least, subscribe to Johnson's view that right rather than fashion should prevail?

Mr. Forth: Of course I subscribe to that view; and, much as I normally admire precedent, which I think has an important role to play in our affairs, the reference by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston simply to a vote on what on the face of it seemed to be a similar matter is not in itself conclusive. *[Interruption.]*

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston says, from a sedentary position—I do not often report such remarks, but in this case I think it rather helpful—that it was the will of the House. Yes, on that occasion it was: as he has reminded us, 400 Members voted the wrong way and three of us voted the right way. But that concerned an entirely different matter, namely a Joint Committee on Human Rights. That, in all conscience, can hardly be seen in the same light as a very much more focused Committee on science and technology. I am sure the hon. Gentleman's colleagues would agree that such a Committee must necessarily take a very different view of things, and must have a different methodology, different procedures and different expertise.

Liz Blackman (Erewash): I should be interested to know whether the right hon. Gentleman sought the opinions of any Conservative members of the Science and Technology Committee before speaking tonight.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful for that question. I hoped that members of the Committee would take the trouble to be present.

Dr. Gibson: Where is the Chairman?

Mr. Forth: Will the hon. Gentleman contain himself for a moment?

The hon. Member for Erewash (Liz Blackman) made a perfectly reasonable point. I should have been happier if, following the Minister's courteous opening remarks, Conservative Committee members had been present to show their support for the motion, and to explain why they considered it to be of value. In their absence, I must speculate, and I find myself in a difficult position. I agree that this is unfortunate, and to that extent I agree with the hon. Lady. She said, quite reasonably, that the debate would have been helped by positive contributions—in addition to those of the Minister—explaining much more fully why the proposal was a good idea. If that had happened I might not have had to speak at all, which, as you know, Mr. Speaker, would have helped things along quite a bit. In the absence of any Conservative Committee member being prepared to make a contribution to the debate, all we can do is to speculate, despite the fact that the Minister did his best to give a brief outline of why the motion was to be supported.

Liz Blackman: We have very little time, but given the fact—

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That, for the current Session of Parliament, Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 37, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 46, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 48, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Motion made,

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

LANGUAGE OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCEEDINGS

Motion made,

That—

(1) this House approves the First Report from the Procedure Committee, Session 2000–2001 (HC 47); and

(2) the Resolution of 5th June 1996 on the Language of Parliamentary Proceedings be amended accordingly by inserting, after the word 'Wales,', the words 'and at Westminster in respect of Select Committees'.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Regeneration (Falmouth and Camborne)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

10 pm

Ms Candy Atherton (Falmouth and Camborne): As Members of Parliament, we are in a privileged position to see the wider view of what is happening in our constituencies. That is why I sought the debate. Few are privileged to see the big picture as we do. It is worth looking at in some detail in my constituency.

Every hon. Member knows by now, I hope, that Cornwall has major structural problems in its economy. Indeed, that is one reason that we won objective 1 status nearly two years ago, but the situation is changing and it is time that the House and the wider country woke up to that fact.

In the past, my constituency boasted the richest square mile in the world, as the area basked in the warmth of a strong tin price. One hundred plus years later, some parts are among the poorest in the country. Tin mining, farming, fishing have all suffered from a massive decline in recent years.

There can be no doubt that the latter two industries still face structural changes and difficulties. There was genuine shock and dismay when the last tin mine in Europe closed at South Crofty. People saw that as the end, but life moves on. It is now time for the county to stand up and to hold its head up high because, as the song goes, "The Times They Are A-changing."

I hope to sketch out some of the ways in which my constituency is moving forward and to tell the Government that those are areas that will need help. To industry, I say, "Get involved and build for the future." To some in the county who either choose not to look or do not look, I say, "Things really are getting better. Open your eyes and see."

Let us look at some facts. Unemployment in my constituency has fallen by 33 per cent. since the general election. Last month's fall was the biggest recorded in all the Cornish constituencies. Youth unemployment has fallen by two thirds. My constituency is the industrial heartland of Cornwall. The Falmouth-Penryn and Camborne-Redruth areas both offer great potential for Cornwall's economic resurgence and are our most under-used assets.

The Government's efforts to help Cornwall have been considerable. Objective 1 status was won for Cornwall through the collective efforts of many, but critically through the intervention of the Prime Minister. Since then, the Government have committed themselves to match fund objective 1. With the involvement of the private sector, that programme could be worth up to £1 billion to the county in the next six years.

The Government have protected Cornish jobs. CompAir Holman, which used to be Camborne's principal employer, received a £5 million Government grant two years ago to help it to remain in business in the town, saving literally hundreds of jobs. Cornish Yarg cheese is produced in my constituency using local farmers' milk and employing local people. Regional selective assistance was critical in getting that scheme off the ground and the cheese on to our plates at Westminster.

Cornwall has assisted area status, an education action zone in the Redruth and Camborne area, a health action zone and record capital investment in our schools. A long list of initiatives is equipping Cornwall for the future. Only this week, the Government have confirmed an additional £3.6 million for Kerrier district council, including Redruth, Camborne, Penryn and St. Ives, over the next three years through the neighbourhood renewal fund. That provision is a recognition that the area contains some of our most deprived communities. The minimum wage and the working families tax credit have started to tackle poverty pay. That is a turnaround from the past.

Cornwall had become very used to being let down, time and time again, under the previous Tory Government. By 1997, good news had become something of a shock to the Cornish system. Indeed, the tradition in Cornwall after 18 years of Tory Government is to expect the worst. However, Cornwall has always had a much-loved and unique cultural identity, and it is now constructing a new economic identity for the future, building on that cultural heritage.

I do not believe that we should turn our back on our traditional industries—far from it. Under one recent proposal, the prime sites for mining would be identified and protected for possible use in the future, when we could be confident that the industry could be profitable again. However, over-reliance on struggling industries would be myopic. We must build on traditional strengths and adapt them for the future.

There are several specific examples of what is being done and what can be done.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Atherton: Yes, but very briefly.

Mr. George: Is the hon. Lady aware that, today, as I understand it, Baseresult completed its purchase of South Crofty mine, although the regional development agency had proposed compulsorily purchasing the site and not to use it for mining? Does she welcome the fact that, because of the purchase, mining may continue there in the years ahead?

Ms Atherton: I also heard in the media that Baseresult may have completed its purchase. That is obviously interesting news and will be welcomed by many people in the county. However, I ask the hon. Gentleman to wait a little longer, as I shall deal in my speech with all the different options and opportunities to which my constituents can look forward.

This afternoon, I led a delegation of representatives from the renewable energies sector to meet the new Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, although he has barely got his feet under the table. The renewable energies industry generates more than £10 million annually in the region. The hope is to increase that to £50 million in five years, making Cornwall the green equivalent of silicon valley. That is not far-fetched.

Cornwall has a rich history in the earth sciences, including the Camborne school of mines and the hot rocks project. One of Mrs. Thatcher's great acts of vandalism was to cancel the hot rocks project. Given the world's increasing search for new and cleaner technologies,

her shortsightedness can only be marvelled at. Cancelling that project has certainly cost the United Kingdom and Cornwall dear. Fortunately, however, companies such as Geoscience—which is in my constituency and whose representatives attended today's meeting—have struggled to ensure that all was not lost.

I want everyone to be clear about this. We are talking not about more wind farms in Cornwall, but about exporting technology and renewable energies to the millions, if not billions of people around the world who are seeking new, clean power.

Another local company, Seacore—its representatives also attended today's meeting—is developing such clean power technology through its design of offshore turbines for export internationally. The Government have been supportive thus far. I hope that their support will continue so as to ensure that a genuine cluster of companies is nurtured. A new, green energy park is under construction near Redruth, and I had the pleasure of cutting the first sod in the project. The park utilises the technology of our Cornish earth sciences.

National television often uses pictures of west-end Redruth and Camborne to depict the county's run-down aspects, but they should come and see the revamped west-end drapery stores, which for a generation were left derelict and were a town eyesore. Now, it and other parts of the town are completely rebuilt, providing new homes, jobs and communities.

I received a letter from a constituent in Camborne earlier this week. He wrote:

"The town's spirit has risen, and someone remarked to me that there is hardly an empty shop in the town. We are moving in the right direction."

He is absolutely right. The town centres of Redruth and Camborne are already being regenerated.

The RDA has massive plans for the Camborne, Pool and Redruth area. It is being suggested that the plans—currently out for consultation in the community—will mean that the area will no longer be classed as the poor end of Cornwall.

I am a member of the board working to fulfil the dream of a new community. It consists of representatives from local authorities, local enterprise agencies, the objective 1 fund, the Prince's Trust, local companies, the Government office of the south-west, and the RDA.

I am delighted that the RDA has chosen the area as one of the five top sites in the wider region. That is a sign, visible from Camborne to Westminster and all points in between, that a line has been drawn. The message is, "This area must be regenerated." The people deserve it.

That is not to say that I do not have concerns. Chief among them is that this proposal should be effectively managed and that it will protect Cornwall's unique heritage. I am concerned that the local and national consultants really do consult with local people, and that they talk to people at the local recreation centre, Carn Brea, of which I am a trustee.

I am proud to say that I reopened the centre on behalf of the trust, after its closure by the local council. The council wrongly believed it to be uneconomic, but today 6,500 people use the centre every week and it flourishes. If new leisure facilities are to be developed, I would argue that their development must go hand in hand with the Carn Brea trust and the local community.

There are a number of proposals for the heart of the Pool area. One company wants to mine some tin and use the mine for pumping paste backfill. We would all love to see economic tin mining back in Cornwall, but there are genuine concerns about possible pollutants from an energy plant in the heart of a community of some 45,000 people.

Another group wishes to build Cornwall's equivalent of the Eiffel tower to commemorate that great Cornishman, Richard Trevithick. Meanwhile, the RDA proposals incorporate new clean technologies, the greening of the whole area, and the possibility of thousands of new jobs. All of these schemes are out for discussion. I believe that local people, and not just those who shout the loudest, must be heard in the consultations. All the facts must be on the table so that local people can study them and make their choice.

I am talking about the regeneration of my constituency, and the focus is often on the towns. However, our villages are benefiting too. Four Lanes is a model for regeneration, as are the mining villages of St. Day—my own village—Carharrack and Gwennap. Local people are taking a lead. When Cornwall stops using such villages as landfill dumps, they will be even better.

Improvements are apparent not only in the economy and they include programmes such as sure start, which helps children of three years of age and upwards by tackling poverty before they go to school. They also include our education and health action zones, which assist our schoolchildren through to adulthood. In effect, such programmes ensure that our young people are getting the best possible start in life.

A major initiative is our plan for the combined universities of Cornwall, which builds on our current strengths at the school of mines and the Falmouth school of arts. The project has received substantial help from the Government and the regional development agency. It will be crucial in developing intellectual wealth for the county, and will generate economic wealth in years to come. I am delighted that much of the university will be sited in my constituency. The hub will be at the new Tremough campus in Penryn, while the rim or access points—such as the business school in Pool—will be elsewhere.

In the mean time, in Falmouth and Penryn, regeneration continues apace. The fabulous small boats collection of Greenwich, which is to be housed in the new Falmouth maritime museum, is growing daily. The sea will flow in and out of the building, perched, as it is, on the quay in Falmouth. I am told that it will rival the Sydney opera house. Although I feel that that might slightly overstate the case, with the magnificent Eden project up the road and the Tate at St. Ives just down the road, there is much to attract visitors to the county all year round—a fillip to the Cornish tourist industry that employs 10 per cent. of our work force.

I am hopeful that we will be able to rebuild a new Falmouth docks that will bring together companies from across my constituency involved in high-tech maritime work. Pendennis shipyard has won international acclaim as a designer, builder and renovator of fabulous yachts. It also designed and built the Lords media centre which looks like a yacht hull tipped 90 degrees.

Last week, Sir Michael Lickiss, chairman of the regional development agency, visited the Falmouth docks at my invitation and met some of those who are

[Ms Atherton]

developing plans for the future—a high-tech maritime park based on the historic docks. A feasibility study has just been completed, and everyone agrees that to do nothing is not an option. Again, it is our wish to develop a cluster of high-tech business and industry, creating quality, high-skill employment.

I hope that with a fair wind from the landowners, support from the RDA and the Government, and with all the companies assisting, we can rebuild the Falmouth docks to make them a maritime park that could be the envy of the world.

That is just one example of how skills and intellectual wealth can delivery prosperity for Cornwall. Many of the issues that the Government have sought to push forward—the knowledge economy, research and development, information and communications technology—offer so much to Cornwall. It is vital that support for ICT is rolled out from the existing concentration in the south-east.

Transport is critical to all these plans. I am very pleased that the Government have finally allowed progress on the vexed question of the A30, including its infamous bottleneck at Goss Moor. The rail network in Cornwall must also be developed. If our plans for the Falmouth-Penryn area are to succeed, we need to invest in the Falmouth and Truro branch line, serving the docks and the university. I take this opportunity to ask the Minister to make her views known to companies proposing to take away our high-speed trains and send them to Wales. That is absolutely scandalous, and is viewed with dismay right across Cornwall.

We must also ensure that many of the ideas are not shipwrecked by over-zealous interpretation of funding rules. It is very important that funds are administered properly but, equally, that they reach local partnerships as quickly as possible and enable theory to be put into practice.

There are other risks, of course. Almost all these initiatives depend on the involvement of the south-west RDA, which the Tories—whom I notice are absent tonight—want to abolish. All our plans for the future would be under threat, as the money would not be there to regenerate these communities.

I have sketched just a few of the projects that are going ahead in my constituency. Change is happening apace. I am proud of what is happening—things really have got better. I am grateful to all those who have worked so hard to make the Falmouth and Camborne constituency a better place for all the people to live in.

10.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) on securing the debate and on the passionate and sincere speech that she made about partnership working by all the agencies, with Government, in support of regeneration in her constituency. She said much—it was like a helpful case study—about how Government mainstream policies such as back to work, new deal, training for young people and education for very young children can kickstart change. When Government mainstream policies and local regeneration policies are linked with regional and local activity, and there is pressure from local Members of Parliament, they can act as a catalyst for regeneration. Significant changes can then take place.

I am grateful for what my hon. Friend said about Government assistance and its role in the regeneration of Cornwall. What she could not mention was the role that she has played. She is well known for the assiduous way in which she has pursued Ministers—I say that in the nicest possible way, because it is what all hon. Members should be doing. Testimony to that is her meeting this afternoon with a very new Energy Minister to discuss that industry in Cornwall. She has pursued Ministers up to the highest level to ensure that her area and Cornwall in general get as much as possible—indeed, what they undoubtedly deserve—from the Government.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for recognising what the Government can do, and I put on record the invaluable role that she has played to ensure that Ministers are aware of the problems. She has assiduously pressed again and again for resources to be allocated and action to be taken.

I too am delighted that we were able to secure objective 1 for Cornwall and Scilly, which will bring in around £315 million in the next seven years. As my hon. Friend recognised, that represents a unique opportunity to help turn around Cornwall's economy.

The programme has had an encouraging start. It has been only five months since it was launched, but even so projects to the value of £13 million have been approved. They include—

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): Not a penny has been spent.

Ms Hughes: Many Liberal Democrat Members do not have any experience of Government or of local administration. If they had such experience, they would know that to have approved projects to that value in five months is an incredible feat in its own right—to spend it takes a little longer, but I have no doubt that it will be done and that it will be spent wisely.

Some of the projects include, in the Falmouth and Camborne constituency, the new £4 million Tolvaddon energy park for environmental technology businesses, which is under construction by the regional development agency. In addition, projects to the value of more than £75 million are undergoing appraisal. That is an incredibly fast start to ensure that all those resources get where they are supposed to be. If all those projects were approved, 16 per cent. of the European Union funds available would have been committed to projects, which is commendable.

My hon. Friend mentioned the RDA's investment in Falmouth and Camborne. As she said, the Camborne, Pool and Redruth area is the RDA's first priority for regeneration in Cornwall—one of only five such priority areas in the south-west. Current RDA commitments in the area total about £10 million of investment, including the £4 million energy park project.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions saw at first hand during her visit to Cornwall in the summer of last year work to put the heart back into Redruth town centre, including the West End stores and Alma place projects to transform derelict buildings into social housing and a new Cornish studies centre.

The RDA is also investing £6 million in the Falmouth maritime project that my hon. Friend mentioned, to create a major tourist facility on the waterfront, including a new flagship building for the National Maritime museum and the Cornwall Maritime museum.

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) rightly mentioned the RDA involvement in the area. What is the Government's attitude to the proposals to reopen South Crofty mine by Baseresult and to the RDA's opposition to that proposal?

Ms Hughes: As I understand it, Baseresult wants initially to develop a waste-to-energy plant, using the mine to dispose of the power station ash and debris, later possibly reopening part of the tin-mining operation. As the hon. Gentleman says, there are alternative possibilities for the area—one of which was proposed by the RDA. What is important is the point made by my hon. Friend: the views of local people on those alternatives should be canvassed assiduously and should form part of the overall and final decision on what may happen at South Crofty.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Is the Minister saying, on behalf of the Government, that no option is ruled out?

Ms Hughes: On behalf of the Government, I am saying that we will have to see what develops. As we do so, the views of local people will be an important part of the process.

I am delighted that the RDA is working in partnership with the local authorities, the Prince's Trust and others through the Camborne, Pool and Redruth partnership board—of which, I understand, my hon. Friend is also a member—to plan strategically for the future regeneration of that area. Early proposals by consultants are currently the subject of local public consultation—rightly so.

My hon. Friend mentioned the innovative combined universities of Cornwall project. The collaborative approach taken by the higher and further education institutions through that initiative for developing higher education in the county is exceptional. The CUC has recently submitted a business plan, which—as my hon. Friend knows—has been endorsed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England as a sound and realistic way forward that it and other funders can treat with confidence. I understand that HEFCE has agreed to contribute just over £2.3 million to working capital, and has responded positively in the past two years to joint bids for additional funded student places in Cornwall.

That is another example of the way in which regeneration must be conducted at several levels in order to be sustainable and to have an impact that will continue over time. Important as jobs are, regeneration is not just about jobs or about money; it is about making sure that we invest in the people of an area, providing them with the opportunities to pursue economic development.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, we announced that the Kerrier district is one of four areas in the south-west that will benefit from the neighbourhood renewal fund to help improve housing, raise school standards, reduce crime and improve health. That fund, too, will play an important part in the Government's and Cornwall's wider strategy for improving prosperity. There will be a total of £3.6 million, with just under £1 million—together with this year's settlement—to begin the process.

The Department of Trade and Industry has made 27 offers of regional selective assistance grant, totalling £8.5 million, towards an investment of more than £29 million by companies to create and safeguard more than 1,100 valuable jobs in west Cornwall. That is another important element.

My hon. Friend referred to the renewable energy industry in Cornwall. We welcome recognition that the sector provides opportunities for growth in Cornwall.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): Does my hon. Friend also give credit to my hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) for her support for the Wainstone power station application? That will mean a great deal to her constituents. I know that, in Devon, it will result in a rise in the gross domestic product per person of £180 a year. I hope that it will bring the same result to Cornwall.

Ms Hughes: I was not aware of that achievement, but it is an important ingredient in the development of the renewable energy industry in Cornwall. I am sure that the meetings that my hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne held today will help to develop that.

In conclusion, the Government are fully committed to working in partnership with communities in Falmouth, Camborne and Redruth to deliver economic and social regeneration. As we have heard, the area is already the focus of a range of regeneration and economic development programmes. Gratifyingly, significant progress is already evident. My hon. Friend outlined the reduction in unemployment—especially among young people. Various indicators demonstrate that progress. That shows the added value that we can obtain from partnership—where Government programmes, regional and local authority activity and especially MPs, together with local people, can effect significant change. I am sure that my hon. Friend will continue—

The motion having been made at Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, Mr. Speaker *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at half-past Ten o'clock.

Deferred Division

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Re-rating and National Insurance Funds Payments) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 30th November, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 382, Noes 138.

Division No. 93]

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Desmore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*

O'Hara, Eddie
Oliner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Question accordingly agreed to.

House of Commons

Thursday 1 February 2001

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL (BY ORDER)

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be further considered on Thursday 8 February.

Oral Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

The Minister was asked—

Farm Diversification

1. **Barbara Follett** (Stevenage): What support he is giving to farm business diversification projects. [146775]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): The England rural development programme supports our diversification policies through the £152 million that is behind the rural enterprise scheme. That money will be made available over the next seven years. There are also processing and marketing grants, the vocational training scheme, the energy crops scheme and tree-planting schemes. In addition, the action plan for farming provides for new farm business advice services that offer business health checks for those farmers who want them. It significantly supports diversification opportunities. We are also producing a free guide to on-farm diversification and, on top of that, we aim to make available free planning advice to farmers pursuing diversification under the rural enterprise scheme.

The rural White Paper contains a number of extra innovations on planning that will help diversification, and we have consulted on providing time-limited rate reliefs for farmers who wish to diversify into non-farming activities.

Barbara Follett: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply and, in particular, for his remarks on the planning process. Is he aware that many farmers, including Mr. Owen of Mansell farm, Codicote, in my constituency, find the planning process too long and too costly to make such diversification practical?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend makes a good point. When farmers consider diversification, they may not have the economic wherewithal to put behind a planning application, with all the professional costs that that entails. I hope that it will be possible to help my hon. Friend's constituent with the free planning advice that we now offer, but I would like the planning rules to be more compatible with our objectives for farm diversification. Discussions between my Department and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions are taking place to pursue that objective.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Can the Minister tell us more about the way in which the proposals will affect people setting up riding stables on farms? Although we welcome the opportunities for farmers to be able to diversify, several people who are not farmers have contacted me. They run riding stables and they fear that they will be placed at a competitive disadvantage. Will the Minister ensure that whatever grants and help are available to farmers are equally available to those who specialise in running riding stables?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue, and that is why the issue of help for farmers who make use of diversification measures is out for consultation. He is right that diversifying into businesses that offer equestrian sports is one possible way forward. People considering diversification look to what public support is available, whereas those who are already in the sector worry about the competitive impact on their businesses. He is right to raise this point; it explains why the issue is out for consultation.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): Would the free business service that the Government have set up for farmers also extend to issues such as farmers markets and farm box schemes? They have been profitable for many farmers, especially small hill farmers such as those in my constituency.

Mr. Brown: It is certainly possible for the farmers who make use of the free business advice—after all, the Government are paying for it—to explore whether it would be practical to go into farm box schemes or other on-farm enterprises. That is one way forward. It is not the answer to every farmer's current difficulties, but it is a useful way of getting more money through farm-based businesses, and one that it is perfectly proper to explore with business advisers.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): The Minister announced 10 months ago in his action plan that £6.5 million would be available for farm business advice services to help farmers to improve their businesses and planning, and to diversify. Yet by Christmas only 2 per cent.—£130,000—of that money had been spent. Can he tell us how much he expects will have been spent by the end of March? Will the underspend be rolled forward into the next financial year, or do we add that to the £26 million that he told us last time would probably be lost to the pig industry?

Mr. Brown: It is my intention that every penny of the £66 million that was allocated to the pig industry scheme over three years will be spent on the pig industry. Although I cannot announce the outcome now, discussions are taking place in Government that are designed to achieve that objective. I know, for what it is

worth, that I have the hon. Gentleman's support in trying to achieve that objective. *[Interruption.]* Let me finish my answer.

Precisely the same point applies to the farm business advice scheme. If it is not possible to spend the budget in this financial year, I want to carry forward the allocated money into the next financial year and, possibly, following years.

Every Member who has been a Minister understands the nature of discussions about end-of-year flexibility and carrying budgets forward. There are issues to be discussed with the Treasury, but I make it absolutely clear to the House that I aim to ensure that the money that was made available at the Prime Minister's March summit is spent on the objectives for which it was allocated.

Organic Farming

2. **Mrs. Diana Organ** (Forest of Dean): What the Government's budget is for research and development into organic farming; and what it was in 1997. [146777]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): The Government have progressively increased the budget for research into organic farming from £1.1 million in 1997-98 to the present figure of £2.1 million. In addition, as part of the action plan for farming, £2.3 million has been allocated to establish the European centre for organic fruit and nursery stock at Horticulture Research International, in Kent.

Mrs. Organ: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. If the development of organic farming is to be successful, Government budgets must be administered efficiently and effectively. What would he say to my constituent, Mrs. Ravenshill of Birdwood, an excellent cheese producer who missed the support scheme for conversion by a few days and was debarred because her certificate from the Organic Trade Association came two and a half months after her application?

Mr. Morley: We have increased the budget for organic conversion and reopened the scheme with an additional £18 million for this year. Following the review of the scheme's working, we have, as part of that increase, formally accepted into the scheme people who have started conversion up to three months before they apply. We have now doubled that window of application to six months, so if my hon. Friend's constituent applied within that six months, she can now apply for the conversion grant.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): The Minister will be aware that when consumers buy organic food they often attribute certain characteristics to it. He will be aware also that often there is no scientific basis that would validate the claims that the consumer makes but which the producer knows cannot be made. Should it not be a purpose of the research to try to lay a sound scientific foundation for the qualities of organic food, so that there is no eventual disillusion and consumers do not think that they are being taken for a ride, going voluntarily for a ride, or simply buying expensive food?

Mr. Morley: The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that no one has a right to make claims about any food which are not validated by science. The organic organisations know that very well, and I know that the question was addressed in the right hon. Gentleman's thorough and well researched report from the Select Committee on Agriculture. We assist in a variety of research into organic farming, and the Government recognise that there is clearly established research showing that organic farming offers certain environmental benefits. There is much less indication from research that it has benefits for the food itself. If organic bodies feel that there are such advantages, they can commission research to try to justify their claims.

Ms Debra Shipley (Stourbridge): Does my hon. Friend accept that my constituents want the choice of organic food? Will he join me in welcoming the twentyfold increase in funding for organic conversion since the Conservatives were in power? My constituents definitely want such funding because they want a choice of food.

Mr. Morley: I certainly accept what my hon. Friend says. In the five years leading up to our review of the organic scheme, about 400 farmers converted to organic production within five years; in the last year alone, 1,800 farmers have converted. The Government are committed to supporting consumer choice and those farmers who want to diversify their business by taking advantage of the organic market.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): In view of the concerns of many organic farmers about the threat to the integrity of their produce from neighbouring genetically modified crops, will the Government guarantee that the commercial planting of such crops will not be allowed until English Nature, the Government's statutory adviser on nature conservation, has confirmed that they are environmentally safe?

Mr. Morley: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, there is a three-year moratorium on the commercial planting of genetically modified crops. That is to evaluate the potential impact on the environment, along with other matters, which is being carefully and independently researched. The Government have made it clear that if there is evidence of problems, we will reconsider the length of the commercial moratorium.

Stewardship Agreements

3. **Joan Ruddock** (Lewisham, Deptford): What plans he has to increase the area of farmed land subject to countryside stewardship agreements. [146778]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food announced a substantial increase in the countryside stewardship budget in December 1999. As part of the England rural development programme, £500 million is allocated to the scheme over the

seven-year period 2000-06. Each year, we will be accepting roughly double the number of applications that we did in 1999.

Joan Ruddock: May I tell my hon. Friend how important the countryside stewardship scheme is to those of us who live in cities and who greatly value the conservation of landscape and wildlife in rural areas? Will he confirm that spending under this Government on such schemes has trebled? Will he also confirm that, in terms of public support for farmers, it is further proof, if any were needed, that the Tory party can no longer claim to be the friend of the farmer?

Mr. Morley: I can certainly confirm my hon. Friend's point. The budget has increased by the amount that she claims. That demonstrates the Government's commitment to the countryside, to the people who live and work there and to the taxpayer, who pays for the schemes. The schemes are good news for all our objectives. My hon. Friend may be interested to know that, compared with 1996-97, when spending on countryside stewardship was £10.9 million, by 2006-07, under our projected budget, the Government will be spending £126 million. That will be more than a tenfold increase—a commitment to the countryside unlike that of the previous Administration.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): As the Minister who had the privilege of launching the countryside stewardship scheme, I am delighted that progress is being made. However, will the Minister tell us when the backlog of payments under existing schemes will be cleared?

Mr. Morley: I was discussing that very point — ensuring that payments are made to those who are part of the countryside stewardship and environmentally sensitive area schemes—in one of the regional service centres yesterday. There has been a computer problem. I understand that it has been largely resolved, and that the vast majority of payments are now being made.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): May I tell my hon. Friend that throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s I had the good fortune to live in a house that overlooked open countryside in which hedgerows were a prominent feature? However, they were steadily uprooted as a result of farm practices and the inducements of the then Governments. Is my hon. Friend confident that the countryside stewardship scheme, which I believe has restored about 6,000 miles of hedgerow, will continue even further to reverse the tragic losses of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s?

Mr. Morley: I am confident of that. Farmers have been taking advantage of the countryside stewardship scheme and have been restoring hedgerows. Many have been planted over recent years. As my hon. Friend rightly said, about 6,000 miles of hedgerow have been reinstated. The advantage of stewardship is that we can adapt it to changing circumstances. We have introduced the new arable stewardship pilot scheme. The increasing budget means that we can further extend various aspects of the scheme, to the advantage both of those who live in the countryside and of those who want to see it protected.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): What can the Minister say to the Hosking brothers of South Hams, who have been turned down once again for countryside stewardship funding, despite exemplary farming practices which they have pursued for many years? Does he agree that the focus on paying for improvements in standards rather than on standards themselves has real disadvantages for conscientious farmers who have taken it upon themselves to engage in best practice to meet environmental standards? Would not such farmers be better off if they had bulldozed their hedges, ploughed up pastures, filled in ponds, and then applied for funds to repair the damage?

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman has a point. It is true that the priority of the scheme is to reinstate lost habitats and introduce features that have been lost. It is right to have priorities, and I am sure that Members would accept that we need to get maximum gains from the budget in relation to the benefits that the scheme is paying for. However, I accept the hon. Gentleman's point that conscientious farmers, many of whom have kept important environmental, wildlife and landscape features because they are committed to conservation, are at a disadvantage owing to the way in which the scheme works.

The priority can be justified, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that, in 2003, we are having a mid-term review of such schemes and the way they operate. That is an opportunity to look at how we can address problems of that kind, bearing in mind the fact that, under this Government, there will be a continually rising spend on the budget for those schemes.

Dairy Supply Chain

4. **Mr. Eric Martlew** (Carlisle): What steps he is taking to improve co–operation in the dairy supply chain.

[146779]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): The Government encourage all involved in the dairy industry to work together to bring about an improvement in the dairy supply chain. Last November we set up the milk taskforce as part of the Government's action plan for the long-term development of agriculture. It is seeking to identify methods of beneficial collaboration along the supply chain, from the milk producer through to the retailer and consumer.

Mr. Martlew: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. When I visit the Nestlé creamery in my constituency tomorrow, I am bound to be asked why there is still a ban on the export of dairy products to Saudi Arabia when there is no justification for it. I should be grateful if the Government informed us of progress on that. There is no doubt that farmers in my constituency and throughout the country are not getting a fair price for their milk at present. Will my right hon. Friend tell us what the Government are doing to achieve co-operation between dairy farmers and retailers to ensure that the dairy farmers get a decent price and the retailers remain competitive?

Ms Quin: I recognise my hon. Friend's concerns about the position of dairy farmers in his area and the concerns that he raised about the unjustified Saudi ban on dairy

products from this country, and, indeed, from other countries in the European Union. On the Saudi ban, we have made repeated representations to the Saudi Government: the ban has no basis in science and has certainly not been justified by the Saudis in relation to any risk analysis.

The most recent contact was made by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade, who discussed the issue on a visit to Riyadh in January. We will continue to press the issue. The fact that the Saudis have recently extended the ban in the wake of BSE concerns in the European Union is not helping, but we will continue to make the case, which, we believe, is extremely powerful. Encouraging co-operation and collaboration in the dairy supply chain is an important issue, and the taskforce that I mentioned is to report by the end of March.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): While the Minister talks about reviews and taskforces, is she aware that, over the last 12 months, the income of dairy farmers has dropped by 21 per cent.? Is she aware that 16 per cent. of all dairy farms have gone out of business since her Government came to power? Is she also aware that, from 1998 to June 1999, more than 5,000 dairy farm workers left the industry? Does she not realise that under her stewardship, the dairy chain has been broken?

Ms Quin: The dairy chain has certainly not been broken; I listed the number of measures that, by contrast with the previous Government, we have taken to encourage collaboration in that chain. I do not underestimate in any way the difficulties facing dairy farmers. None the less, Government have introduced a large number of measures, including the abolition of dairy hygiene inspection charges, agrimonetary compensation—which we gave in full to dairy producers—securing the retention of the school milk subsidy, and removing the weight limit on cattle over 30 months old. All those things were urged on us by dairy farmers, and we have responded positively to them.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): My right hon. Friend will know that the industry has faced major changes since the demise of the Milk Marketing Board, Milk Marque, and subsequently. Does she feel that the industry is now in a position to go for high value-added milk and dairy products to meet the needs of consumers in this country, thus ensuring that milk producers get the best value for their milk?

Ms Quin: My hon. Friend highlights an important issue. There are now encouraging signs regarding the organisation of the market and the response given by some of the companies to the challenges imposed on them by the findings of the Competition Commission. I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has said that the companies could become involved in processing, as such involvement is an important means of adding value to products in the way that my hon. Friend mentioned.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): What will the Minister do to encourage co-operation in dairying? Dairy Crest has salami-sliced jobs in west Wales and Cardiff, where 550 jobs have been lost from the industry. A plant lies empty in Whitland, although it could perfectly well sustain the jobs. Will she please help the dairy industry to restore those jobs and to make organic and environmentally friendly products in Wales?

Ms Quin: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the initiative for some of those matters lies primarily with the Secretary for Agricultural and Rural Development in the Welsh Assembly. I assure him that the Government discuss the dairy sector in meetings with devolved Ministers, in order to share ideas and to encourage greater collaboration on the dairy supply chain throughout the United Kingdom. The rural development scheme contains a number of measures that are of interest to the dairy industry and which it should consider. Currently, however, price is the main issue. Despite some recent and welcome increases, prices remain depressed for dairy producers.

Common Fisheries Policy

5. **Mr. Ronnie Campbell** (Blyth Valley): What his priorities are for the 2002 review of the common fisheries policy. [146780]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): The Government wish to see the maintenance of key features of the present arrangements such as national quotas based on relative stability and access restrictions within national six and 12-mile limits. At the same time, we want to secure improvements to make the CFP a more effective instrument for conserving fish stocks. That includes enhancing the regional dimension, integrating environmental considerations more fully and reducing discards.

Mr. Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Will he give a commitment to fishermen that no other countries will fish in the no-fishing zones? Our fishermen are a bit cheesed off, as we keep to every dot and comma of European law, while our competitors—our partners, I should say—are flouting it to their advantage.

Mr. Morley: Claims are not always borne out by the facts, but I can give my hon. Friend an absolute assurance: I am confident that we will ensure in negotiations on the review of 2002 that our six and 12-mile exclusive fishing limits remain. Indeed, I intend to argue that they should be a permanent feature of our national limits. I am confident that we will achieve that outcome, as we have been engaging with our European neighbours and have adopted a consensus approach to the matter.

Our approach contrasts with that of the Conservative party, which has unworkable policies on fishing. In last week's debate on fisheries, the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), made it clear that the Conservative party will be unelectable if it pursues its half-baked proposals.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): How can the Parliamentary Secretary have the gall to speak about making the common fisheries policy a more effective instrument for conservation, when it has been a conservation disaster? Would he not be better employed facing up to what he acknowledged in opposition—that it

is only by obtaining control of our own waters that we will ever be able to conserve stocks, as well as the British fishing industry?

Mr. Morley: When it comes to issues such as enforcement, we have control of our own waters. We need to ensure that the necessary enforcement is provided. Hon. Members may like to consider the location of the fishing grounds specified in the recent cod recovery programme. Almost all the most important cod fishing grounds for our country are currently outside our national limits. Unless we have a European mechanism for dealing with conservation, we will have no influence on matters that are vital to our industry. That is the mistake that the Conservatives are making: they are considering narrow national interests, rather than the long-term interests of our fishing industry.

Mr. Frank Doran (Aberdeen, Central): My hon. Friend has made it clear that he understands Conservative party policy well. Conservative Members would withdraw from the common fisheries policy, effectively make a unilateral declaration of independence in the North sea and the channel, and enter into complex negotiations over access, which our fishermen have had for decades, if not centuries—

Hon. Members: Order!

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman knows that he must ask about ministerial, not Opposition policy.

Mr. Doran: At a time when the fishing industry is facing its most serious crisis in decades, can the Parliamentary Secretary imagine a more serious threat to its future than Conservative policy?

Mr. Morley: I cannot imagine a more serious threat. I should like to know the exact details of the policy, because last week's debate revealed that it would not involve non-UK vessels leaving our waters, or returning the quotas of non-UK fishermen to British fishermen. It would lead to a loss of UK influence on fisheries control and management. The Opposition's policy is half-baked, ill thought out and undeliverable.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Does the Parliamentary Secretary accept that the uncertainty with which many fishermen regard European negotiations was increased with the release of documents under the 30-year rule? They revealed that, in European negotiations about fishing in a wider UK context, fishermen would be regarded as expendable. He and I can remember more recent European negotiations when fishing interests were subordinated to other objectives.

What is the Parliamentary Secretary's perspective? When entering into negotiations, does he regard relative stability as an essential, without which there can be no common fisheries policy? Will he persuade the Government to subordinate other European objectives to fishing, for a change?

Mr. Morley: I believe that relative stability is vital and that we need to maintain it after 2002. I am confident that we can do that, because it is in our country's interest and that of other countries. As for the hon. Gentleman's comments about the fishing industry being expendable, the documents related to a previous, Conservative Government. They do not represent the Government's view. We have given the fishing industry probably unprecedented involvement in making decisions on issues that are important to its future.

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): My hon. Friend doubtless knows the strength of feeling in Grimsby and Cleethorpes about the impact of no-fishing zones on income and jobs. Is he sympathetic to calls for compensation for loss of income? What will he do to get money from the Treasury to further that aim?

Mr. Morley: It is difficult to grant compensation for limited closures to protect fish stocks that have been damaged by fishing. However, I accept that the fishing industry faces structural problems. I met industry representatives this week to discuss ways in which the Government can help with the long-term problems that they face.

In relation to the cod recovery programme for the north-east ports, I stress to my hon. Friend that the prawn grounds have been kept open and that the inshore fishing industry's interests have been protected. There is a balance to be struck between protecting fish stocks and ensuring that our industry has fishing opportunities. I believe that we have got that balance right.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): Does the Parliamentary Secretary agree that the UK industry is now in crisis owing to swingeing quota cuts imposed by the common fisheries policy and the high price of fuel, and that the problem has been exacerbated by the recently announced cod recovery programme in the North sea? Given that financial support by Spain and France for their fishermen is under European Commission scrutiny as a possible breach of competition rules, how exactly does the Parliamentary Secretary intend to give financial support to our fishing industry in the short term?

Mr. Morley: Structural measures are available; funds are available in our structural programme. Regional programmes can also assist fishing ports. We must explore all those methods. There is also decommissioning, and consideration of whether there is an argument for reducing the capacity in the UK fleet. Those measures are under discussion.

I accept that policies have financial implications, and some funds are available. I note that financial commitments are not forthcoming from the Opposition. Given their pledge to make cuts of £16 billion in public expenditure, it is difficult for them to make such commitments.

Farm Animal Welfare

7. **Mrs. Anne Campbell** (Cambridge): What recent representations he has received concerning the impact of agricultural trade liberalisation on farm animal welfare. [146782]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I have received a number of such representations. We support the European Commission in its recent formal proposal to the World Trade Organisation, which explicitly calls for animal welfare to be considered in trade liberalisation negotiations. The proposal was tabled by the EU Commission in Geneva in December, with the unanimous support of EU member states.

Mrs. Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for that reply. Does he agree that it would be a disaster if trade liberalisation were to mean that UK livestock was exported to countries with lower animal welfare standards? Will he give the House an assurance that Britain will be at the forefront of EU efforts to place this matter high on the agenda in the next WTO round of negotiations?

Mr. Morley: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. The issue has been raised by the UK and the European Union. It did not feature in the previous World Trade Organisation talks, and it is a welcome step forward that it will now do so.

In relation to the higher standards being implemented by UK and European Union farmers, consideration is given to issues of quality standards in the context of globalisation and liberalisation of trade. It is legitimate that those issues be raised in the context of the WTO talks, and they will be.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): In the context of moves towards more trade liberalisation, do the Government share the concerns of many poultry farmers that some imported poultry may have been reared using growth-promoting drugs that have been banned throughout Europe on health grounds? Are there any circumstances in which the Government would consider blocking such imports?

Mr. Morley: Under this Government, we now have an independent body—the Food Standards Agency—responsible for monitoring the safety and quality of food coming into this country. Quality standards are monitored in the UK and throughout the EU, with further inspections of plants in third countries. If the FSA has evidence of a problem, it will make recommendations to the Government, who will have no hesitation in acting on them.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Farmers in my constituency have no problem keeping within the guidelines for animal welfare. They keep their livestock to a very high standard, but are concerned about the quality of imports. What advice does my hon. Friend the Minister have for those farmers on informing consumers of the high quality of animal welfare in this country, and advising them how to make decisions when buying their meat?

Mr. Morley: A number of quality assurance schemes are already in place, supported by a range of bodies, including the red tractor standard supported by the National Farmers Union. Consumers should consider that information carefully. The Government are keen to ensure that consumers have as much information as possible, so that they can make informed choices and use consumer power to support our producers, who are applying the very high standards that people want.

Agrimonetary Compensation

8. **Sir Robert Smith** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): When he intends to reach a decision on the payment of agrimonetary compensation to British farmers. [146783]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): The final figure will not be known until later this month. However, the amount available is likely to be about £200 million. We have until 30 April to decide. Since 1997, the Government will have paid £629 million in agrimonetary compensation, at a cost of £455 million to the United Kingdom taxpayer.

Sir Robert Smith: I thank the Minister for his answer, as far as it goes, and recognise that some money has been paid in the past.

The message from the farmers whom I met in Alford and Stonehaven last week—confirmed by figures from the Ministry showing a fall in farm incomes—is that they would like an end to at least one element of their uncertainty as soon as possible. Will the Government make a commitment, in principle, to recognise that a mechanism is available to alleviate the currency problems that the farmers face, and that they are willing to access the money involved as soon as possible to alleviate that uncertainty?

Mr. Brown: The Government recognise that such a mechanism is available. We have made extensive use of it, both on the mandatory side—it is worth reminding the House that this Government negotiated the mandatory element of agrimonetary compensation—and on the discretionary side. We have made use of the instrument when times have been very difficult for farmers, particularly in the livestock sector.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): Now that the euro has regained about 10 per cent. of its value against the pound, what effect will that have on the money available in agrimonetary compensation? More generally, does not that rise mean much better support prices and better market prices? Indeed, could not it herald the turnaround in the fortunes of agriculture?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. However, the calculations are of course historic, so they relate to where the euro was rather than to where it is

going, although he is right to say that a strengthening of the euro would be to the advantage of United Kingdom agriculture.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): In the light of the facts that dairy farmers in Wales last year earned as little as £3,000, that further money is available in agrimonetary compensation, which the Minister accepts, and that the figures are historic and reflect the lack of support payments to farmers over the past few years, will he now give farming industries in Wales and throughout the United Kingdom the assurance that the Government will receive every penny possible despite the Fontainebleau agreement, which was negotiated by the Conservatives?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman is right to refer to the previous Conservative Government's Fontainebleau arrangements because those arrangements put the cost of agrimonetary compensation primarily on the shoulders of the British taxpayer. The issue of further agrimonetary payments is under consideration by the Government and a decision will be made, as it usually is, in— *[Interruption.]* I cannot tell whether Conservative Members, who are shouting at me, are making the case for membership of the euro or for devaluation of sterling, but it is clearly one of the two. No doubt a Conservative Front Bencher will intervene in a moment to say which.

In answer to the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas), when we considered the circumstances of the dairy industry for the previous agrimonetary round, we drew down every penny we could in recognition of the difficult circumstances. I know that averages are always held to be unfair, but that decision is worth £900 per dairy farmer.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Does my right hon. Friend agree that a typical livestock farmer has benefited by between £1,000 and £1,500 through agrimonetary compensation? Will he consider the fact that an increase in that would benefit farmers who are in need this year and also confirm what the previous Government paid in agrimonetary compensation?

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): That is not enough money to heat a swimming pool.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Member for Buckingham is right. The sum paid in agrimonetary compensation under the previous Conservative Government would not pay to heat anything at all, because they did not pay out a penny in agrimonetary compensation—not a single penny. *[Interruption.]* I do not know how I managed to stir Opposition Front Benchers from their usual lethargy, but, for the sake of the record, the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) is shouting, "Three months, three months!" Before the general election, it would have been possible for the Conservative Government to commit to just under half a billion pounds of agrimonetary compensation, if they had so chosen. They did not commit to a penny.

It is worth reminding those who follow these debates that, although Conservative Members now call for substantial extra public expenditure on agrimonetary compensation, they also call for overall reductions in public expenditure and tax cuts at the same time. I would be as interested as everyone else to hear how on earth that could be done.

Hunting with Dogs

9. **Mr. Peter Luff** (Mid-Worcestershire): What assessment he has made of the impact of a ban on hunting with dogs on arrangements for the disposal of fallen stock. [146784]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): The Burns report considered that, in the event of a ban on hunting, farmers would lose a large part of the collection service for fallen stock currently offered by hunts. Farmers would then need to use an alternative disposal method, such as the rendering or knackery services or incineration. Proposed European Union rules could also affect the disposal routes available to farmers. We are in close touch with the disposal and farming industries over possible future arrangements.

Mr. Luff: The Minister has, for the second time, honestly admitted that the Government value the service provided by hunts to farmers in connection with fallen stock, but, given the increasing problems in disposing of stock to which she alluded, including on-farm burial and incineration, is not it time for the Government to produce an authoritative figure for the cost that would be imposed on British farmers were hunting with dogs ever to be banned? Will she at least admit that that figure would be substantial?

Ms Quin: The Government commissioned the Burns report precisely to look at those issues, and I commend its findings in that regard. However, the position is uneven across the country, depending partly on the geographical distribution of hunts, and partly on the availability of other services. Given that situation and the fact that there are European Union rules and proposals in the pipeline, it is important, as I said in my answer to the hon. Gentleman, to discuss with farmers and the existing industry how best to move forward.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

The Solicitor-General was asked—

Narey Reforms

29. **Mrs. Jackie Lawrence** (Preseli Pembrokeshire): What effect the Narey reforms have had in expediting the prosecution of offences. [146805]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): Early indications are that the Narey reforms, brought about through the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, are having a substantial effect on reducing delay and improving efficiency. They have been implemented in two stages. The first stage, which was introduced in November 1999, led to all defendants appearing before a court within days of being charged, rather than four or five weeks later, as

was previously the case. That enables defendants who wish to plead guilty at the first hearing to be sentenced very quickly, often the day after charge.

The second stage, which came into effect just over a fortnight ago, ensures that defendants charged with the most serious cases, such as murder and rape, appear in front of a Crown court judge in little more than a week after charge, following a single magistrates court appearance.

Mrs. Lawrence: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that reply. I am sure that, like me, he realises that in more serious cases, the delays before the final resolution is achieved often cause extra distress to the individuals or the families concerned. What overall reduction in delay will be offered by a speedy Crown court appearance?

The Solicitor-General: My hon. Friend is right that delay has an effect, for example, on victims and witnesses. The idea is to move such cases into the Crown court quickly. The experience in the past fortnight has been good. For example, a case was reported to me yesterday involving a rape committed on 19 January. The case was heard in the Exeter Crown court a couple of days ago, and the person will be sentenced shortly. Such swift treatment of serious cases is to be welcomed. I shall be visiting my hon. Friend's Crown Prosecution Service area in the next week or so, and I hope to get good news about swift justice there, as well.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): The Narey review stressed the importance of an efficient and effective Crown Prosecution Service. At the last Solicitor-General's questions, I mentioned to the hon. and learned Gentleman that additional funding had been made available to the Crown Prosecution Service, but he knows as well as I do that the morale of the CPS has been rock bottom. I should like the Solicitor-General to answer the question that I asked him last time: will he cause to be conducted an independent review of the morale and effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service? If so, when, and will he put the results of that review in the public domain?

The Solicitor-General: I do not accept that CPS morale is rock bottom. There were problems last year, but there has been a significant increase in funding—about 23 per cent. nationwide in the next year. The hon. Gentleman's area has hit the jackpot, as it will receive a 14 per cent. increase in real funding next year. Overall, nationwide, that means some 500 more people in the CPS to carry out prosecutions. There will be a certain number in the hon. Gentleman's area, as well. There was a problem of stress. The CPS management will re-examine that in the coming year.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): I declare an interest as a practising lawyer. Bearing in mind that part two of the Narey reforms is now coming into effect, will my hon. and learned Friend learn the lesson of the procedures that took place in Northampton and other places during the experimental period, where it was found that if the process went ahead too quickly, the case that finally came to trial was deficient from the prosecution's point of view, because not all the statements and forensic evidence had been obtained? Although speedy justice is welcome, one must be careful that the full case goes before the court, not a partial case, which can lead to a miscarriage of justice either way.

The Solicitor-General: I accept what my hon. Friend says. There is always tension between speedy justice on the one hand and the rights of defendants on the other. Certainly, cases must not move so quickly that the rights of defendants are prejudiced.

Criminal Justice

30. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): If he will make a statement on the average length of time between arrest and trial. [146806]

34. **Mr. George Mudie** (Leeds, East): If he will make a statement on the length of time the CPS takes to bring cases to court. [146810]

The Solicitor-General: The average length of time between the commencement of proceedings and trial, or guilty plea, is reducing. The latest available data on all defendants in the magistrates courts shows that the average time fell to 49 days in September 2000. As for the Crown court, the average time between charge and committal for trial is also falling. The average time for adult defendants fell to 89 days in September 2000. The figures for youth defendants show a reduction to 85 days between arrest and committal.

The Crown Prosecution Service has made a substantial contribution to the achievement of those results. I am confident that the additional funding that I have mentioned, and other changes, will maintain this encouraging progress.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Solicitor-General for his characteristically comprehensive reply.

Although I accept that a reduction in the average length of time between arrest and trial is an important policy objective, does the hon. and learned Gentleman in turn accept that it is less important than the pursuit of justice and the nature of the trial itself? Will he belatedly acknowledge that the proposed removal of the right to trial by jury in a number of very important cases is a gross affront to justice, and that even at this stage the Government should withdraw their disgraceful proposal?

The Solicitor-General: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's point about the mode-of-trial proposals, which concern only a small number of cases. As for his point about quick justice, under the last Government the time was 142 days for persistent young offenders, which was simply unacceptable. It did not bring home to wrongdoers the need for them to change their ways. We have now reduced the time to under 100 days—an average of about 94 days nationwide, although in some areas it is much lower than that. The idea is to bring persistent young offenders before the courts quickly, so that they have to address their wrongdoing. I think that that is the right policy.

Mr. Mudie: Will my hon. and learned Friend comment on the time between arrest and trial of youngsters, particularly in the light of a recent case in my

constituency? A young lad abused an antisocial behaviour order within a week of its imposition. That was last March, but the case was brought to trial only a few weeks ago. Does that indicate that our pledge is being met, or does it indicate—more interestingly, and more worryingly—a lack of interest in the success of ASBOs on the part of the CPS?

The Solicitor-General: It certainly does not indicate a lack of interest. We take antisocial behaviour orders very seriously.

I cannot explain why that case took so long without knowing more about it. In some cases, the offending of persistent young offenders is linked with that of adult offenders; such cases might go to the Crown court. That might explain the delay, but if my hon. Friend gives me details I will look into the matter.

In my hon. Friend's area, the average time is down to the national average of about 94 days. That is good news, but I reiterate that we are driving the figure down even more. We must meet the 71-day pledge, and we are on track to do so later this year.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Is the Solicitor-General satisfied with the time that it takes to get a case that is referred by the Criminal Cases Review Commission to the Court of Appeal?

The Solicitor-General: That does not fall within my responsibility. There are a number of possible reasons for the delay. Such cases are often extremely complicated, and some—including the one in which the hon. Gentleman has an interest—are historic, often requiring detailed investigation. Generally, however, we are trying to speed up justice, and we are achieving that aim.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): The CPS is one of many contributors to the prosecution process. Does my hon. and learned Friend accept that there is still scope for improved co-ordinatic and co-operation between all those contributors to speed up cases?

The Solicitor-General: One of the beneficial effects of the persistent young offender pledge and of other changes, such as the Narey changes, which I mentioned to my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mrs. Lawrence), is that the different agencies are now working together. Under the previous Administration, they were very much autonomous institutions. They now have to work together, and they are working together. Recently, as my hon. Friend knows, I visited the CPS in his constituency and saw how successfully it is working with police. Under the Glidewell changes, which are now being rolled out nationwide, prosecutors are often with the police in police stations making quick decisions.

Crown Prosecution Service

31. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): What procedures the CPS follows prior to making a decision not to proceed with a prosecution which is at an advanced stage. [146807]

The Solicitor-General: Crown prosecutors review each case on its own facts and merits in accordance with the code for Crown prosecutors. The process of review is a continuing process; fresh evidence may become available which alters the prosecutor's assessment of a case, or the public interest considerations may change. Wherever possible, Crown prosecutors will discuss significant changes to the charges, or stopping the case, with police before a decision is made.

Attorney-General's guidelines have just been introduced on the procedure to be followed by advocates when decisions are taken at court. Those guidelines emphasise the importance of prosecutors speaking with the victim or the victim's family so that their views and interests can be taken into account.

Mr. Mackinlay: May I ask the Solicitor-General whether the Crown's decision not to offer evidence at the trial, on 8 June 1999, of Linda Watson and Amanda Williams for the murder of Richard Watson had anything to do with the fact that the security and intelligence services had some interest in the case? If so, was that interest disclosed to the Police Complaints Authority when it pursued that botched prosecution?

The Solicitor-General: I have written to my hon. Friend about that case. Certainly as far as I know there was no involvement of the security and intelligence services whatsoever. As I explained to him, the CPS made the decision not to continue simply because the prosecution's forensic evidence did not amount to proof. The defence produced forensic evidence, and frankly, our evidence could not match it. On such a basis, as I said in my reply to him, the prosecution must be stopped. That is in the interests of defendants.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Will the Solicitor-General accept that victims and victims' families are frequently bewildered by the lack of information on the reasons for either dropping or reducing charges in given cases? Does he accept that the Opposition's proposal that there should be a named CPS officer or lawyer to act as a point of contact between victims or victims' families and the CPS is a good one? Would it not eradicate as far as is humanly possible the sense of bewilderment facing victims and their families? I am sure that he is a reasonable man. Therefore, if he accepts our proposal, why does he not implement it?

The Solicitor-General: I am afraid that the Opposition are stealing our policies—because that is precisely what is in our proposals that will be rolled out later this year. There have already been pilot projects to test our proposals whereby the CPS will be the point of contact for victims, victims' families and others in relation to decisions on charges. The hon. and learned Gentleman is right that, often in the past, that has not happened and people have been bewildered about why, for example, charges have been dropped or pleas have been accepted.

As I said, the national scheme will be rolled out later this year. Under the Attorney-General's guidelines, which I mentioned earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), if a case is there for trial and a plea is accepted, victims and their families must be informed so that they can have an input.

Chile

32. **Mr. Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington, North): What plans he has to start proceedings relating to the deaths of William Beausire and Father Michael Woodward in Chile. [146808]

The Solicitor-General: It will not be a surprise to my hon. Friend when I say that I have no plans. Many people, including William Beausire and Father Michael Woodward, were tortured and murdered under General Pinochet's regime in Chile in the 1970s. Our courts, however, do not have jurisdiction to try those responsible for those appalling acts. As I said in my statement to the House on General Pinochet, on 2 March 2000, the criminal offences both of torture—which is contrary to section 134 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988—and of hostage-taking under the Taking of Hostages Act 1982, which otherwise might apply, were not retrospective and could not be made to apply to matters such as the two deaths about which my hon. Friend inquires.

Mr. Corbyn: I am disappointed with that answer. Also disappointing was the Department's attitude to the possibility of holding a private prosecution of General Pinochet when he was held in this country, and to supporting an application in the Chilean courts. Is my hon. and learned Friend aware that a case has been successfully deposited in the High Court in Chile regarding Charles Horman, a US national who was also murdered in that country? That case is listed for hearing. Will not he re-examine the mountain of evidence relating to the cases mentioned in my question, and the new evidence from a Chilean navy officer who witnessed the torture of Father Woodward?

The two victims will never return. Will not my hon. and learned Friend also meet their relatives, and see what practical legal support can be given to the families to help them mount a serious case against Pinochet and all his henchmen in the Chilean courts, where hundreds of such cases are at last being mounted?

The Solicitor-General: Under the Criminal Justice (International Co-operation) Act 1990, it is possible for authorities in this country to assist prosecutors in Chile, and that might well happen.

In addition, what this country did in relation to Senator Pinochet has had a catalytic effect in Chile. That is a good thing. Secondly, were these appalling crimes to occur today—God forbid that they would—the cases could be tried in a court here.

Business of the House

12.31 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Will the Leader of the House give the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business of the House is as follows:

MONDAY 5 FEBRUARY—Opposition Day [4th Allotted Day].

Until about 7 o'clock, there will be a debate entitled "Failure of the Government to Address Social Exclusion, Poverty and Job Losses in Wales" on a motion in the name of Plaid Cymru, followed by a debate on personal care for the elderly on a motion in the name of the Liberal Democrats.

TUESDAY 6 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the House of Commons (Removal of Clergy Disqualification) Bill.

Motion on the Draft Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (Disapplication of Part IV for Northern Ireland Parties, etc) Order 2001.

WEDNESDAY 7 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Homes Bill.

THURSDAY 8 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Social Security Contributions (Share Options) Bill.

Remaining stages of the Children's Commissioner for Wales Bill.

FRIDAY 9 FEBRUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the following week will be as follows:

MONDAY 12 FEBRUARY—Opposition Day [5th Allotted Day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

TUESDAY 13 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Bill.

Remaining stages of the Capital Allowances Bill.

WEDNESDAY 14 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Health and Social Care Bill.

THURSDAY 15 FEBRUARY—We hope that there will be a debate on the report of the BSE inquiry by Lord Phillips on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 16 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The House will wish to be reminded that on Wednesday 14 February, there will be a debate in European Standing Committee A relating to the prevention and control of certain transmissible spongiform encephalopathies. Details of the relevant documents will be given in the *Official Report*.

[Wednesday 14 February 2001:

European Standing Committee A—Relevant European Union document: 5196/99, Control of certain transmissible spongiform encephalopathies. Relevant European Scrutiny Committee reports: HC 23-xxxi(1999-2000) and HC 34-xiii (1998-99).]

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall on Thursdays for the next four weeks will be as follows:

THURSDAY 8 FEBRUARY—Debate on social security fraud.

THURSDAY 15 FEBRUARY—Debate on the reports from the Education and Employment Committee on standards and quality in education and the annual report of Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools.

THURSDAY 22 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

THURSDAY 1 MARCH—Debate on the report from the Health Committee on provision of NHS mental health services.

Perhaps I can take this opportunity to remind the House that not only will the House not be sitting on Friday 16 February, but it will not return until Monday 26 February.

Mrs. Browning: I thank the Leader of the House for that information. It comes as something of a surprise to find that after just a week the Government have changed their mind about holding a debate on Thursday 8 February on standards and privileges. That is an important debate which, as the right hon. Lady knows, has the support of those on the Conservative Benches. What has happened in the past week to change her mind about that being an appropriate subject for debate by the House? Is it that standards, as far as Ministers in this Government are concerned, are their own standards, and that privileges mean the exploitation of their office?

During the past week we have seen the Prime Minister dismiss a Cabinet Minister in the morning for not telling the truth, and tell the House in the afternoon, with tears in his eyes, that that is a tragedy, while two days later the Prime Minister's press secretary described that tragic figure as "detached" and "lacking focus". No one could describe the right hon. Lady as detached and lacking focus, so will she explain why we are to be deprived of that very important debate next Thursday?

May I also ask the right hon. Lady to explain why a debate on social security fraud scheduled for next Thursday is to be taken in Westminster Hall and has not been allocated time on the Floor of the House? It is a very important debate, not least because since the Government came to office they have made no fewer than 46 announcements about tackling benefit fraud. It was a major pledge in their election manifesto, yet it is clear from parliamentary answers that social security fraud is out of control. The issue deserves the scrutiny and consideration of the whole House in the Chamber, rather than being kicked into Westminster Hall in the hope that it will not be noticed.

I refer the right hon. Lady to the request that I made on 21 December last year. There is a need for a debate on the intelligence services; she will be aware that members of the Intelligence and Security Committee are very anxious to have such a debate. Last year, the Government were late in holding that debate and promised that it would be held on a more timely occasion in this Session. Will the right hon. Lady look very carefully for a slot for that debate in the near future?

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): We can't tell the hon. Lady, it's a secret.

Mrs. Browning: There is another secret in which I am even more interested; perhaps the right hon. Lady can help us with it. Can she prevail upon the Chancellor to disclose publicly the date of the Budget? We are now into February and the date must be in the Chancellor's diary.

[Mrs. Browning]

Could I prevail upon her to persuade him to disclose that date so that next week when she comes to the Dispatch Box she can share that information with us?

Finally, will the right hon. Lady arrange for a statement in the House early next week on the public-private partnership that the Government have proposed for the tube? We have recently heard from Mr. Kiley—a man who knows something about these matters—that the Government's proposal is undeliverable. If that is the case, the House would like to discuss the matter in some detail.

Mrs. Beckett: First, the hon. Lady asked me about the provisional business that I had announced. I always make it very plain that provisional business is exactly that.

The hon. Lady is right that we have moved the debate that was originally proposed on standards and privileges. However, she seems to have overlooked something, which I think that the Conservative Members who raised the matter last week also overlooked. When we eventually have that debate, it will be on the recent report of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges. As I said to the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), who raised the matter last week, I am very mindful of the prerogatives of the Chair to decide what is in order. However, as the report does not deal with the behaviour of Ministers, because that is not a matter for the Register of Members' Interests, and their conduct, it would be hard to argue that it would be in order to raise such matters.

I think that the hon. Lady is clutching at straws, in a desperate attempt to find yet another excuse to raise the events of the past 10 days or so. However, I can tell her of the two other factors that have led the Government to decide to move the debate. First, we are ready to deal with the remaining stages of legislation, which, as she will know, has to be a priority for the Government. Secondly, I understand that the Committee is continuing to take evidence from Conservative Members on the report that it is proposed that we should discuss. The Chair of the Committee let me know that although it was obviously a matter for discussion, there would nevertheless be merit in letting the Committee finish taking evidence before the House discussed the matter. That is the view of the Committee's Chairman, and it is obviously a legitimate point of view.

The hon. Lady asks me why we did not find time on the Floor of the House for the debate on fraud, which will be held in Westminster Hall. As she will remember, the Conservative party did not seek to hold that debate on the Floor of the House. Indeed, if it is such a vital matter and as neglected as she suggests, it is surprising that the Conservative party has not found the time to raise it, given that it has had several Opposition day debates already. Furthermore, she seems to have forgotten that we have introduced a Bill on social security fraud, so the notion that there is a lack of opportunity to discuss that matter seems somewhat flawed, to put it no higher than that.

I accept, of course, the need for a debate on the intelligence and security services, and the Government will seek to find time for one at some point. I cannot enlighten the hon. Lady about the date of the Budget, and I do not think that that is unreasonable.

The hon. Lady will know that there have been constant statements about the tube from Mr. Kiley and from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and that such matters are under discussion. No doubt when those discussions are at a more refined stage, there may be something to announce to the House.

Mr. Mackinlay: May I take the Leader of the House back to the reply that she gave me a couple of days ago? I reminded her of the Prime Minister's promise to the House on 13 July, that we would have a free vote on the proposals in the Liaison Committee report, "Shifting the Balance: Select Committees and the Executive". She said:

> "I am entirely familiar with the *Hansard* reference that my hon. Friend quotes. I am familiar also with what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said because I was sitting two places away from him at the time."—[*Official Report*, 30 January 2001; Vol. 362, c. 171.]

I was watching her when he made that statement. She grimaced because he was speaking off-message; it was not part of the script. The fact is that the Prime Minister unequivocally gave an undertaking that we would have a free vote on the matter. No other construction can be put on it but that we would have that vote this side of the general election. There would be no purpose in having it after the general election, because the whole idea was to have those measures in place when we return—if we return—after the general election. Will she think about that again?

Mrs. Beckett: With great respect to my hon. Friend, when he has already raised a matter some half a dozen times with me, there is no need to ask me to think about it again. I have thought about it repeatedly. He knows what my view is; I have expressed it, I hope, with clarity as well as with courtesy. I simply say that the position remains as I have told him on many occasions.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Did the Leader of the House notice that Conservative Members did not welcome the BSE debate? We on the Liberal Democrat Benches warmly welcome that debate, which is on an issue of huge importance to the countryside and particularly to the much damaged livestock industry. However, will a statement be made well in advance of that debate about the Government's response on BSE and to the Phillips report? Obviously, that it is extremely important.

Will a statement be made, and can we have a debate on the politicisation of the civil service, not just in relation to the role of Mr. Alastair Campbell, but more generally? Is the right hon. Lady aware that the Cabinet Office and the Treasury have now admitted that civil servants have been used to calculate the cost of various Opposition policies, yet the House has not been given access to that information? Civil servants are doing a job at taxpayers' expense, yet we, who represent taxpayers, cannot question Ministers on the work being undertaken.

Given that the right hon. Lady is reviewing various matters in her role as Chairman of the Modernisation Committee, will she review the arrangements for recording abstentions? She will be aware that, especially since the Queen's Speech, those on the Conservative Front Bench have been recommending abstentions so

regularly—indeed, they did so even last night—that we do not know whether Conservative Members are abstaining on principle or simply going home.

Mrs. Beckett: I really must take the hon. Gentleman to task for that foul slur. Given the massive number of occasions on which those on the Opposition Benches call for us to sit ever longer days and ever longer hours, it surely cannot be that they have gone home—even if they are not registering their numbers in vast quantities in the Division Lobby.

The hon. Gentleman asks me about the BSE debate. I recognise that Liberal Democrat Members, at least, have raised that matter repeatedly. That is why I was anxious to give an indication as to when the Government hope to be able to schedule the debate. Of course, I understand the wish to see the Government's response in a timely period before that debate; that is partly why I stressed that the date I mentioned was when we hoped to hold the debate. The Government are anxious to put before the House the right combination of information, and, of course, to hold a debate on it.

The hon. Gentleman also asks about the politicisation of the civil service. On that, I have to take issue with him. The Prime Minister's official spokesman is on a special adviser contract and his role is in accordance with that contract. There is no suggestion of it being politicised or in any way outwith the rules.

The hon. Gentleman refers to the use of the Treasury to cost policies, but nothing whatever is new or untoward about that—it has happened since time immemorial. In consequence, it does not seem to me that the matter requires any special statement.

As for recording abstentions, I have already dealt with that issue. From my observations, the hon. Gentleman may be entirely right; a large number of Tory Members are not always here for the long hours that they claim to be in this place, but that—I am happy to say—is a matter for them.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): May I again draw the attention of the Leader of the House to the terrible earthquake in India, and also in the south and south-east of Pakistan? Does she recall that, following similar earthquakes in Turkey, the relationship between Greece and Turkey improved considerably? Does she agree that a debate in the House might encourage India and Pakistan to work not only on their recovery programme, but on wider issues to their mutual advantage? That would have the support of the whole Commonwealth and, indeed, of the wider international community.

Mrs. Beckett: My right hon. Friend is entirely right. It has often been said that the aftermath of the tragic events in Greece and Turkey was to encourage recognition of the degree to which they benefited from assisting each another. I entirely take his point that the same argument has validity in the case of India and Pakistan. At present, the great concentration of concern in both countries must be to deal with the aftermath of that appalling event. I hope, however, that in the long term, it will indeed have the effect suggested by my right hon. Friend, although I fear that I cannot find time for a debate on the matter at present.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): Yesterday, the Prime Minister referred to the appalling plight of millions of people in Africa suffering from HIV and AIDS. Recent figures have also shown a developing problem in this country, although, obviously, it is not on the same scale. May we have a debate in the House on Aids and will the Government make a statement on what they are doing to help to combat the challenge both in this country and overseas?

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot find time for an early debate on AIDS, although as we are hoping to take the remaining stages of the Health and Social Care Bill on Wednesday 14 February, the right hon. Gentleman may find an opportunity to air the subject during debate on the issues raised in that Bill. I take his point that it is a matter of great concern in Africa. I fear that I cannot find time for a special debate, but I recommend to him the attractions of Westminster Hall.

Mr. Gerry Steinberg (City of Durham): Could the Leader of the House arrange a debate on admission policies to primary schools? That is a problem for many local education authorities at present—including mine in Durham. Four and five-year-old children living in Coxhoe in my constituency—a village that has expanded over the years—cannot obtain places at the local school because the maximum class size is 30. The children have to attend local schools two or three miles away where there are many empty places. It is not acceptable for four and five-year-olds to have to travel such distances in bad weather because they cannot get a place in a local school; there are sound educational reasons why they should not. I fully support the Government's policy of having a maximum of 30 children in a class, but can we have a debate on the issue to see whether a solution can be found?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's concern for his constituents who face those difficult circumstances. I recall that, in my city of Derby, a fast-developing new estate caused the same type of difficulties because sufficient provision for children had not been planned under the Conservative party.

My hon. Friend will know how much work the Government are doing to try to improve the position in education. For example, we have the highest number of teachers employed for more than a decade—7,000 more than there were in January 1998. He will also know of the substantial programme of capital investment that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced recently.

I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on the particular problems that my hon. Friend has identified in his constituency. However, I remind him that oral questions to the Department for Education and Employment will be held on Thursday next.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): When the Leader of the House replied to the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) about the Prime Minister's promise of a free vote on the Liaison Committee report, "Shifting the Balance: Select Committees and the Executive", might she not, for the sake of clarity and courtesy, have added the word "contempt"? There has been contempt for members of the Liaison Committee and contempt for the

[Mr. Crispin Blunt]

House, which is owed a debate and a free vote on those measures. She should find Government time for such a debate.

Mrs. Beckett: I did.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South–East): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to early-day motion 181 on the price of industrial gas, which has almost doubled in recent months?

[*That this House notes the near doubling in the price of industrial gas over the last 12 months and the detrimental effect this increase is having on energy intensive sectors of manufacturing industry; expresses concern about the operation of the gas supply interconnector between Bacton in East Anglia and Zeebrugge in Belgium, which links a de-regulated market in Britain with a continental market where the price of gas is still linked to the price of oil; views with alarm allegations of collusion between the gas supply companies; and calls upon the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to ask the Office of Fair Trading to carry out a full scale investigation into the wholesale gas market.*]

The price rise has been the last straw for a factory in my constituency that makes paper. It employs 170 people but, this week, it has announced its closure. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that my hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe makes a statement about that, so that hon. Members can fully understand the complex reasons for that huge hike in industrial gas prices?

Mrs. Beckett: I have great sympathy for my hon. Friend and his constituents. I know that others in industry are similarly affected. The Government are conscious of the importance of gas prices and of the impact of the recent rise, which, I understand, is primarily due to high oil prices. The Government take the view that, if anti-competitive activity is identified in this sector, they will not hesitate to refer the matter to the appropriate competition authorities. My hon. Friend might like to monitor developments with a view to making such information available to my hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe if he thinks that that is appropriate.

Sir George Young (North–West Hampshire): Will the right hon. Lady reconsider the rather terse reply that she gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) and to the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) about the Liaison Committee report? Will she reconsider what she said on Tuesday, when she made it clear that it was very unlikely that there would be a debate on the report before the end of this Parliament? Does she recognise that, if we do not take a decision in this Parliament and we want to set up the Select Committees quickly in the new Parliament, we will have to use the current system? Although she may be able to persuade the House on a free vote to retain the present system, it is not right for her to stifle both a debate and a vote on this important matter.

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman has more cause than anyone to know that what I have said about a free vote has not changed from the very beginning. He has asked me this question more often than most, although the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) is seeking to catch up with his record. I take his point entirely that—if, as it may be, there is a general election some time in the next 18 months—it will be important for Select Committee appointments to be made speedily. I am not at all sure that a new system of making those appointments is likely to be speedier, but I certainly assure him that everyone will bear his remarks in mind.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): Will my right hon. Friend make time for a debate on the cuts being made by many Tory-controlled councils? In Calderdale, the Tory council proposed massive cuts to social services and education. It is attacking the weak and defenceless, yet it received a reasonable settlement. One of the worst cuts is to the Scope outreach service, which looks after elderly disabled people. The council is also scrapping free school milk, which is particularly mean, and increasing council tax by far more than the party promised in its election manifesto. It is about time that these people were exposed.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point, not least because one of the moves that, in theory, everybody wants to see is towards a better balance between health and social service care, so that we can, in particular, care for the elderly in their own homes, as most of them would wish. She is right to point out that cuts in social services undermine that objective. She is also right to indicate that in the four years since the general election, the Government grant to local government has gone up by 14 per cent. in real terms, compared with a cut of 7 per cent. in the previous four years, so that stability in grant distribution and a substantial increase in investment mean that councils should be able to plan ahead for good services.

I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on the issue, but my hon. Friend may find that the attractions of Westminster Hall beckon.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Pursuant to the opening exchanges after the statement by the Leader of the House, can she give an assurance that after three and three quarter years, we shall get a definitive statement on the Government's policy on the tube before the general election, so that we can verify whether their handling of the tube is actively intended to sacrifice Labour seats in London or whether it has some other motivation?

Mrs. Beckett: I think that most Tory Members, and perhaps even the right hon. Gentleman himself, would acknowledge that the underlying problems of London Underground are due to years of neglect and under-investment. Dialogue about the tube's future continues. As for when it can be concluded, obviously we all hope that that will be as soon as possible, but I am afraid that I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman a date.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): The Leader of the House will be as keen as we are that Members are not kept here unnecessarily and that they do not have their time wasted. She will be aware that *Hansard* shows that three times this week the number of Members opposing a

Government motion in the No Lobby was zero. She may be interested to know that in the whole of the previous Session and up to Christmas in this Session that never happened. Does she believe that the Opposition are totally falling down on their job in that they call votes but fail to produce any of their Members in the Lobby?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which chimes in with the earlier point made by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler). Of course, although it is open to any Member—or rather any two Members, since two names are required for the tellers—to call a Division, people have always wondered whether it is wise to call attention to the fact that support for the stance being adopted is as little as two Members. Although our procedures allow for that, I share my hon. Friend's view that it is perhaps a less than constructive use of time, but the Opposition do not seem to be very good at making constructive use of their time.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Will the Leader of the House arrange for a Minister from the Northern Ireland Office to explain how equality and law and order issues arising from the Belfast agreement are being dealt with? One person who was out on licence was readmitted to prison because of perceived involvement in activities contrary to that licence. By contrast, another, a murderer, was released and has committed that crime again in murdering Trevor Kells, but he has not been called back under licence, although I understand that some of his republican colleagues have exercised their own summary justice. Surely the law of the land should be maintained.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand the concern that the hon. Gentleman expresses. I cannot undertake to ask a Northern Ireland Minister specifically to deal with the issues that he raises in the very near future. He will know, however, that there is shortly to be a meeting of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee, and he may find the opportunity within the parameters of that meeting to raise these issues.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Will my right hon. Friend, after liaising with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, try to bring forward at an early date the student nurse review, especially with regard to bursaries? A group of colleagues and I met some student nurses at the recent south-west conference of Unison, and to a person they were saying, "Can we have the review brought forward and a debate to discuss how nurses can be properly rewarded to ensure that we get the proper number of nurses on our wards?"

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend will know that the Government have already recruited significant extra numbers of nurses, and expanded the number of training places so that more potential nurses are coming forward. I understand his concern and I will draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health. I remind my hon. Friend that we hope to take the remaining stages of the Health and Social Care Bill on 14 February. He may have an opportunity then to air these matters.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Will the Leader of the House accept from me, as one who has been fairly criticised by the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges, and therefore has some understanding of the difficult task that members of that Committee have to undertake, that by moving next Thursday's debate for what every objective observer will perceive as purely party political and partisan reasons, she has done much to undermine the integrity of the Committee? There is nothing that the right hon. Lady knows today about that debate that she did not know last Thursday. Moving the debate will give credence to those who think that it is a Committee with an in-built Labour majority that is acting on party political reasons. That is a tragedy for the Committee and a tragedy for the House.

Mrs. Beckett: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman did not follow fully the point that I made earlier, which is that since—*[Interruption.]* I am mindful that it is for the Chair to determine what is in order. As the report that we would have been discussing, and which we may still have an opportunity to discuss, does not deal with the conduct of Ministers, it is difficult for me to see how that matter could possibly be in order. I do not see where the hon. Gentleman's point about partisan treatment of the Committee arises. I utterly reject his suggestion that the Government are seeking in any way to take, or have taken, action that will inadvertently affect the integrity of the Committee.

The hon. Gentleman's reference to the fact that the Committee has a Labour majority, as do all Select Committees, is somewhat unfortunate. All Select Committees reflect the pattern of the House. His reference to that was particularly unfortunate because he may have noticed that recently there has been a growing tendency in the press to refer to decisions of the Committee as being made by the Labour majority, when the Committee was unanimous. That undermines the integrity of the Committee.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): May I join the shadow Leader of the House in calling for an early debate on MI5, MI6 and GCHQ operations, especially as new Official Secrets Act legislation is to be brought forward? I ask my right hon. Friend to prevail upon my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary himself to reply to such a debate. That is the unanimous request of members of the Intelligence and Security Committee.

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot find time to schedule a debate in the near future. My hon. Friend will know of the considerable pressures on my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's diary, inevitably often dictated by events elsewhere. However, I shall draw my hon. Friend's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Last week, I asked the Leader of the House if she could find time for a debate on what was going on in the murky waters of the millennium dome. Those waters have got even muddier this week with press reports of the difficulties of Mr. Bourne, who is said to support the Government with personal donations, and is unable to find the money to buy the dome or to find some activity to go inside it. We also learn that further calls may be made on public funds to deal with expenses connected with the dome.

[Mr. Michael Jack]

We still have not had an opportunity to probe more thoroughly the role of the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) in determining what went in the dome. When can we have a debate on the matter so that we may know more clearly what is going on?

Mrs. Beckett: One of the few criticisms that I have not yet heard of the dome is that it is full of water. However, the issues surrounding the dome have been aired extensively in the House on many occasions and, no doubt, will be aired again in future. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on them in the near future.

Gillian Merron (Lincoln): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the tragic case of Mark Thorne, a young man in my constituency who was electrocuted while working at Fatty Arbuckle's, a fast-food restaurant in the city of Lincoln? The coroner returned a verdict of unlawful killing; clearly, this was a tragic and terrible case of employer negligence. Will my right hon. Friend press the Government to introduce legislation as soon as possible to make corporate killing an offence? The family of Mark Thorne want that and I strongly support its introduction.

Mrs. Beckett: The whole House will sympathise with my hon. Friend's constituents in their tragic loss and the terrible circumstances that led to the death of that young man. It will share her view that those difficult issues ought to be investigated thoroughly.

My hon. Friend will know that the Government recently issued a consultative document on corporate killing. I believe that the consultation period has now ended and the Government are studying the responses, which we take seriously and with which we will deal carefully. I will, however, draw my hon. Friend's remarks to the attention of the relevant Ministers.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Does the Leader of the House agree that every school and local authority in England eagerly awaits the School Teachers Review Body's decision and that of the Government on how they will fund school teachers' pay awards this year? Is it not bizarre that last night there was agreement on the local government settlement, without the teachers' pay review award being included? Today, there was to be a statement at 1 o'clock, announcing the outcome of the teachers' pay review. That was suddenly pulled and it will now be made at 9.30 am tomorrow. Will the Leader of the House tell the House that there will be no statement about that on the "Today" programme tomorrow morning, and that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will come to the House at the start of business to make a statement on that incredibly important issue?

Mrs. Beckett: I would simply say to the hon. Gentleman that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will, of course, seek to make that announcement in the proper way. At present, I am not aware whether he hopes to make it through the medium of a written answer, which, as the hon. Gentleman will know, is perfectly in order. I do not recall whether any changes were made to today's business; I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is correct about that. However, we are shortly to have an important statement on the steel industry and the entire House will think it proper that that statement is made today.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): My right hon. Friend will be aware that we used to have some terrible local government financial settlements under the Conservatives. However, we did have lengthy debates on those inadequate settlements. Now we have better settlements for Derbyshire and other areas, but we do not have such lengthy debates. We had an inadequate set of debates last night, which lasted just three hours. Why cannot we have the best of both worlds—better settlements still for Derbyshire and long, full debates?

Mrs. Beckett: I take my hon. Friend's point. He is quite right, and I know how strongly he and other Derbyshire Members have pressed those issues in the House over the years. I understand his regret that, last night, we had only two one-and-a-half hour debates on local government funding. He will know, I hope, that that was the result of objections from Conservative Back Benchers to the Government motion, which sought to provide more time for those debates. Whether their objections stem from the fact that they do not wish to discuss better settlements for local government is a matter for my hon. Friend to consider.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): The Leader of the House keeps telling us that she cannot find time for this debate or that debate, but she could find time for all the debates if she was prepared to order the House to sit during half-term week. Is not it increasingly clear that Labour Members are trying to hide behind half-term week in order to deprive the public and the House of the chance to hold this awful Government to account?

Mrs. Beckett: The recommendation that the House should not sit during what is most schools' February half-term, if that were at all possible, was made by the all-party Modernisation Committee at a time when I was not one of its members. I believe that that recommendation, which was also proposed by the Jopling report, was unanimous. As for the suggestion that the Government are seeking to avoid the scrutiny of the House, we have provided 200 extra opportunities for debate in Westminster Hall, so that is a pretty ludicrous accusation.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): May I ask my right hon. Friend for an urgent debate on the future of the steel industry, following this morning's announcement by Corus of 6,000 job losses—1,200 of which will occur in Llanwern, near my constituency—and the closure of Ebbw Vale? Does she agree that Sir Brian Moffat, the chairman of Corus, has treated the House, the Government and the unions with contempt? Should not the matter be publicly and urgently debated in the House?

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware of the serious concern that is felt by all hon. Members—a concern that is likely to be expressed when we move on to the next business. I am also conscious that my hon. Friend has had the forethought to secure a Westminster Hall debate, in which

I believe that he hopes to air the issues. I fear that I cannot undertake to find in Government time the opportunity for a special debate in the near future. However, I have little doubt that, as matters unfold, hon. Members will continue to press for various opportunities to scrutinise the unfortunate developments that have occurred. The Government have tried to engage the company in constructive discussion, but without the success that we would have liked.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I was touched by the right hon. Lady's explanation of why she took the extraordinary decision to cancel Thursday's debate on standards and privileges. She said that the motion might not be wide enough to allow the House to discuss the funding of the dome, the granting of passports and all the other topical matters relating to ministerial misconduct and allegations of such misconduct. If such are her reasons, why will she not ensure an early debate on a wide motion? I am sure that the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) would value the opportunity to counter the allegations of dishonesty that are currently circulating against him from Cabinet members. I am sure that the many Ministers who are clinging precariously to their jobs would also like the opportunity to set the record straight on their own misconduct. Surely providing such a debate would be the right thing to do, instead of sweeping the matter into the long grass and sending Parliament away for far too long to ensure that the public do not see proper scrutiny of this miserable Government.

Mrs. Beckett: Not for the first time, the right hon. Gentleman has demonstrated that he either does not listen to what is said, or does not follow it properly. I did not give the reasons that he described in respect of not pursuing the debate at the present time. Opposition Members are clearly desperate to discuss the Hammond inquiry before its work is finished and have argued that many other issues need addressing, so I simply pointed out that we now have the opportunity to discuss two items of Government legislation on the day to which he refers. Given Opposition Members' comments on the need to scrutinise the Government's actions, I would have thought that even he might have thought that such business was more important.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Will my right hon. Friend comment on the progress of legislation to establish through ratification and into full law the International Criminal Court? Does she accept that there is unnecessary delay in the House of Lords? Will she do her best to persuade the relevant authorities there to ensure that the measures pass rapidly into Committee, so that they can come to this House and be passed into law? They can then be used to bring to justice the international criminals who can currently go free.

Mrs. Beckett: I know that my hon. Friend has for some time expressed a great interest in those matters and pressed for the measure's introduction. I am not aware of any untoward delay in the House of Lords, but I shall certainly draw his remarks to the attention of relevant colleagues. I assure him that the Government are anxious to make progress on the matter.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): The transport commissioner for London is today meeting the Deputy Prime Minister to discuss the future of the underground, for whose long-awaited modernisation the Government promised a public-private Partnership. Will the Leader of the House at least induce the Deputy Prime Minister to provide progress reports, if that is the correct term? Will she encourage him not to wait for what she earlier called a somewhat refined stage in discussions? Knowing the Deputy Prime Minister as we do, we cannot help but expect that we might have to wait an inordinately long time for such a stage to be reached.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman rightly says that the modernisation of the tube has been long awaited. It is unfortunate that it waited 18 years under the Government whom he supported. However, I assure him that the Labour Government are keen for the constructive negotiations that are taking place to be successfully concluded. If that happens, we shall be only too anxious to make it known.

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): Is my right hon. Friend aware of worrying reports today about a former Conservative immigration Minister who admitted receiving papers from the Hinduja family for a passport application and was employed by them as an adviser after leaving office? Does she agree that, for the Hammond inquiry to be full, thorough, transparent and fair, the House must have access to papers from the previous Administration that show the involvement of Conservative Ministers in the matter? That would ensure that all the issues were brought to light and that the House had confidence in the inquiry.

Mrs. Beckett: I had seen the reports to which my hon. Friend refers. The papers that Sir Anthony asks to see and their release are matters for him, not the Government. I am sure that he will wish to examine thoroughly the facts about a series of events, which, from my reading, are of long standing. However, I know that Sir Anthony is anxious to complete his inquiry speedily, and we must therefore strike a balance.

Sir Anthony has expressed a wish for Ministers to avoid making comments that appear to prejudge any aspect of the inquiry before it produces any details. I therefore hope that my hon. Friend understands if I do not comment further on her question.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Steel Industry

1.17 pm

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): With permission Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the steel industry and the announcement made today by Corus.

The House will know that since early December Corus has been conducting a review of its operations, the results of which were announced this morning. Corus has said that it intends to introduce radical restructuring measures, which will mean significant job losses in England and Wales. More than 6,000 jobs will be lost; about 3,000 will be lost in Wales and 3,000 in England.

Corus has failed to discuss its plans with the Government. Relevant information has not been disclosed; the company has resisted any meaningful dialogue and has refused to discuss in detail its plans for the industry. We have expressed our anxieties to the company about that lack of information at the highest level.

There is no doubt that Corus has been facing difficulties. Trading conditions are tough, and there has been a clear need for the company to take steps to address those problems.

The Government recognise that it is for Corus and any other company to take the commercial decisions that it believes are necessary. However, in the case that we are considering, capacity will be reduced and thousands of jobs lost as a result of a short-term response to the difficulties.

The Government acknowledge that, at a time of globalisation, many sectors of industry are undergoing major restructuring. In those circumstances, the role of Government is to provide economic stability. We are doing exactly that. Consequently, more than 1 million more people are in work now than in 1997.

Inflation remains around or below the target of 2.5 per cent. Long-term interest rates are the lowest for 35 years. We have put an end to the old cycle of boom and bust. Building on that platform of stability, the Government have been driving forward an active industrial policy to enable established industries to modernise, to adopt new processes and technologies and to support the development of new industries.

We have seen manufacturing productivity increase by about 3.5 per cent. over the past year. Exports are growing, with manufacturing export volumes up by more than 9.5 per cent. in the past year. Manufacturing output is also rising. The prospects for manufacturing are improving, with most forecasters expecting growth to pick up over the next two years. Only this morning, the latest Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply report showed manufacturing growing at its fastest rate since March last year.

Today's announcement by Corus stands in stark contrast to other manufacturing companies that are prepared to take a long-term view. In recent weeks, Toyota and Nissan have taken positive decisions on production in the United Kingdom, when they could have gone anywhere in the world. They have decided that they have a future as manufacturers in the United Kingdom. They have committed to substantial new investment. They have demonstrated confidence in their labour force and in the economic stability and favourable business environment that this Government have established.

Corus should, like Toyota and Nissan, weigh up its long-term interests and prospects and, in responding to the real challenges that it faces, put far greater weight on the new opportunities for developing into new markets. Even after today's announcement, Corus will remain a major employer, with about 22,000 employees in the United Kingdom—a demonstration of the fact that there is a future for the steel industry.

It is because there is a future for the industry that Corus should think again about the proposed closures and redundancies, and work with the trade unions, the Government and the National Assembly for Wales to identify a better way forward. We recognise that that is a commercial decision to be taken by the company and that action had to be taken to tackle the losses being suffered. However, Corus should now engage openly and work constructively with all the relevant parties, building on the strengths of the steel industry.

UK steelworkers have improved productivity dramatically in recent years. They are the most highly productive steelworkers in the whole of Europe. Between 1998 and 1999, they increased their productivity from 533 tonnes per person to 571 tonnes—well above the levels in Germany and France. We have been working with the industry to help it to improve productivity, to modernise and to adopt new technology.

The work force at Corus have shown their long-term commitment to the industry and to the company, and I share their anger at Corus's behaviour. Corus should now work with its employees and the communities affected. Should Corus refuse to change course, it must meet its obligations. It must pay the costs of the clean-up of the sites affected by today's announcement. It should then release them quickly and play its part in helping the communities affected.

The Government will not walk away from the innocent victims of this decision. We will be there alongside them. We will provide help for the individuals affected, support for local communities and backing for regeneration schemes to support the local economy and provide new jobs for people. However, it need not come to that.

Corus could adopt a different approach. If it were to do so, it would have the support of the Government. On behalf of 6,000 steelworkers, their families and the communities in which they live, I urge Corus to think again and to work with us to identify a better way forward.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving me an advance copy of his statement.

The ending of iron and steel making at Llanwern and at Ebbw Vale and the plant closures elsewhere—not just in Wales, but in Yorkshire and Teesside—represent a devastating blow to the workers affected and their families, especially as productivity in those plants increased so enormously over the past 20 years. The 6,000 job losses announced today come on top of some 4,000 last year, and the ripple effect will be felt much more widely among suppliers and others, including, as it happens, my constituency, which provides limestone for steel making. Where will the 3,000 job losses affecting

so-called "other business operations" fall? In other words, outside Wales and the north of England, which other local economies and communities will be affected?

The much wider problem represented by the job losses is the manufacturing decline since 1997. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, since the general election, more than 350,000 jobs have been lost in the manufacturing sector? What is his assessment of the rate of those job losses? Are today's announcements just the symptom of a wider malaise and a deeper trend, which is getting worse, not better, in manufacturing industry?

Last week, we initiated a debate on manufacturing in which we demanded from the Secretary of State a package of practical and immediate measures to help manufacturing. Why did he refuse our proposals? We gave him specific examples of the regulatory burdens and the extra business taxes on manufacturing, which are undermining its international competitiveness. Is he aware that the United Kingdom Steel Association has specifically drawn attention to the burden of those extra regulations and the damage that it is doing to our competitiveness in overseas markets?

Is the Secretary of State aware that Corus partly blames high transport costs, which, of course, are caused directly by Government taxation policies that have made road fuel taxes the highest in Europe and undermined every manufacturing company that has to transport its products to the continent or elsewhere?

Last week, we demanded that the Government withdraw the new energy tax—the so-called climate change levy—which will come into effect in April and will do further damage to manufacturing concerns such as steel making that are high users of energy. Will the Secretary of State, even at this late stage, withdraw that new threat to manufacturing jobs? How can he justify an unnecessary and damaging extra measure that Corus must have taken into account in its decision to lay off such a number of workers?

Manufacturing is the sector that the Labour Government forgot. The Government say, and the Secretary of State has just told us, that Corus must think again. I hope that it does think again, but the Government must think again as well, and they can start by dismantling the £32 billion of extra regulatory and tax costs that the CBI has identified as an extra burden on British business over this Parliament.

Who in the Government is responsible for policy on Corus and on manufacturing and the steel industry? Is it the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry? Is it the Secretary of State for Wales? Is it the First Minister of the Welsh Assembly or his deputy, who is a Liberal and who apparently speaks on economic matters? Is it the Prime Minister, who met the chairman of Corus? Is it the Chancellor, who imposed those extra, damaging business taxes? Instead of a firm and clear strategy to stop the closures and reverse the trend in manufacturing decline, all we get from the Government is policy fragmentation and devolution of responsibility to others. Who is in charge of a strategy to prevent this from happening again?

We have been warning of these job losses for months. We have seen new Labour taking old Labour for granted. We have seen a Secretary of State for Trade and Industry who is constantly surprised at the damage that his own policies are doing. The Opposition will do all that we can to help the Government find a way out of the serious situation, but only the Government can introduce a practical and immediate package of measures to restore the competitiveness of manufacturing industry in world markets. If the Secretary of State cannot do that, will he make way for those who can?

Mr. Byers: I think that there were some questions in that statement, to which I shall try to reply.

The right hon. Gentleman speaks of transport costs. When he has time to read the detail of Corus's announcement, he will see that transport costs were not a major issue. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) asked the questions. He should let the Minister reply.

Mr. Byers: The right hon. Gentleman will see that, as part of the restructuring announced today, Corus will take products from Teesside down to Llanwern, so transport costs are clearly not a great issue.

The right hon. Gentleman did not mention the costs of the climate change levy to the steel industry: £8 million a year. If he had referred to the losses being incurred by Corus, he would have realised that £8 million is insignificant in that context. I do not know what contact the right hon. Gentleman has had with the chief executive of Corus, but if he had met him to talk about the company's plans and proposals—we have known since 5 December that the review was under way—he would know that the climate change levy was not a consideration. It was raised specifically with the chief executive, and it was not an issue.

The right hon. Gentleman speaks of jobs being lost. He fails to refer to the fact that, on average, every year for 18 years under the Conservative Government 150,000 manufacturing jobs were lost. That is his record.

The right hon. Gentleman does not refer to the impact of Tory policies on the steel industry. All that he needs to look at is the record of his Government. Between 1979 and 1997, 121,000 steel jobs were lost under the Conservative Government.

The right hon. Gentleman's solution is to deny workers minimum standards. When he speaks about the burden of regulation and red tape, he means the national minimum wage, which would go under the Conservatives; he means the right to paid holidays, which would go under the Conservatives; he means that the opportunities that we have provided for trade union recognition would be denied; and he means that health and safety would be put to one side.

That is the Tory prescription for manufacturing industry and for industry generally. We will not embrace that approach. All that the Tories offered was boom and bust. We offer economic stability and a far better way forward.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): There was no malaise at Llanwern, which has the highest productivity, high investment and high tech—a brilliant success for Britain.

Today, we have witnessed the butchery of the steel industry. There have been many crises in the steel industry in the past 50 years. They have all been solved by common sense, agreements and deals done between

[Mr. Paul Flynn]

Government and the industry. Today, we have seen the industrial heart ripped out of the Ebbw valley. Six months ago Corus said that it intended to invest £150 million in the furnace at Llanwern. Today, that prospect was given the death sentence. That will mean that the rest of the plant is less viable.

Is it not true that by rumour, by denial of dialogue and by refusing to consider any alternative deal, Corus has callously and cynically manipulated the position, indifferent to the suffering of local people, entirely for the internal benefit of one single company? The assets and skills of Llanwern are being stripped out to benefit the company, and the contracts will be enjoyed by its Dutch arm.

Is it not right for us to censure Corus today—

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): The hon. Gentleman should censure his own Government.

Mr. Flynn: Those who claim that this is a party political matter will rightly be treated with contempt by those who have seen their futures destroyed by Corus. It should be seen as a company with an undeveloped social conscience, but a highly developed instinct for greed.

Mr. Byers: Labour Members understand the anger articulated by my hon. Friend on behalf of his constituents. There is a personal element in what he says: he worked at Llanwern for a number of years.

There is no doubt that the process and procedures adopted by Corus run counter to most of the ways in which British business should be operating at the beginning of the 21st century. It has not involved the work force: it has made no attempt to explain the policies or the difficulties. The review has been in progress for nearly two months, but there has been no attempt to adopt a partnership approach.

Our message to Corus is clear. We understand the difficulties that it faces, but we believe that it can overcome those difficulties if it works in partnership with the Government, trade unions and the National Assembly for Wales. The steel industry operates very much on an economic-cycle basis. It is experiencing difficulties now, but good times will come. What worries the Government is that capacity and jobs are being lost, and that when we have opportunities in future we shall not have a strong steel industry that can take advantage of those opportunities.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): Most right-thinking people will probably agree that Corus has displayed a disgraceful neglect of its work force—the most productive steelworkers in Europe. Those running the company have behaved like a bunch of 19th century ironmasters. The loss of 6,000 jobs in south Wales, Yorkshire and north-east England is a tragedy for those workers and their families.

Is the Secretary of State aware that today Corus is recruiting steelworkers for its plant in Holland, but sacking workers in the United Kingdom? Does he believe that the crux of the matter is the euro and, indeed, exchange rates, which have caused every ton of steel produced in the United Kingdom to make a loss? When will the Government address that problem?

Does the Secretary of State agree that our employment laws are inadequate to protect British workers, compared with those on the continent? When will the Government produce legislation to give British workers the same protection as their counterparts in Europe?

Why did the Department of Trade and Industry allow British Steel to amalgamate with Corus without considering some of the problems that have, in fact, resulted? There is no doubt that many communities will be devastated—not least Ebbw Vale, on the boundary of my constituency, which has been dealt what amounts to a knock-out punch.

The number of job losses in Llanwern is enormous. What we need now is a crash programme of investment. Will the Secretary of State plead with the Treasury for extra money for the Welsh block grant, to ensure the establishment of the new industries that will be so badly needed?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman raises the important question of what would happen if Corus proceeded with the plans that it announced today. I hope that the House will be united in sending Corus the clear message that we want it to reconsider, but, as I said in my statement, if it fails to do so we shall need to work alongside the individuals and communities affected by the decision.

We need to ensure that regeneration measures and job creation programmes are supported, and we shall certainly do that. We will not walk away from the difficulties being experienced by those individuals and communities.

The hon. Gentleman raises United Kingdom employment law. Of course the European works council provisions apply to Corus as a company that operates in two European Union countries. There are signs that the European works council provisions are perhaps not working as effectively as they should, and the Government will certainly want to consider that.

The hon. Gentleman will also be aware that, only last week, in the light of events that occurred elsewhere, I announced that we would consult the Trades Union Congress and the Confederation of British Industry on our domestic information and consultation arrangements. We have already had first meetings with both organisations, and I hope that we can make progress with those discussions as quickly as possible.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): Labour Members are shocked by the fury that my right hon. Friend is expressing and the way in which Corus has sidelined the Government and rejected out of hand the offers of assistance and support that have been proffered. Will he tell the House of the discussions that he has had with Corus and the attitude that the company has adopted towards him? I think that it would be instructive for the House to appreciate the manner in which the company behaves.

Will my right hon. Friend, in considering what we do next, try to impress on Corus that if it is not prepared to save the jobs, it should try to save the plant so that others can take on the responsibility of steel making. Then, if and when we join the euro and our circumstances change dramatically, we will be able to take advantage of new market conditions and new industrial opportunities which many of us see as the future for our country?

Mr. Byers: There have been numerous meetings with the company and with the chief executive since the review

started at the beginning of December. However, the chief executive indicated very early in those discussions that a package of measures to assist the company would not be enough to remedy its underlying problems as he saw them.

My hon. Friend will also be aware that, at the end of last week, there was an approach by those representing the work force at Llanwern about the possibility of taking over the plant and operating it themselves. As I understand it, Corus has dismissed that possibility because it does not want someone to be competing against it in the market. That was the company's reason, and I hope that it will reconsider that approach. If the work force genuinely feel that they can take over the plant and make it run profitably—we have seen at Tower colliery, in south Wales, that it can be done—I hope that Corus will give the idea proper and detailed consideration.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Will the Secretary of State answer the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) about which communities will lose the other 3,000 jobs?

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Read the press release.

Mr. Bruce: The hon. Gentleman obviously has not read the press release; I have it in my hand.

Has the company given details of those job losses? The Secretary of State says that he has had extensive talks with the company. Has Corus said that it did not want to give details on job losses to the DTI because when Vauxhall did so, they were leaked to the press and the poor people who were losing their jobs learned about it on local radio?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman keeps making that accusation about Vauxhall, which he knows is untrue. If he wants to learn the details of the Corus announcement, he should talk to Corus.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South): It is appropriate that my right hon. Friend should know of the anger of the work force on Teesside and in my constituency at this devastating news. They believe that their livelihoods and their families are unquestionably in desperate straits. My right hon. Friend will also want to know that my constituents' anger has been increased by the fact that they heard the news on the radio. Representatives of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation were refused the opportunity to discuss with management what options existed to save jobs.

My constituents have also been told that a further 3,000 jobs are to go. It is possible that they will hear on the radio the news about where those jobs will be lost. The work force are angry and their families are exceedingly anxious. My constituents would like to know how many times the Government approached Corus to achieve a resolution. Did the Government offer the company an effective package worth some £85 million, which it refused even to contemplate?

Mr. Byers: As I said earlier, there have been numerous meetings with Corus over the past two months, but the difficulty was that Corus would not enter into a meaningful dialogue or discussion about working together to overcome the difficulties being experienced by the industry.

I understand the anger that my hon. Friend's constituents must feel. It is bad enough to lose one's job, or have it threatened, but I hope that all hon. Members will agree that to learn about it from a local radio broadcast is unacceptable. We have begun the consultation on information in part to find a better way forward, to ensure that a similar event does not occur in the future.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Is the Secretary of State proud of his record and that of his Department? He did not know about BMW or Corus, and he makes statements to protect the textile industry while wearing a South African suit. Is it not about time that his job went too?

Mr. Byers: I do not know where the hon. Gentleman's suit was made, but he will be pleased to know that I am wearing an English-made suit. Perhaps a Whip will find out soon where the hon. Gentleman's suit was made.

On the serious point, the reality is that the Government engaged with Corus, but that Corus did not want to enter into dialogue with the Government. On behalf of the Government and the 6,000 steelworkers who have lost their jobs, I am asking Corus today to think again and to work with us, to find a better way forward and to overcome the company's difficulties.

That is the message from the Government. I regret the fact that the Tories have not joined us in that call.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on setting out very clearly the miserable way in which Corus has dumped British workers on the scrap heap. Sir Brian Moffat now joins Sir Ian MacGregor in the history of treachery in the steel industry: both have treated British steelworkers in a miserable way, and both have been honoured with knighthoods. That is a great pity.

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that Corus refused to discuss aspects of the plans that it was making, and that it blocked the Government's efforts to begin the process of regeneration by refusing to give the age profiles of the workers in their plants? Will he further impress on Sir Brian Moffat that it was that work force who earned British Steel such profits that it was able to throw £700 million at shareholders to get them to agree to the merger with Corus? I wonder what those shareholders are thinking about Sir Brian's actions now. I hope that further representations will be made to Corus to try to save something from this disaster.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend knows from his constituency experience exactly what large-scale job losses mean in the steel industry. If I recall correctly, in the Tory years about 10,000 steel jobs were lost in his constituency, so he will know at first hand the difficulties that will be encountered. We will certainly continue to make representations to Corus. I hope that in the face of the anger that has been expressed today and the shock felt by the communities and the individuals affected by the decision, Corus will engage far more constructively and that it will reconsider its announcement.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): The Secretary of State may be aware of a particular problem that all the

[Mr. Richard Allan]

steel areas face, including my own in south Yorkshire, which this announcement can only make worse. I refer to high levels of long-term sickness and unemployment among older workers who have left the steel industry as a result of previous redundancies, or who will leave it in future. Does he agree that if ever there were a priority for joined-up Government action, it would be to offer new opportunities to people who have had to leave the steel industry so that they are not simply left to face 10, 15 or 20 years of inactivity followed by retirement? Does he agree that many national programmes, however well intentioned, have failed to touch those groups? Will he make it a priority for his Department to do something to help?

Mr. Byers: We have been working for some time now in this area because of the needs referred to by the hon. Gentleman. I hope that in the very near future we will be able to make proposals, perhaps as part of a package in response to today's announcement. As I said, I hope that Corus will reconsider its position, but if it does not, we will need to introduce a package of measures to provide help for those affected and, in that context, we will need to address the issue referred to by the hon. Gentleman.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): I am glad that my right hon. Friend mentioned the experience of Tower colliery in my constituency. When the previous Government and the Coal Board wanted to shut down the pit, the workers said no and set up a workers' co-operative. Will my right hon. Friend put every pressure possible on Corus to allow the men to be given the chance to run their own business? The men know better than anyone where efficiency savings can be made in the industry. Give the men in the industry a chance if the owners have failed.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. When my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales and I met Sir Brian Moffat this morning, we made exactly that point about providing an opportunity for workers at Llanwern, who suggested last week that they were interested in taking over the plant. We urged him to give detailed consideration to the proposal. Corus has resisted so far, but I hope that in the light of today's announcement it will now give detailed consideration to the proposition from the ISTC.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Of course, mass sackings are not consistent with the image of an economically buoyant Britain that the Government wish to spin in the run-up to an election. However, the Secretary of State has to accept that the board of Corus is acting not capriciously but because the company is making losses. That is happening because of the cheap imports of steel to this country and because a loss is made on every ton of steel made here. Until the Government are prepared to face up to why that is happening, there will continue to be a haemorrhage of jobs from the steel industry and from UK manufacturing. When will the Government show some leadership on that issue?

Mr. Byers: I know that the hon. Gentleman has strong views about the European single currency, and he may find himself isolated in the Conservative party at present. He gave a coded message, which I hope his Front Benchers heard. We are aware of the issues to which he referred and we have a clear policy on them. We are keeping the option open, and I think that business understands that. Only a week ago, Nissan took its very positive decision because we kept the option open and did not rule it out for the next Parliament.

Mr. Ian Cawsey (Brigg and Goole): My right hon. Friend will welcome the news that if he can have conversations with Corus over the aid package that has been put in place, workers at the Scunthorpe site will support him in all his endeavours. Scunthorpe and the north Lincolnshire area are losing objective 2 status, which is in a transitionary phase. Four hundred jobs could be lost at the Scunthorpe works on top of the 670 jobs already lost. Will my right hon. Friend give an undertaking to look at the objective status of the north Lincolnshire area and to see what further money can be invested to assist in the regrowth of that economy and to help those people find jobs?

Mr. Byers: Our first task must be to try to get Corus to reconsider this morning's announcement, but my hon. Friend makes an important point: the more than 400 jobs that are projected to be lost at Scunthorpe are on top of the nearly 700 losses that Corus declared last year. Of course, if Corus proceeds with the proposals announced today, we will put in place a package of measures to ensure economic regeneration and job creation in the affected areas. I assure my hon. Friend that we shall carefully examine how we can do that in Scunthorpe and north Lincolnshire.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): There is no doubt that today's announcement is disastrous for the communities in Teesside, Yorkshire and Wales that will be so badly affected; it is a real body blow. While I acknowledge that Corus has hitherto behaved very badly, does the Secretary of State realise that since Labour took office, 16,000 jobs have been lost in manufacturing in Wales? Is it not a fact that keeping inflation down has become something of a sacred cow? Should we not be looking at fiscal rather than monetary policies to control inflation? Does he agree that the Monetary Policy Committee should consider employment as well as inflation? Will he please tell the House what kind of help was on offer to Corus?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Welsh Assembly proposed a detailed package of measures, and support would have come from the United Kingdom Government as well. It was carefully tailored to ensure that we did not come into conflict with any European Union state aid provisions. In the end, it was clear that Corus did not want to engage in those discussions. The company said that discussions would make no difference to today's announcement. I regret that, because if we had had a genuine dialogue, we could have gone through with Corus the details of the support that would have been available. We may not have avoided all the consequences of today's announcement, but we would have been able to alleviate some of the pain now being suffered in many communities.

On the Government's economic policies, short-term measures could be taken, which might be broadly supported, but which would, in the medium and long term,

cause lasting difficulties. Wales knows that because it went through a desperate, painful period in the early 1980s. There are difficulties at the moment, but people in Wales, especially in south Wales and at Shotton in north Wales, know that they do not want to return to the early 1990s, when not thousands but tens of thousands of jobs were lost.

With respect to the hon. Gentleman, the policy prescriptions that he proposes may receive plaudits today, but they will reap real problems in the medium and long term, with tens of thousands of job losses in Wales and throughout the United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I wish to help every hon. Member in this very serious matter, but I need the co-operation of the House. Questions must be brief if I am to call every hon. Member who wishes to speak.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): May I tell my right hon. Friend that anyone who knows the history of Ebbw Vale and the surrounding communities, some of which I represent, will know that steel making is vital to our communities? A total closure, such as that proposed, would therefore be desperate and devastating. Even at the eleventh hour, will my right hon. Friend make an appeal to Sir Brian Moffat and Corus because they owe a responsibility not only to their shareholders and bankers, but to the people who have made the industry such a great success?

Mr. Byers: Many communities will suffer if today's announcement is implemented, but Ebbw Vale in particular will be devastated by the announcement of the whole plant's closure. That community and town has developed very much on steel, the fundamental core of its economic activity. If Corus proceeds with the closure of Ebbw Vale, the Government and the Welsh Assembly will work alongside the community and the individuals affected to help them through a painful and difficult time. Better than that, however, we urge Corus to think again, to reconsider its proposals and to find a way in which Ebbw Vale can retain steel-making capacity. As my hon. Friend suggests, I urge Corus to reconsider the decision that it has taken today.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Did the Government not know that this disaster was impending? Last October, in evidence to the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, the Secretary of State's Department analysed the problems faced by the steel industry and came up with an extremely complacent response. If the Government had got down to solving the problem then, developing the package of support that the Secretary of State tells us that they have offered—late in the day—to Corus, might not the disaster have been averted? Was not one contributory factor the high cost of energy in this country in comparison with that of our European competitors?

Mr. Byers: The reality is that when Corus had two joint chief executives, I discussed with them the possibility of support and assistance for the industry. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that those joint chief executives were dismissed in early December, which led to the review that we are dealing with—the consequences of which were announced today. We have been engaged with the company but, as I said in my statement and in reply to hon. Members, the company simply did not want to have a dialogue about how we could work in partnership to identify a better way forward.

Mr. MacShane: When Nissan and Boeing are investing in the UK, when there are 1.1 million new jobs here and 4.7 million new jobs in the euro zone and when Europe and Britain are growing, it is crazy to take so much steel capacity out of our economy. Sir Brian Moffat will ask a sacrifice of many men and women. May I suggest that he adds his own name to that list of sacrifice by resigning? A new leadership at Corus—because we must look forward—should work with the Government, the unions and even some Opposition Members, who understand the needs of manufacturing, to build a policy that gets us fully into Europe. The pound-euro imbalance has been the main cause of those running losses. We need a policy whereby we use more steel in the UK. The Tory anti-manufacturing policies that Corus so brilliantly represents are at the root of the problem.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes an important point when he draws the attention of the House to the significant announcements made in recent weeks that core manufacturers have decided to invest in the United Kingdom. He was right to point out that Boeing made an announcement yesterday; there were also announcements from Nissan seven days ago and from Toyota at the beginning of January. If Corus takes the opportunity to reflect on today's announcement and on those decisions, it will recognise that manufacturing in the United Kingdom has a strong base. We have sectors of great growth—for example, in aerospace—for which steel will be required in the future. Corus will still employ 22,000 people after today's decision, showing that there is a long-term, viable future for the steel industry in the UK. The Government want to work with Corus to identify a common agenda, so that the company can meet its responsibilities and we can give hope to the individuals and communities affected.

Mr. Frank Roy (Motherwell and Wishaw): I would like to be able to say that the last remnants of the Scottish steel industry at the Dalyell and Clydebridge plants have avoided the cuts because of the lobbying carried out by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Rutherglen (Mr. McAvoy) and myself, but it would not be true. Frankly, the management of Corus have shown me that they do not give a damn for local politicians or, indeed, for the work force. As someone who has spent most of his life in a steelworks, I point out that tomorrow morning, 6,000 men will wake up with real fear for the first time in their lives—fear that the skills that they have honed working in blast furnaces, coke ovens, strip mills, boss plants and continuous casting plants will no longer be of any use to them. Will the Secretary of State ensure that, if those men lose their jobs, retraining will be given as quickly as possible?

[Mr. Frank Roy]

Will the Secretary of State also ensure that he does not look across the Floor for lessons from Tory Members? The Tory party tried to smash steel trade unions into the ground in the 1980s; they sold off British Steel—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I think that the Minister has heard what the hon. Gentleman has to say.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point based on his experience of the steel industry. If Corus does not withdraw these proposals, we will want to work with the individuals affected to ensure that their skills can be used to good effect in new jobs that give them good prospects for the future.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): One of the few worthwhile things that the shadow Secretary of State for Trade and Industry said was that a ripple effect would follow today's announcement by Corus. More jobs might be lost if it continues with its present line.

May I underline the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor)? BBC Radio Cleveland announced the closure of the coil plate mill on Teesside, and we have made representations for a month about that plant without receiving any significant response.

Will my right hon. Friend impress on Corus the importance of the pension rights of the people who will be transferred? I understand that those rights will be frozen until people reach the age of 65, and that fact is causing additional anxiety. My final plea is to call on the House to be unanimous in calling on Corus to think, think and think again.

Mr. Byers: I hope that that will be the case, but I regret the fact that the Conservative Opposition did not join us in asking Corus to reconsider its approach.

We shall certainly raise my hon. Friend's specific point about pension rights with the company, because the issue is of great concern to the people who might be affected. I also share his concern about the way in which the work force on Teesside learned of their future. To hear the news on a local radio station must have rubbed salt into their wounds.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): Corus's behaviour makes it a founder member of those who represent the unacceptable face of global capitalism. A steel mill in Sheerness in my constituency is owned by ASW Holdings of Cardiff. Workers there and at Corus have raised the issue of pension funds. One of the attractions of takeovers arises when the smaller company has a much richer pension fund. The pension funds of the two companies are merged, the trusts are changed and the owners of the new pension fund raid it. That has happened at Corus, and it could happen at ASW. Will my right hon. Friend examine the way in which pension funds are operated in the steel industry?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have already considered in some detail the way in which the new company, Corus, which emerged from British Steel, has used the pension fund. So far, it appears that it has operated perfectly lawfully, although I know that many Labour Members think that its conduct has been unacceptable. Perhaps we should re-examine the rules that apply to pension funds.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, just over 12 months ago, Corus invested in a French steel plant that cost £80 million? A further £22 million was invested in that plant to produce rail lines that could easily have been produced at one of the plants in the United Kingdom that is now suffering from redundancies. That is unacceptable.

Mr. Byers: The House will understand that companies take commercial decisions on what might be a good long-term investment. We are saying to Corus that it needs to take a long-term approach to the steel industry in the United Kingdom. If we had had the levels of investment that my hon. Friend mentioned, some of the difficulties being experienced today might have been overcome.

The Government can impress on Corus the damaging effects of its decision. We stand ready and willing to work with it to identify a practical way forward that will overcome the problems that Corus is facing—clearly, there are problems—and to do so in a way that will secure the long-term future of the industry in the United Kingdom and the 6,000 jobs that are at risk as a result of today's announcement.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): Today's news will be devastating to my constituents who work at Llanwern and an insult to those who worked there and paid the price in early retirement and redundancy to help to contribute to making the plant more profitable. Sir Brian Moffat met a group of Welsh Labour Members on Monday evening and assured us that he had made no decision about any plant. If that were the case on Monday, what happened during the past two days? Have all the decisions been taken in just two days? If they have, does that not show how short term they are? If he was not telling the truth, does it not show his deceit and the contempt with which he has treated the Government, the House and the work force?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend speaks powerfully on behalf of his constituents, and I fully understand his concern. It is clear that over several years the work force at Corus have demonstrated a lasting commitment to the industry and done everything asked of them. They have improved productivity and have been prepared to take early retirement, where appropriate, to secure the future of the industry and their colleagues. It is about time that Corus demonstrated a similar commitment to its work force, and it can do so by reconsidering the decisions and announcement that it made earlier today.

Opposition Day

[3RD ALLOTTED DAY]

Asylum System

Mr. Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister and that there is a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

2.11 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I beg to move,

That this House condemns the Government's failure to deal with the total chaos in the asylum system, which is detrimental to the interests of genuine refugees and the people of the United Kingdom; notes the failure of the Government's measures introduced under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; further notes that the number of asylum applications made in 2000 reached the record level of 76,040, and that the proportion of unfounded claims increased to 78 per cent of all applications; notes with concern the continuing backlog of asylum applications and undetermined applications for British citizenship; and calls on the Government to take action to put in place measures which would both deter unwarranted claims and assist genuine refugees.

Before I embark on my speech, it may help the House if I say that as we have had an important statement, to which it was quite proper to allocate a large amount of time, there is less than two hours for this debate, so I ask for the indulgence of the House because I shall not take interventions from hon. Members on either side of the Chamber.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Shame!

Miss Widdecombe: It is intended to help as many Members as possible to speak in the debate.

From April 2000,

"the new system will be in place, with new rules on benefit and new holding centres being opened up, so that claims can be processed quickly and we shall be able to get the numbers back down again."—[*Official Report*, 2 February 2000; Vol. 343, c. 1035.]

Those are striking words, as are the following:

"We are getting on with restoring the asylum and immigration system to proper integrity, so as to ensure that it deals firmly, fairly and swiftly with asylum and immigration applications."—[*Official Report*, 2 February 2000; Vol. 343, c. 1067.]

Those were the promises made earlier this year by the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary respectively.

The reality has been totally different. This country's asylum system is in utter chaos. That chaos not only continues to devalue the promises made by the Government in the House, but most of all is detrimental to genuine refugees. The Home Secretary is once again faced with a crisis of his own making—something with which he is all too familiar. Last year, we saw the implementation of his so-called flagship legislation, which he assured us would reduce the number of asylum claims. However, Home Office figures released at the end of last month show that the number of those seeking asylum in this country is the highest ever, with 76,040 applications for asylum received last year, compared with 32,000 at the end of 1997.

The Government might claim that the number of applications has fallen this month, but that is a fall from a record number in November, when we saw the highest ever number of monthly applications. The number of applications in the last quarter of last year was the highest in the year and is an increase on the figure for the last quarter of 1999.

We left office with the number of asylum seekers falling. Our tough measures led to applications falling by 40 per cent., but under this Government we have seen huge increases in the number of applications every year. Those figures demonstrate once and for all the abject failure of this Government's asylum policy. They claimed that the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 would cut the number of unfounded applications and tackle the abuse of the system.

Despite the promises made by the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary, and despite the claims made by the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), that the Government's policies were beginning to work, there has been a month-on-month increase for seven of the eight months since April 2000, when the policies came into effect.

The Prime Minister stated in the House that:

"the key factor is that the measures that were introduced in April will make a difference."—[*Official Report*, 10 May 2000; Vol. 349, c. 837.]

He also promised:

"The new system will be fairer and faster and will deter the bogus asylum seeker."—[*Official Report*, 16 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 386.]

The Government's measures have indeed made a difference: they have increased the total number of applications in every year since 1997, and since the measures that were supposed to tackle the problem came into force, there has been a further increase in the percentage of asylum seekers whose claims are judged to be invalid.

Since April 2000, things have got worse. The Government have failed in their aim of reducing the number of unfounded claims on our asylum system. Whereas the previous Government saw falls in the number of applications, this Government have propelled the country to the top of the league table in Europe for the number of asylum applications. Other European countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, have taken measures that have led to a fall in the number of applications. Under this Government, all we have had is year-on-year increases. Those figures show that our asylum system under Labour may be spun as successful but is in fact a total failure. It is not fairer; it is not faster; it is not firmer.

Claims have not been considered fairly. The huge backlog of unprocessed claims continues. The dispersal and support system is in a complete mess and is failing local authorities and those whom it is supposed to be helping. The immigration and nationality directorate is beset by bureaucratic blunders. The Home Secretary's flagship policy is now an expensive farce.

Rather than there being a fairer policy, which we were promised, case files are routinely lost and Home Office lawyers are left without vital information. The Minister of State admitted to the House that the immigration and nationality directorate has lost an incredible 15,855 files. According to the Home Office, vital files have gone

[Miss Widdecombe]

missing with increasing frequency. However, it is so desperate to get itself out of this mess of its own making that instead of allowing adjournments in cases where files have been lost, it has pushed ahead with asylum appeals when lawyers have not had the files to challenge applicants' stories. What is fair or firm about asylum tribunals not being presented with all the available evidence, or about initial refusals of unfounded applications being overturned because the material to challenge the case is not available?

The backlog of asylum applications rose from 51,000 in 1997 to 66,000 in 2000. In between, in 1999, the number rose to a horrific 101,000. In March, the Minister of State said:

"Speeding up the asylum process is a major objective in our reform of the asylum system. People who come to the United Kingdom may be fleeing terrible persecution and it is important that their claims are dealt with swiftly. So that rather than being stuck in an administrative limbo they are able to get on with rebuilding their lives."

I am sure that the whole House shares that sentiment. However, asylum seekers are still faced with enormous delays before decisions are made.

The Home Office is so desperate to get out of the morass of backlogs and delays that it has created since 1997 that it has had to resort to using an amnesty. In a 1998 White Paper, Labour stated:

"We reject the concept of amnesty".

The Government might claim that the backlog has been reduced, but is it fair that thousands of asylum seekers have been allowed to remain in this country without a full consideration of their case or, in many instances, after their claim has been refused? More than 21,000 asylum seekers have benefited from the amnesty. Is that a fair way of dealing with the problem? As well as the Government's inaction in taking measures to discourage the number of unfounded asylum claims, they have done little to remove those whose claims have been found to be bogus. Why is it that the number of removals and voluntary departures of failed asylum seekers was only 7,610 for the first 10 months of last year, against a total number of refusals for that year of 76,850?

Yesterday, the Select Committee on Home Affairs, which is Labour dominated, in a report which we may all pay tribute to and respect, accused the Government of being dilatory in removing rejected asylum seekers. It reported that during the first 10 months of last year, 58,885 asylum claims were rejected, but only 7,610 claimants were expelled in the same period. A recent report on Channel 4 news referred to at least 18,000 people who were officially listed as having been refused asylum last year, but who were for various reasons allowed to stay.

What is the point of an asylum system that, having rejected applications as unfounded, does not remove the applicants from the country? It is no wonder that thousands of asylum claims are being made in order to get round immigration controls. It is well known that it will be months before a case is decided and that there is little chance of the Government getting round to deporting asylum seekers, even after their claims have been rejected.

Another part of the Home Secretary's flagship policy was the dispersal and new support arrangements that were introduced as part of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. We were told that the introduction of the voucher system would cut abuse. Instead, the voucher system and dispersal schemes have been beset by problems and have failed to do what the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister claimed, which was to reduce the number of claims and deter abuse while providing support for genuine asylum seekers.

In June 2000, the Minister of State said:

"The arrangements for dispersing asylum seekers are working well."—[*Official Report*, 26 June 2000; Vol. 352, c. 652.]

However, in the same month the Audit Commission, on the implementation of the dispersal scheme under the 1999 Act, concluded that there were significant problems with the Government's—

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Audit Commission report was on the interim arrangements—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Order. The hon. Lady must know that that is not a point of order for the Chair.

Miss Widdecombe: We are used to bogus points of order from a Government who have no intention even of getting on top of bogus asylum claims. I shall tell them what they do not want to hear.

The Audit Commission's report stated that there were inadequate support services outside London—*[Interruption.]* Yes, it did. It added that that presented a major barrier to successful dispersal. Large groups of asylum seekers have been sent to distant parts of the country where appropriate social, language and legal support has not been available.

The Government's actions have caused suffering for genuine refugees. The dispersal system is being implemented cruelly. Applicants are dispersed by a chaotic system that sends them to areas often without appropriate support. They are often exploited by unscrupulous landlords. Is that fairer? It might be faster, but it is certainly not fairer.

The Guardian—no friend to the Opposition—reported on asylum barons in May 2000. They were growing rich on providing substandard accommodation for the Government's dispersal programme. *[Interruption.]* Apparently, substandard accommodation for the dispersal programme is of amusement to Labour Members. When they talk about genuine refugees in future, we shall remember that they laughed about a report that some people were growing rich at the expense of others.

The report by Shelter, which was published yesterday, again reported that the Government's actions were still leading to taxpayers' money being used to house asylum seekers in substandard property. Is that a fair or kind way for the Government to fulfil their responsibilities?

The dispersal scheme has been a disaster. The Government set targets for the dispersal of 65,000 asylum seekers, but the number dispersed has been a fraction of that. Meanwhile, local authorities are picking up the bill for the Government's failure. Kent county council has reported a backlog of more than 1,000 people waiting for dispersal. That same council says that spending on asylum has increased from about £250,000 in the year 1996-97 to

a forecast £50 million in 2000-01. The council had to deal with only 50 asylum seekers in the last six months that the Conservative Government were in office, whereas it is now dealing with 10,000.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): That is the previous Government's fault.

Miss Widdecombe: The right hon. Gentleman has the gall to call out from a sedentary position that that is our fault. We left a manageable situation, with applications falling. The Government have imposed on local authorities and on genuine asylum seekers a miserable failure of a system for which they alone are responsible.

Another news report in October last year was that the relationship between local authorities and the Home Office was at breaking point because of the lack of co-operation between the two. The Government are trying to palm off their responsibilities on to local communities.

In addition, the Government's voucher scheme for asylum seekers has ended in disaster. Refugee Action—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps Refugee Action is also a source of amusement for Labour Members. It was forced to close its office in Liverpool at the end of last year because workers there had been inundated with asylum seekers whose accommodation was unsafe and who had not received vouchers for essential items such as clothing and food. The charity said that it could not cope with the demand and it refused to compensate for what it called "Home Office inefficacies". The Government should be ashamed that they have put a charity that is devoted to helping refugees in that position. Instead of apologising, they continue in their intransigence, claiming that a system which everybody can see has failed is successful.

Once people have been cleared for citizenship, they face another backlog—possibly with the exception of those who make large donations to the Labour party. The number of undetermined citizenship applications has risen under the Government from 54,970 in 1997 to 73,000 at the end of last year. The current waiting time for applications for naturalisation is almost 20 months—that is, unless one is bailing out the dome, when the waiting time is reduced to six months.

Is that not evidence of the Government's record? We have a serious crisis in our asylum and immigration system. Thousands of people are stuck in backlogs, but the Government do nothing except sit and laugh. The thousands have to grin and bear the Government's empty promises. I visited Croydon 18 months ago and spoke to the queues of desperate people who had been waiting for months. They had been obeying the law and making due applications for visas and renewals of their leave to remain, or requests for citizenship. Every one of them was doing what he or she should be doing. Many of them were on their fourth or fifth visit, and they were being told, "No progress." What can the Government say? They can say only that since then the situation has become much worse.

Our policy, as announced last year by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, would be to provide secure reception centres, which would reduce the incentive for unfounded applications. As the former head of the Immigration Service Union commented:

"In my study of immigration controls, it was apparent that those countries who maintained a policy of detention had a far smaller proportion of bogus, as against genuine, refugees."

Guy Goodwin-Gill, professor of international refugee law at Oxford university, said that if all new asylum seekers—

Mr. Straw *rose—*

Miss Widdecombe: I think that I made my intentions—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Lady made it clear at the commencement of her speech that she had no intention of giving way.

Miss Widdecombe: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. I understand why Labour Members do not want to hear such things, but they are going to hear them.

Professor Goodwin-Gill—*[Interruption.]* The House is going to hear what the professor said, because it is important. He is professor of international refugee law at Oxford university, and he said that if all new asylum seekers were held in secure reception centres while their claims were processed, the system would be speeded up. Furthermore, he said:

"I have no doubt in my own mind that those who come without reference to refugee status would be deterred".

Our policy of secure detention would mean that Britain would no longer put down a welcome mat for those who abuse our asylum system with unfounded claims, and it would aid genuine refugees. Instead of the Government's disastrous dispersal policy, reception centres would provide legal, linguistic and medical support for those seeking asylum. That policy, along with our national removals agency, would make sure that those whose claims were judged to be unfounded would be removed.

It is often said that that policy would be highly expensive. The Government are providing a reception centre which, when fully up and running, will cater for a fifth of all applicants. It cost £6 million. Are we really to believe the Home Secretary's extravagant claims that, as one fifth can be dealt with for £6 million, somehow the remaining four fifths will cost between £2 billion and £3 billion? That costing is nonsense, and the right hon. Gentleman knows it. He looked at the possibility of universal reception centres himself, and knows that they would work. He is simply not taking the single step that other countries have taken, which has proved to be successful.

Our policy will really produce a fairer, faster and firmer asylum policy. We shall know where those whom we are going to reject are and we shall be able to remove them. We shall be able to provide those whom we are going to accept with a proper resettlement package, which will mean that they go out with the necessary support. That is a hit-and-miss business with local authorities at the moment. We left a 40 per cent. fall in applications because we took measures that had a deterrent effect. We shall repeat that success when, in a few months time, we take over the asylum system. It will be a good day, not just for the British taxpayer, but for the man genuinely fleeing persecution.

2.33 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"reaffirms the obligations of the United Kingdom under the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees to provide asylum for those fleeing from a well-founded fear of persecution; approves the Government's strategy for reform of the asylum system and welcomes the practical improvements which have already been delivered, including substantial additional investment to provide the Immigration and Nationality Directorate with the staff and other resources essential to operate an efficient and humane asylum system; congratulates the Immigration and Nationality Directorate staff on their recent achievements including taking 110,000 initial asylum decisions in 2000; welcomes the effect which the provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and other measures have had in reducing unfounded asylum claims; welcomes the successful introduction of a coherent, national system of support for asylum seekers to replace the chaotic arrangements created by the previous Government which imposed an intolerable burden on local authorities in London and the South-East; notes that the civil penalty, a measure which was opposed by the Official Opposition, has successfully encouraged hauliers and ferry operators to introduce additional security measures to tackle clandestine and illegal entry to the United Kingdom; welcomes the Government's expansion of detention capacity to support substantial increases in the number of asylum seekers with unfounded claims who are removed from the UK; and supports the Government's commitment to working closely with other countries to deal more effectively with asylum pressures affecting the whole of Europe."

I always welcome the opportunity for a serious debate on asylum policy, to discuss how we might make the system a little more effective. I was looking forward to that, but as the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) finished her extraordinary speech, the image that was conjured up was of a fairy godmother, dressed as Widow Twankey, waving a magic wand, and suggesting that with one bound, it would be possible to solve the asylum problems that have affected every single European country.

Instead of serious, constructive proposals, we heard the usual mixture of the unworkable and the unthinkable from a party which, while mouthing its supposed commitment to the rights of the genuine refugee, adopts an approach with an altogether more sinister motive. That approach is designed for one purpose only: not to deal with the issue, but to exploit it in the hope that fear will encourage some voters to support the Conservative party. That approach has nothing to do with principle or even workable policy; it has everything to do with prejudice.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: No. When the Opposition first announced their choice of debate for today, they put it on record—I ask my hon. Friends to weigh these words carefully—that it was to be about the Government's failure to run an efficient and humane asylum system. I checked the motion last night when it went down to the Table Office, and noticed that the word "humanity" had disappeared. So the Conservative party's commitment to humanity on this issue lasted exactly seven days. In the intervening period, one can imagine the scene in the shadow Cabinet. That loyal body of people in the shadow Cabinet, who spend most of their time dropping the proposals of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald like hot bricks, might have said, "Do you really think it's a good idea for us to mention humanity? Do you think that will really appeal to our core voters?"

For the Conservative party to talk of humanity on this issue takes us into high Orwellian regions of double-speak. I shall take two examples, one from the Conservative party's past and one from the future that it promises. Five years ago, when the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald was dealing with immigration matters, the Conservative Government passed into law provisions with the sole aim of ensuring that asylum claimants who, for whatever reason, applied inside the United Kingdom, were denied any means of support at all. Under the plans and legislation of the right hon. Lady, there was to be no food, no shelter and no housing whatever. Those provisions were included in the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996. There was to be no support whatever. But for the incompetence of the Conservative party, that is exactly what would have happened. Because the right hon. Lady failed to draft the legislation properly, the courts held that the responsibility of providing for all those asylum seekers would land on local authorities.

Today, the right hon. Lady said that, at the end of 1996, Kent had a responsibility for only 50 asylum seekers, but that it is now responsible for 10,000.

Miss Widdecombe: The Government let them in.

Mr. Straw: That is because, under the right hon. Lady's legislation, it was intended, first, that asylum seekers should have no support. Then, under the legislation, the responsibility for dealing with thousands of asylum seekers fell indiscriminately on local authorities in London and the south-east. That was the result of the right hon. Lady's policy, and the dispersal policy is there to put that right. If the right hon. Lady has any complaints about those 10,000 asylum seekers, the person who has to answer for those complaints is none other than herself.

The right hon. Lady was fortunate to have an excuse for not taking interventions in an extraordinary speech that was riddled with even more inaccuracies than usual. Towards the end, she presented her policy to lock up all asylum indefinitely seekers in what are called secure reception centres. Indeed, the Leader of the Opposition has said that

"the next Conservative Government will detain all new applicants for asylum, whether port applicants or in-country applicants, in reception centres."

That claim applies to everybody, rather than only to those whose claims appear to be unfounded or to young single men. It applies to elderly people, and to women and children, regardless of their circumstances.

Leaving aside the fact that it would take years, if not decades, to build the number of centres that the right hon. Lady would need to implement that proposal, I point out that its cost would run into billions of pounds. It is extraordinary to suggest that she can base her plans on Oakington, which is a processing centre, and to argue on the basis of its costs that indefinite detention would be a matter of millions of pounds. At least 50 centres would be needed, many of them in the green belt and in Conservative constituencies, in Kent and elsewhere.

I attempted to intervene on the right hon. Lady to remind her that we are trying to build additional detention capacity in Aldington, which is just outside Ashford. We

have looked around the country for sites that will enable us to increase detention capacity to 2,500 places. That increase is necessary because of the inadequate detention capacity that was left by the previous Government. We searched the country for sites and found Aldington—but what is the result? The Conservative party, which supports the expansion of detention centres nationally, opposes it locally. The Member of Parliament for the area is a Conservative and opposes the centre. The Conservative council opposes it so much that it has even invoked the Human Rights Act 1998 to argue against it.

We know that local Tories are opposed to the centre, but what of the right hon. Lady? She knows the area and may know the 14 other sites that were considered. After 18 months of careful work by officials, we decided that Aldington was the best available site. Given her prominence in Kent and her policy of establishing more detention centres, about which we have just heard, should she not have been able to form a view on this one centre? However, when she was asked directly whether she was for or against Aldington, she ducked and dived pathetically:

"I have not looked at the merits and demerits of the Aldington site".

Whether it is my policy or hers, the simple fact is that, if she wants 50 extra detention centres, she must start with one centre. Aldington is the first one, so I offer her the opportunity to tell us whether she supports it.

Miss Widdecombe: First, if one detention centre can cope with one fifth of all applicants, why will it take 50 to deal with all of them? That is nonsense arithmetic. Secondly, I shall consider the merits and demerits of every site, including Aldington.

Mr. Straw: That is why I said earlier that the Tories do not have any serious policies to deal with the problem. I assume that the right hon. Lady has more influence with Kent Tories than I do. One word from her to tell them she would certainly establish a centre in Aldington, since 50 centres are needed, would change the current circumstances. The simple truth is that she wills the end, but not the means. It is utterly disreputable of her to call for detention space in general, but then to oppose it or sit on her hands in respect of particular details.

I say to the right hon. Lady that there is a huge difference between processing centres such as Oakington—

Miss Widdecombe: Why 50?

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Lady asks why there should be 50 centres. That is the case because, on any basis, she would have to hold 30,000 applicants if she wanted any chance of success. I am happy to share those figures with her. Furthermore, to understand the sheer incredibility of what the right hon. Lady proposes, we must try to accept not only that she is going to build a network of centres throughout the country and find the necessary money, but that she will magic into existence safe, stable Governments in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Somalia, to allow unfounded applicants to be immediately sent back once their claims have been rejected.

Even the most cursory scrutiny of that fantasy policy exposes its deceit. There is not the slightest chance that such a policy could ever be implemented. It is completely and utterly unworkable. I know that, as does anybody who knows anything about the issue, and the right hon. Lady knows it too. Of course, however, that is not the point for the Opposition. It is not a question of whether their proposals are workable, but of whether they appeal to people's base prejudices. The truth about asylum is that it does not lend itself to her glib pronouncements. It is a hugely complex matter, for which a solution cannot be provided overnight. Instead, it requires concerted and long-term efforts, both in the United Kingdom and with our European partners.

As the Select Committee on Home Affairs recognised in its report on border controls, which was published yesterday, action is necessary at a European level to deal with the asylum issues that affect all European countries.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Why here?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman keeps asking why the problem has not affected other European countries. The answer is that it does affect them. In the three months from July to September last year, UK asylum applications increased by 6 per cent. on the previous three months. Sweden saw an increase of 48 per cent., Belgium 52 per cent., Germany and Austria 24 per cent., Denmark 23 per cent. and the Netherlands 16 per cent.

One of the reasons why we happen to have more asylum applicants in absolute terms—this is another point that the right hon. Lady may not have noticed—is that we have a bigger population. If she wants to refer to league tables, let me tell her about the league table on asylum applications per thousand of population. We are not first, second or third in that table, but eighth, which is in the middle of the asylum league. Belgium has more than two and a half times our rate of asylum applications. In Ireland, the rate is almost twice ours, and in the Netherlands it is getting on for 60 per cent. The rates in Switzerland, Austria and Denmark are all greater than ours. They have significantly higher proportions of applicants per head of population than this country. This is a European problem that can be resolved successfully only by European action.

Mr. Marsha Singh (Bradford, West): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Dublin convention is one of the obstacles to the quick removal from this country of asylum seekers whose claims have been rejected? Will he tell the House which Government signed that convention?

Mr. Straw: The Dublin convention was and is one of the major problems in removing applicants from this country. *[Interruption.]* As it happens, I was not dealing with immigration and asylum when the matter arose in 1990. The Opposition approach the matter as if we were responsible for a measure that they introduced. The convention was signed in 1990. Notwithstanding the fact that the previous Government, including the right hon. Lady, knew exactly what it would achieve—or not achieve—they did nothing to try to reverse it or to limit its operation. When the Labour Government came to power in May 1997, we knew that the convention would inevitably take effect in October of that year. Worst of all, in addition to establishing the convention, the previous Government were willing to tear up the gentlemen's

[Mr. Straw]

agreement with Belgium and France that had previously allowed this country to send back most asylum applicants to those countries.

Mr. Fabricant: Get rid of it, then.

Mr. Straw: We would like to get rid of the Dublin convention, and quickly. The problem is that it is currently the only EU agreement that enables us to return applicants, so disowning it altogether would leave us with no agreements whatever with other European countries. I dearly wish that we could return to gentlemen's agreements; indeed, that is exactly what we are working on. However, if ever there was a single factor that helped to cause the increase in the number of asylum applicants who enter this country, and the greater difficulty in removing them, it was the Dublin convention, for which the right hon. Lady was responsible.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): How many more genuine asylum seekers would have come to this country without the military campaign to liberate Kosovo? Many Conservative Members, including many who are in the Chamber, strenuously opposed that campaign.

Mr. Straw: Thousands more would have come to this country, just as Germany had to bear the brunt of almost 500,000 applicants a year in the early 1990s because of the chaos in Bosnia.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) draws attention to another point. Fundamental pressures for asylum arise not from the circumstances in the receiving state but from disruption, civil strife and worse in countries hundreds of miles away.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald referred to the drop in figures in 1996. I have corresponded with the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), the former Home Secretary. Numbers declined early in 1996; they fell throughout Europe. However, by the end of 1996, they were rising, and they continued to rise in 1997. The right hon. Lady cannot escape the fact that the increase throughout Europe was due to growing civil strife.

Mr. Fabricant: They came to us first.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman is completely wrong. Asylum seekers could not have come to us first. Instead of fanning his prejudices, he should examine the figures and concentrate on the fact that, notwithstanding recent increases in this and other countries, we were in the middle of the European table last year, and we remain in that position this year.

The right hon. Lady suggests that there was a dramatic change in asylum and immigration policy in May 1997.

Miss Widdecombe: You came to office.

Mr. Straw: Yes, not least because people recognised that our immigration policy would be fairer, firmer and faster. However, the legislative and administrative structures remained exactly as the previous Government had left them until the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 came into force last year.

The biggest difference between our two Administrations was investment. When the right hon. Lady was immigration Minister, she did not provide for an increase in resources to reduce the record delay in processing asylum applications. Instead, she agreed formal plans with the Treasury for a reduction of 1,200 people—almost half the staff—in the immigration and nationality directorate. When numbers rose from late 1996, as the previous Government knew they would, they adopted the most irresponsible policy of all: a scorched earth policy. They tried to ensure that we were unable to cope with the increase by degrading the system and staff at Croydon. At the end of 1997, there were fewer than 100 skilled case workers left. It is no wonder we faced so many problems.

Our approach was to recognise the administrative and legal chaos that the right hon. Lady had left, and the financial problems that existed. We proposed a root and branch reform, in the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. It was the most comprehensive reform of the system ever introduced.

Miss Widdecombe: It was a total failure.

Mr. Straw: It was not described in that way at the time. Indeed, it received substantial scrutiny in a Special Standing Committee, which was notable for two or three reasons. First, the then Opposition spokesman put on record his support for the dispersal policy because he recognised that it made more sense than secure reception centres. He realised, because he has more sense than the right hon. Lady, that they could not be afforded or introduced for many years.

Secondly, the proceedings were notable because Conservative members of the Committee opposed only one measure. It could not be described as soft; indeed, the Conservative spokesman in the other place, Lord Cope, described it as tougher than any measure that the Conservatives had devised. The right hon. Lady did not mention that policy in her opening speech; it has proved the most effective in a range of effective measures. It is the civil penalty.

The civil penalty has made a significant difference to enforcement. It has resulted in a decline in the number of clandestines who come through docks such as Dover. I am glad to see the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) nodding. It has contributed to reducing the number of unfounded applications from places such as eastern Europe, to which it is much easier to return applicants than, for example, Iran and Afghanistan.

Applications from eastern Europe have fallen by 50 per cent. as a direct result of our measures. Our policies are working, but neither the right hon. Lady nor anyone else could have anticipated the huge increase in civil strife, disorder and violence in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Somalia and Sri Lanka, which account for the bulk of applications not only in the United Kingdom, but throughout Europe.

The right hon. Lady implies that a policy of locking up asylum seekers—some of whose claims are unfounded—from the countries that I mentioned will enable us to get them back quickly to the countries from which they have

come. That is incredible and wrong. Despite the best efforts, not only of the United Kingdom but of other European countries, it is difficult, whatever the system, to get rejected asylum applicants back to the countries from which they came. We work hard at the problem, but those people are often here for many months, sometimes years, after their applications have been refused.

That problem affects every country in Europe. In Germany, the Minister for the Interior, Otto Schilly, told me only three months ago that 500,000 rejected asylum applicants are on welfare. They cannot be returned to their country of origin despite the rejection of their applications.

What are the right hon. Lady's proposals for speeding up the removal of rejected applicants to Afghanistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Iran, Iraq and China?

Miss Widdecombe: Deter them from coming here in the first place.

Mr. Straw: Two replies today have revealed the bankruptcy of the right hon. Lady's policies. This is another example of the magic wand. Her policy is a zero policy. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The House must come to order.

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Lady's answer was important. She claims that she would deter all applicants. Despite having detention centres in which to lock up applicants for ever, there will be no applicants, genuine or otherwise.

Almost all asylum applicants from Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia or Sri Lanka, even if their applications turn out to be unfounded, are fleeing from what they regard as disruptive circumstances. They are not living in happy circumstances. Why is it that people with similar economic circumstances in, say, India do not flee to this country, while people from those other countries do? The result of the right hon. Lady's policy would be to lock out every asylum applicant.

Miss Widdecombe: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: I shall give way in a moment.

Earlier today, the right hon. Lady admitted, when she said that some reception and detention centres would be needed, that some people coming in would have their claims rejected. I put the question to her again. How would she return rejected asylum applicants, in a better and quicker way than we or other European countries are doing, to Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Somalia and Sri Lanka?

Miss Widdecombe: One could be forgiven for thinking that no asylum seekers were ever returned to those countries, yet the Home Secretary told the House only a few months ago that the Afghan hijackers and all involved in their case would go back to Afghanistan as soon as possible. They are still here, although the Home Secretary said that it would be very easy to deal with them.

The right hon. Gentleman is failing to distinguish between the genuine and the ill founded cases. We will welcome the genuine cases, but we will deter the ill founded ones by sending out a simple message: "If you come to Britain without a well founded claim, you will be detained. You will be dealt with speedily, and you will be sent back." If that is the message going out, it will be a deterrent.

Mr. Straw: In a more charitable moment, I might have thought the right hon. Lady had not thought this through. She is an intelligent woman who is capable of a perfectly intelligent contribution to a debate on some issues. Yet on this crucial issue, she implies that with one sweep she would be free, having produced a solution that she would never be able to produce in government.

The right hon. Lady's answer exposed another interesting point. She assumed that the world was divided, almost literally, into black and white: that there were applicants whose cases were genuine and well founded, and those whose cases were not genuine and, therefore—although she did not use the word on this occasion—abusive. There are a number of applicants—I have seen some in my constituency—whose fear, subjectively, is perfectly genuine, but who turn out to be unable to meet the objective test of the 1951 convention. The right hon. Lady would still have the problem of having to return those applicants to their country of origin. She has proposed no policy for doing so, despite being given every opportunity.

As for the right hon. Lady's suggestion, to which she keeps returning, that all one needs is reception centres and detention centres—even on her own analysis, that would take years to achieve. It would not work, in any event; it has not worked in other countries. She would still have the problem that our and every other European country has had—dealing with the realities of the world. They are: that it is straightforward to return people to some countries, in which case we are doing so, but that with other countries, although we are doing our best and will continue to strengthen our work on removals, it is much more difficult.

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): I thank the Home Secretary for giving way, and for his recent correspondence with me on this subject, although I am disappointed at the outcome.

Will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House what effect he believes the treaty of Nice, and enlargement, will have on migration pressures? When the Home Affairs Committee was told by the Home Office that it was reasonable to assume that the internal frontiers between the new member states and the Schengen states would remain in place for many years to come, what basis was there for that assumption?

Mr. Straw: The admission of the new states to the EU will, almost by definition, have the effect of reducing unfounded claims from the applicant countries—for example, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. *[Interruption.]* I hope that the right hon. Lady will allow me to continue. This is an important question and I am trying to answer the hon. Gentleman.

One of the tests that the Interior Ministers have determined should be set for the applicant countries is that their justice and home affairs systems should have integrity, so that there could not, for example, be the kind of abuse alleged to have been perpetrated in the past against the Roma gypsies in the Czech Republic. In a sense, that is a plus.

[Mr. Straw]

My answer to the hon. Gentleman's second question relates to the Schengen countries. The Schengen countries that currently maintain a border with eastern Europe are all absolutely clear that they have to maintain border controls—for example, at the eastern perimeter of Germany, Austria and Italy—for many years to come.

Although we are not formally a member of the Schengen area, we take part in Schengen. One of the reasons that I want to do so is to stiffen the resolve of my fellow Interior Ministers. Although the central and eastern European countries have improved their human rights record, countries further to the east may not have done, and their borders may be leaky. I accept what the hon. Gentleman says, but the EU is putting in place measures to deal with those issues.

I mentioned the civil penalty earlier. That has made a huge difference to dealing with clandestines. I notice that the right hon. Lady made no reference to it. I also notice that, notwithstanding the effectiveness of the civil penalty, the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the Leader of the Opposition, has said on a number of occasions that he would withdraw the penalty and abandon it altogether. If the Conservative party goes into the next election with that pledge, as well as the fantastical pledges that we have heard today, it would expose even more the bankruptcy of their policies.

Mr. Wardle: We are going to win the election.

Mr. Straw: No, you are not.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere) *rose—*

Mr. Gwyn Prosser (Dover) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Prosser: Does my right hon. Friend agree that if it were not for the civil penalties, the recent huge overhaul of security—not only in the trucking companies but in the port of Calais, and particularly in the P&O Stena company—would never have taken place? That operation has been lauded as highly successful and effective.

Mr. Straw: There is no question but that my hon. Friend is right. He has experienced the chaos that was produced by the previous arrangements under the Conservatives, and the pressure that it produced across Kent. He also knows the effectiveness of the civil penalty. There is no doubt that the imposition of the civil penalty has strengthened security at Dover and is now adding greatly to the strengthening of security where we really intended it to: at dispatching ports such as Calais. The port of Calais has strengthened its security, as have major carriers such as P&O Stena.

On the asylum support system, the right hon. Lady came up with a lot of quotations that were wholly tendentious because they referred to the Conservatives' asylum system, not to the new one that we have put in place. So far as the Shelter report is concerned, Chris Holmes, the director of Shelter, wrote to me to stress that a study that it had carried out was done before the establishment of the national asylum support service, and that

> the specifications of the NASS system represent an improvement on the situation to date.

The Audit Commission report also referred to the previous system, not the new one.

What the Conservatives did—I now think that they did it deliberately—not only left chaos in the administration and the legislation, but collapsed the resources available to the immigration and nationality directorate, even though numbers were rising. We have increased—*[Interruption.]* Well, it was either deliberate or utterly incompetent. On this occasion, I happen to think that it was deliberate. We have increased the resources in the IND dramatically. We have doubled the number of IND staff. As a result, we have reduced the time taken to process applications. The backlog has come down, too, from 100,000 early last year to 66,000, and falling fast.

I have said before, and I am happy to say it in the House, that the asylum issue presents me with more acute ethical issues of principle than any other aspect of my work as Home Secretary. I wish, therefore, that we could engage in a serious debate about how we can make our system more humane and effective. Such a contribution was made from the Opposition side when the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle asked a question based on his experience as an immigration Minister.

We attempted to secure such a debate, not least with our decision to commit the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 to a Special Standing Committee. That is what makes the recent pronouncements of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald so absurd. If the Conservatives were serious about the alternatives to our reforms, why did they do virtually nothing to amend that legislation? Indeed, aside from the civil penalty, all they did—*[Interruption.]* Aside from the civil penalty, which they opposed, the only other thing they did—*[Interruption.]* Well, the right hon. Lady is twittering, as usual. I have got used to it, fortunately. I took interventions, but, unsurprisingly, she was ready to evade them. She does not want to be questioned on her policy.

Aside from the civil penalty, all the Conservative party was willing to do at that stage was not to wind up cash support, but to propose a £500 million increase in it. By contrast with such disreputable, ill thought out and ill judged proposals, the Government are engaged in the long-term process of reform. Those reforms and the investment that we are putting in place have laid the foundations for a fairer, faster and firmer asylum system. I invite the House to reject the Opposition motion and support the Government amendment.

3.12 pm

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): I cannot say that the debate so far has been either constructive or educative, and even to call these proceedings a debate may not accord with the "Oxford English Dictionary" definition because I do not believe that a lot of listening has been done on either side. However, the debate is timely as it comes the day after the publication of the Home Affairs Committee report and in the week during which hon. Members will have received the Shelter report on housing asylum seekers in the private rented sector. The right hon.

Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) referred to the report only in passing, not in detail.

Miss Widdecombe: I had no time.

Jackie Ballard: We choose our priorities for the little time available.

I notice that the Chairman of the Committee is no longer in his place, but the report makes 22 detailed and serious recommendations that are worthy of serious consideration. We on the Liberal Democrat Benches would support many of them, particularly better co-ordination between the different services and better use of technology. The report refers to push and pull factors, and I shall discuss first some pull factors.

If people in other countries know of a backlog of applications in the United Kingdom, how long it takes to process applications and the inadequacy of the system to monitor the departure of failed asylum seekers, that may act as a pull factor that draws them to the United Kingdom. So may a faulty perception of what they will receive under the benefits system. Many think that they would get many times the amount that they would really receive and do not realise that people are given vouchers, not cash. Knowledge of the language, cultural and historical links and family links are also pull factors. However, no matter how bad the country of origin of an asylum seeker, it must be difficult to leave behind one's homeland and home, so asylum seekers naturally seek somewhere with which they are familiar in terms of people, place or language.

The standard of accommodation for asylum seekers cannot be a pull factor. The Home Secretary said that the Shelter report was undertaken between January and March last year, before the system changed, but it says that asylum seekers largely live in houses in multiple occupation. I would be pleased to hear his assurance that those details have changed measurably.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Surely the hon. Lady accepts that, however substandard or undesirable we may consider such conditions to be, many of those seeking refuge in this country would consider them to be a zillion miles better than the equivalent accommodation in the countries from which they are fleeing. Therefore, that is one pull factor that she should not ignore.

Jackie Ballard: Asylum seekers largely live in HMOs, and 17 per cent. of those were found to be unfit for human habitation. Such conditions may or may not be better than those which some people have left. Many people are persecuted for their political views or for membership of certain organisations and they may have lived in houses that are much better than my house or that of the hon. Gentleman. The fact that some people come from worse conditions does not justify their living in inhuman conditions when they reach this country.

Furthermore, 86 per cent. of those HMOs were unfit for the number of occupants that they held and more than 80 per cent. were exposed to an unacceptable fire risk. I readily accept that many people who are indigenous to this country live in substandard HMOs, but the one does not justify the other.

I do not know how many Members of the House have the time or the inclination to watch soap operas, but I happened to watch "EastEnders" on Sunday, immediately after the Home Secretary's appearance on another channel. One character was trying to persuade another to buy a house and turn it into bedsits. The person being persuaded said, "Look at the state of the house; it is disgraceful. No one would live in it." The person doing the persuading said, "Yes, but we can pack it full of asylum seekers and students. People who are desperate will live anywhere."

Soap operas often reflect real life and I suspect that the authors of that scene were reflecting the attitudes of a number of landlords across the country, and perhaps of people who have listened to the Conservatives on the subject of asylum seekers. The Shelter report concludes by saying that there is a need for an urgent review of housing and greater support from the NASS system, especially in relation to homes subcontracted from private landlords. I hope that the Home Secretary will take note of that.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Is the hon. Lady aware that asylum seekers in Liverpool, particularly in the Inn on the Park, the Landmark and Sunnyside, live in deplorable physical conditions and under a regime that provokes—indeed, organises—intimidation and causes great concern? Can she shed any light on why the Liberal Democrat city council has not used its powers under environmental health laws to take action?

Jackie Ballard: Clearly, I do not know the details of what is happening in Liverpool. The hon. Lady, as a representative of Liverpool, will know those details. If she wants to speak to me afterwards, I shall be happy to ask my colleagues on Liverpool city council about that.

The demeaning and ineffective voucher system cannot be a pull factor and I hope that the Minister of State will tell the House when the results of the voucher system review will be made public. She will know that there is a lot of anxiety among her Back Benchers about that. Perhaps she will also tell us how many submissions were received and how many of those opposed the system.

We believe that the asylum dispersal system needs urgent review. According to the Refugee Council, it has led to a massive increase in the number of applications not being considered at all. When the Conservatives cite their statistics, they do not take that into account. There was a huge increase last year in the number of applications rejected on the grounds of non-compliance. Many asylum seekers have difficulty in completing the statement of evidence forms. That difficulty is compounded by postal delays, and problems in finding a legal representative and in access to translation services.

We must treat people who come to this country humanely and fairly. I hope that no hon. Member would disagree with that statement. However, the Conservatives speak as though the most important issue was the number of people coming to the UK seeking asylum. They imagine that asylum seekers can be deterred from coming to the UK by an even tougher regime than we already have. How can asylum seekers be deterred from coming from countries such as Somalia and Afghanistan? The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald did not have an answer to that.

[Jackie Ballard]

I shall spend a little time considering the push factors, which get less airing in debates about asylum. In his evidence to the Select Committee, the Home Secretary said—I paraphrase—that the primary determinant of the number of people seeking asylum was not the attitude or competence of the UK Government, but pressures in other parts of the world.

There are an estimated 30 million displaced people across the world. EU countries make up 6 per cent. of the world's population and last year took only 4 per cent. of the world's refugees. We had more than 70,000 applications in the UK last year, but as the Home Secretary says, pro rata that puts us only 10th in the league of European countries. We host a small fraction of the world's refugees.

The poorer countries in the southern hemisphere receive the most refugees. We cannot expect the developing world to absorb all the problems of refugees. The UK contribution pales into insignificance compared with much poorer countries, such as Pakistan and even Iran, which have taken, respectively, 1 million and almost 2 million refugees from Afghanistan.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jackie Ballard: No. Time is short and others want to speak.

As the Select Committee said, we should focus on conflict resolution and on an EU-wide effective development aid policy, if we seriously want to deter asylum seekers by reducing the number of people who need to flee from conflict and poverty. We need to establish in this country an open and clear immigration policy. I welcome the Minister's recent remarks on the positive contributions of immigrants, and on the need to attract skilled workers to our shortage areas.

People, particularly Conservative people, speak about economic migration as though it was somehow immoral or sinful for people to seek to better themselves. *[Interruption.]* I should have thought that Conservatives would applaud economic migrants, rather than criticising them. We need also to establish nationally and internationally the legal methods of claiming asylum.

In conclusion, I shall ask the Minister a specific question, which I hope she will have time to answer. What advice would she give to a woman persecuted by the Taliban in Afghanistan, who speaks English and wants to come to the UK as a refugee? How does she do that legally? The Minister's answer to that woman will be the true test of the fairness of the Government's policies on asylum.

3.23 pm

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): I might be the only Back-Bench Member who speaks in the debate, so I might be the only hon. Member restricted to 10 minutes.

I respectfully ask those on both Front Benches, particularly the Opposition Front Bench, to get together quickly, to see whether the debate can extended by at least an hour. That would take an hour out of the debate on agriculture, in which not enough hon. Members have applied to speak, as I understand it. That would enable us to deal with the serious matter of asylum at slightly greater length.

As there will be only one or two Back-Bench speeches, I wonder why the two Front-Bench spokesmen need 20 minutes to reply. I realise that my remarks are of great importance to them, but—

Miss Widdecombe: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We considered seriously whether we could extend the debate, but as I am sure the House will appreciate, there is an equally important debate to follow. The reason why time has been so short is that a whole hour was taken up by, admittedly, a very important statement. As a Front-Bench Member, I regret that. I tried to gallop through, but those on the Government Benches were not entirely appreciative of that, as the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) will recall.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order for the Chair. I know that Mr. Speaker has imposed a time limit of 10 minutes. In the brief time that is left, perhaps hon. Members will impose an even shorter time limit on themselves.

Mr. Corbyn: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Injury time for that intervention, please.

We have a responsibility in the House, as does anyone in public life, to be very careful about the language that we use when describing asylum seekers and the problems faced by them. As the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) mentioned, the topic even gets into soap operas. Hon. Members should think about the language that they use, and the racist abuse that is meted out against asylum seekers on the streets of our big cities every night of the week. I think of the stabbing of Cumali Sinangali that took place over the Christmas weekend, and going back some years, I think of a Kurdish man, Shiho Iyuguven, whose family I got to know well, who took his life because of the way in which he had been treated in this country, and the family's fear.

We should remember that most asylum seekers have come to Britain to seek a place of refuge and a place of safety because of the abuse of their human rights in the society from which they came. The abusive language used towards asylum seekers encourages racist attacks, xenophobic attitudes, and very bad attitudes, right down to the school playground, in respect of asylum seekers' children. We should remember that and be extremely careful.

If the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) has any doubts about the reasons why people seek asylum, I urge her to take a few hours to read the Human Rights Watch report 2000. The opening pages are dedicated to a series of maps showing countries where there are major abuses of human rights, lesser abuses of human rights and very few abuses. The right hon. Lady will see that in the majority of countries of the world, people suffer major abuses of human rights.

Nobody willingly, lightly or easily goes into exile and seeks asylum from his own society. Many people have sought and received asylum in the area in which I live. I know them well and I talk to them. It brings tears to my eyes when I hear the abuse that they have been through in prison systems in various parts of the world, and their

wish to make a serious contribution to this society. Newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* routinely run headlines condemning asylum seekers for whatever reason, and that is parroted by the Conservative party.

I hold the principles laid down in the Geneva conventions and the UN convention on human rights to be extremely important. They lay down the right of asylum for people seeking to flee from persecution and personal danger. We should be careful that the way in which we deal with asylum seekers in Britain does not, to some extent, perpetuate that abuse of human rights.

I refer anyone who is concerned about that to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights report dated 8 August last year, which contained the concluding observations of the committee on the elimination of racial discrimination. I shall quote briefly from the report. It states:

"The Committee expresses concern that the dispersal system"—

that is, in western Europe and Britain—

"may hamper the adequate access of asylum seekers to expert legal and other necessary services, i.e. health and education. It recommends that the State party implement a strategy ensuring that asylum seekers have access to essential services, and to ensure that their basic rights are protected."

That is a serious statement from the UN, and we would do well to remember the importance of it.

I am sorry to have to mention that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald is keen to ensure that all asylum seekers are imprisoned as soon as they arrive in this country, so that their applications can be processed.

According to the latest information that I have, there are 1,195 asylum seekers held in various establishments around the country. I do not believe that it is necessary to hold those people in detention. I do not believe that it is right to put them in prisons. We should beware of abusing human rights, as those people have not committed any crime; they have merely applied for asylum in this country. The immigration service has an overwhelming power to detain people.

Many asylum seekers are facing poverty. Under the Social Security Act 1986, income support was reduced to 90 per cent. for people seeking asylum. The Government of the day offered no explanation. That has been followed up by the voucher system and the small amount of cash that goes with it, with the result that many asylum seekers and their children are living in desperate poverty.

Many of those people's asylum applications will ultimately be granted. Their children will grow up in this country and will become citizens of this country; they will live here for evermore. What right have we to punish the children of asylum seekers? What right have we to make them live on less than what we know to be the poverty level? Teachers in local primary schools tell me what life is like for asylum-seeking children who do not even get enough to eat.

The Shelter report on the housing of asylum seekers is a welcome document. I have not time to go through all of it, but I shall give the headline facts. Nearly a fifth of all dwellings examined by Shelter were unfit for human habitation; 19 per cent. of occupied dwellings were infested with cockroaches, fleas and bedbugs; nearly half the bedsits were unfit for human habitation; and 83 per cent. of houses in multiple occupation that were visited were exposed to unacceptable fire risks.

Those landlords are making millions out of the asylum system and the misery that goes with it, as they are through the housing benefit system. It is time we got a grip. It is time we imposed rent control on these people, and imposed tough regulation on the conditions in which they make their tenants live. It is outrageous that profits should be made from such conditions in this day and age.

As for the voucher system, it is divisive, inefficient, expensive and entirely ineffective. The other week, a man who had been a prominent professional member of his community told me, with tears in his eyes, that he had been forced to flee his country because of the way he had been treated there. He told me how, having been burnt out of his house at 3 am, he had eventually made his way to this country. Once a week he must walk a long way to a supermarket with his vouchers, because he has not the cash to pay for a bus ticket and he cannot get change. In any event, he cannot get change when he uses the voucher in the supermarket.

I hope the Minister will tell us that the report of the examination of the system will appear soon. I hope she will also say that we will return to a system of cash benefits. That system is more efficient: it often means that children are fed more, and are given more appropriate food.

Finally, let me say something about the economic contribution made by asylum seekers here. Two weeks ago, along with the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) and a number of others, I attended a meeting of the Tamil community in the House. I knew many of those people: I had known them when they were seeking asylum here in the mid-1980s. The contribution that they have made to this country—the professional work they have done, the way in which they have brought up their families and all the efforts they have made—is a credit to them and their community. Why does the Conservative party consistently denigrate people who seek asylum, and seek to make a contribution to our society?

Many have written much about asylum. I am sorry to say, however, that when the history of the late 20th and early 21st centuries is written, many others will say, "Yes, you rightly remember the victims of the Holocaust and all the horrors that went with it, but what about the people who are now routinely abused and deprived of their human rights? What about those who are forced to flee and to seek a place of safety elsewhere? What about those who are badly treated by racist groups all over Europe, as a matter of routine?"

Can we please have a sense of humanity, and understand just what the abuse of human rights is like for so many people in so many places around the world? Can we put the emphasis on a foreign policy initiative, an economic initiative, to give people better rights and a better standard of living, rather than the constant condemnation of those who merely seek what we all want for ourselves—a decent home, a decent job, enough to eat, and some hope for our children?

3.34 pm

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Let me say at the outset that I have genuine sympathy for real asylum seekers. I have been to Kosovo and Bosnia, and I helped to organise a conference in Beirut while bombing was going on there. I have no doubt—and figures show this again and again—that a proportion, albeit a minority, of the many people who make asylum claims in this country are genuine cases.

[Mr. Julian Brazier]

It is, however, difficult to exaggerate the way in which the current tide of refugees claiming asylum status is affecting the country, and will affect the country if the torrent of people with unfounded claims continues. In my east Kent constituency, we are already beginning to run out of options for planning decisions. We have no brownfield sites left; I know of three housing estates that are, at this moment, being built on flood plains. It is absurd to see new houses being built with, in one instance, up to 6 in of water lapping around the doors. Our infrastructure in southern England is overloaded: 100,000 people in a single year will mean 1.5 million over the 15-year planning cycle. Those are not racist considerations; they are the considerations of a country—Britain as a whole—that now has a higher population density than China.

Mrs. Ellman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brazier: I will not, because of the shortage of time.

Much of Scotland consists of highland country that is not easily built over. England on its own is now nearly as crowded as India, and southern England is particularly crowded. There is a duty—which, to be fair, the Government have recognised—to try to prevent the flow of unfounded asylum applications.

Time considerations force me to confine myself to four concrete points about the workings of the asylum system. First, I firmly believe that we should reintroduce the white list. In the time available, the Library has been able to give me only the figures for the first year after its introduction, but it appears that in that period the number of applicants from democratic countries on the list, where there is little risk of human rights abuse, fell from 7,000 to 5,500 in 1997, although the tide of applications from non-white-list countries was still rising sharply. Surely it makes sense to reintroduce the list.

Let me give an example of a country that I think should be on the white list, if the list still existed. By November 1999, the horrendous exodus of genuine refugees that followed the commencement of bombing in Kosovo had, in terms of numbers, already been reversed; with substantial reconstruction under way, people were returning to their homes. Yet last year people claiming to come from the former Yugoslavia formed the third highest category of applicants for asylum in this country. That cannot be right when we have invested so much time and treasure in trying to make the area secure, especially as there is plenty of evidence that a large proportion of the applicants were Albanians pretending to be Kosovars. I refer to entrants in 2000, not 1999.

My second point relates to the point of entry. The Minister emphasised the imposition of civil penalties on lorries. I think that it is right to accept those penalties now, and I do not believe that there will be another vote on the matter; but if it works to have civil penalties that involve a certain amount of self-regulation, in the long term it must be worth the extra resources to extend spot checks to every lorry. Such a system would pay for itself many times over.

Thirdly, I think that we need a proper mechanism for return. The Select Committee report makes a constructive point that, curiously, has not featured in the debate so far. It points out that there are plenty of relatively stable but very poor third world countries that, in many instances, neighbour the countries we are debating. Surely it must be possible, as part of our overseas development programme—which, rightly, is a large programme by international standards—to offer grants to some of those countries to take some asylum applicants who could comfortably be housed there. The report touches on the point only fairly lightly, although I have dealt with it in more detail, and it proposes consideration of various options.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: I remind my hon. Friend that, at paragraph 157 of our report, the Select Committee states:

"In particular we ask whether people fleeing persecution in their own country should be found refuge in nearby safe countries rather than in countries far away."

Is not my hon. Friend also making that point?

Mr. Brazier: Precisely; and there is no reason at all why we should not use aid funds to support that.

My fourth and final point is about a court ruling that has not figured at all in the debate. Our international undertakings on asylum, which I take very seriously, must in most circumstances deal with persecution by Governments. If we allow those undertakings to be extended to cases in which people claim that they are persecuted by their neighbours or by criminals—the courts have chosen to do so in various rulings in the past 12 months—we will simply be opening the floodgates. Are we going to say that people living in high-crime areas in the United Kingdom should be able to claim asylum in other parts of the country? We have to take a tough line, and it is reasonable that we do so.

The United Kingdom has a long and honourable record on asylum. It is right that we should have such a record. However, the tensions that are building up in southern England in constituencies such as mine are unacceptable and are working against the interests of racial harmony. *[Interruption.]* The best way of ensuring racial harmony and decent treatment for the minority of genuine applicants is to tackle abuse by using the measures that I have suggested.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), may I enjoin the hon. Member for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy) to silence? We do not want a running commentary from a sedentary position.

3.42 pm

Mr. Lidington: Like many hon. Members, I regret the lack of time available to debate this subject. One way of dealing with that might be for the Government's business managers to make time available for a debate on the report published yesterday by the Select Committee on Home Affairs.

On a first, quick read through, I have been very impressed by the quality of the argument and some of the proposals from the Committee. I tell the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) that, having been Chairman of a Select Committee that managed to produce a unanimous report on asylum subscribed to by the hon. Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh) and by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), his future as the Government's special diplomatic envoy must be assured.

One of the matters that the Select Committee and other hon. Members have acknowledged is that external pressures for migration across continents are continuous and are not likely to diminish in future years. They arise partly from the political instability in many countries, especially in the developing world; partly from the natural desire of people who are not entitled to refugee status to move to a place where they can seek a better life for themselves and their families; partly from the availability of relatively cheap international travel compared with previous decades; and partly, as the Home Secretary has acknowledged many times, from the activity of organised criminals—racketeers who trade in human beings.

The Select Committee pointed out that, as well as those external pressures, there are "pull" factors. Paragraph 14 of the Committee's report states:

> "It is probable that the UK's interpretation of international law and the delay in reaching asylum decisions in recent years have also made the United Kingdom an attractive destination."

The Opposition selected this subject for debate again today because, although we acknowledge the immense difficulties for any Government of any colour in handling the issue, there has been the most remarkable and conspicuous gap between everything that the current Administration promised and what in practice they have been able to deliver.

Something is wrong when, last month, almost one in six asylum applications were from European countries, excluding Turkey from the definition. Something is wrong when, last year, the United Kingdom recorded not only the largest number of asylum applications in our history, but the largest number of applicants of any country in Europe, and—according to figures published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees—significantly more than Germany in every month of 2000. On the United Nations method of counting, the figures for the United Kingdom were 97,900, compared with 78,800 for Germany and 43,900 for the Netherlands.

Delay is undoubtedly one of the reasons for that. I shall be interested to hear whether the Minister of State repeats the Government's pledge that by 1 April 2001 the backlog of asylum applications awaiting an initial decision will have been reduced to what the Government term "frictional levels". I hope that they succeed, but the record so far gives me considerable cause for doubt.

It is not only Conservative supporters who have been pointing out the relationship between chaos in the administration and decision-making process, and the incentive that it gives people to try their luck in the United Kingdom rather than elsewhere. That issue was addressed directly by Professor Guy Goodwin-Gill, of the university of Oxford, to whom my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) referred. Professor Goodwin-Gill, who has worked with the UNHCR and has no political axe to grind on the subject, told the Select Committee:

> "I think one has to recognise that the 70,000 persons we had last year"—

in 1999—

> "is a function of inefficiency on the part of the present decision making procedure. There is no doubt that an ineffective and inefficient procedure will act as a magnet."

That is a common-sense view, endorsed by someone who has devoted a considerable part of his career to dealing with the problem in detail.

Something is wrong when, in the first 10 months of 2000, only 8,000 failed asylum seekers were removed from the United Kingdom. In those 10 months, approximately 63,000 new applications were made. Something is wrong when just under 2,000 asylum refusals have been issued against people held at Oakington reception centre, but—according to the Government's evidence to the Select Committee—only 254 of them have been removed or have left voluntarily after those decisions had been taken. It is a matter not only of effectiveness, important though that is, but of humanity.

I should like to deal with a point that the Home Secretary made—that a system that embodies delay, inefficiency and ineffectiveness is unfair to the genuine refugee who has to wait in the queue with everyone else. In practice, a dispersal system that was introduced for perfectly good motives, and that I certainly hoped would work effectively, is causing tremendous difficulties for all types of asylum seekers.

Evidence from the Immigration Advisory Service describes applicants having to travel by night bus from London to another city, then having to wait after a sleepless night for three or five hours before a detailed interview that will be the basis of a decision on their application. I have no idea whether those cases are well founded or not, but that is not a sensible way of organising our asylum policy. That is why a system under which people are housed in secure reception centres with board and lodging and legal advice, and interpretation and translation facilities available, would be not only a deterrent to unfounded asylum claims, but in practice a much more efficient and humane way of dealing with asylum seekers who claim on British soil than the current, shambolic arrangements.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Is my hon. Friend aware of the situation in the borough of Hillingdon? It has the biggest port of entry into the United Kingdom, through which a quarter of the total number of people seeking asylum in the UK come. The number of asylum seekers recorded in the final quarter of last year was larger than in previous quarters, which shows that the dispersal policy is simply not working. Our local authority cannot cope.

Mr. Lidington: My hon. Friend makes the point about Hillingdon well, and I could support it by saying that Kent is talking about having a backlog of 1,000 asylum seekers in temporary bed-and-breakfast hotels. Moreover, Northamptonshire county council has stated that

[Mr. Lidington]

"the volume of asylum seekers coming to Northamptonshire shows no signs of reducing, despite NASS statements to the contrary following the roll-out of the national dispersal arrangements."

Before I conclude, I want to mak one further point of detail, to which I hope the Minister will be able to respond. It has to do with the Government's much-vaunted figures on the number of initial decisions. What is striking about the figures for 2000 is the number of refusals for what is termed "non-compliance". In practice, that term refers to an applicant's failure to fill in the form correctly.

As I understand it, an applicant has 10 working days to complete and submit a 19-page statement of evidence form, which must be completed in English. Dispersal and the general shambles affecting the administration of the system mean that access to interpreters, translators and legal advisers may be interrupted or even rendered impossible. In 1999, 1,085 claims were rejected on grounds of non-compliance, but the total rose to 26,635 in 2000.

My fear is that perhaps the statistics are being pumped up and made to look good—to look as though many people were having their cases considered and determined and refused—but that in practice the refusal is purely technical. If that is so, there has been no gain, as it means that the substantive consideration of a case has to be dealt with further down the line by the adjudicator at the appeal hearing. That would not be a sensible way to run the system, and I hope that the Minister will respond to that point.

The hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) rightly reminded the House of the importance of the central principles of the 1951 United Nations convention on refugees. It is the one point on which I agree with him. Our asylum system has degenerated into a shambolic state, which reduces our ability to deliver the promises that we signed up to when we acceded to that convention. It also undermines public support for the principle that we should give succour to people who are genuinely fleeing persecution, which the hon. Gentleman was right to argue that we should seek to uphold.

The policies of the present Administration are neither fast, nor firm, nor fair. It is time that we had fresh policies, and a new start.

3.53 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): I shall begin by picking up some themes developed earlier in the debate by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. He was right to say that asylum poses some of the most acutely difficult ethical problems that he has had to deal with. I am sure that many other hon. Members could say the same. The polarised nature of the debate in our country does us no good at all.

It is appropriate to refer to the 1951 convention in this debate, given last weekend's commemoration of the holocaust. The convention came into being because, after the horrific events of the holocaust and the second world war, people said, "Never, ever again will we turn our backs on those fleeing persecution." I salute the people who drew up the 1951 convention, which we mark and commemorate this year. Our guiding principle must be that we should not turn our backs.

However, the asylum debate is difficult, and it stirs strong emotions. I feel very emotional, and very strongly, about it. That is because the people who framed the 1951 convention and the principles on which it was founded could not have imagined the situation that exists today. Today, we are faced with smuggling, trafficking in human beings and the exploitation of mass travel. The hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) referred to that.

The traffic in human beings is a despicable activity. Women are taken for prostitution and children are taken to be used in criminal activity. People make billions of pounds a year from the traffic in human beings.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): Is my hon. Friend aware that Northampton is a major destination for the traffic in human beings, and in particular for people from the former Republic of Yugoslavia? Will she agree to look at the situation, and ensure that the national asylum support service reinstates registration for asylum seekers in Northampton? Registration is due to end tomorrow, but the service is essential if we are to deal with the 15 to 20 people who come into Northampton every week.

Mrs. Roche: I know that my hon. Friend has made representations about that matter before. We have spoken about it, and I shall certainly look at the matter again and take very seriously what she has to say.

For those people who make well founded cases under the convention, we must have a proper process of refugee integration. I am delighted that we now have a national strategy. I chair the working group on that, and it had its first meeting yesterday. However, we must also recognise the difficulties associated with return—difficulties that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) could not resolve. When one turns down a person's application, one must decide how to remove that person.

I cannot say that my aim, when I came into politics, was to remove people from the United Kingdom. It certainly was not my aim, but removal must happen when a person who has made an unfounded application reaches the end of the process. It can be very difficult. For some countries in eastern Europe, there is no problem at all but, as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said, we are now dealing with some of the most difficult countries in the world. I agree with much of what my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) said about the need for moderation in this area. However, I must tell him that that is why we need increased detention space at the end of the process.

I turn now to some of the other points made in the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard), who, speaking on asylum for the first time from the Liberal Democrat Front Bench, made a very good speech. She was right to refer to the Shelter report. Unfortunately, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald would not allow me to intervene to point out that the report was compiled before the Government's system came into operation. Of course people have to be housed properly, and we need high standards to ensure that the housing is available.

The hon. Member for Taunton asked me a very important question about cases involving Afghanistan. The problem that she raised highlights how right the Home Secretary was to talk, in his Lisbon speech, about the need to view the 1951 convention in the modern context.

I understand what my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North said about his constituency, which borders my own. In both our constituencies, many people from all over the world are seeking asylum. It is important that we look after people properly while their claims are being processed, and that is our aim.

I very much welcomed the speech by the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier), and what he had to say about his support for the civil penalty. I thought that his remarks about returns and the need to see the problem in the context of international development were very well made. I understand completely what the hon. Gentleman said; he demonstrated his understanding of this complex procedure.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. She heard the quote that I gave from the Select Committee's recommendations about dealing with the victims of persecution in the region where they suffer persecution, a point that the Home Secretary mentioned. Do the Government propose to take that recommendation forward, as it would unquestionably help to alleviate some of the pressure on the United Kingdom?

Mrs. Roche: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The whole debate, which is being addressed by the European Union, and by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in its worldwide consultation on the convention, has been taken forward as a result of the Home Secretary's speech in Lisbon. In the developed world, we spend a fantastic sum of money on considering and processing applications for asylum. In the developing world, which has the majority of asylum seekers and refugees, we spend comparatively little. Of course there is an imbalance, but many other factors apply.

The hon. Member for Aylesbury spoke about dispersal. The national asylum support service replaces the shambolic arrangements previously in place, under which many boroughs in London and the south-east could not cope. We think that the system is working reasonably well. That does not mean to say that there are no teething difficulties, as there are with any new organisation. However, what Shelter has to say about standards shows that NASS officials should be congratulated on their very hard work.

As far as the backlog is concerned, the hon. Gentleman talked about non-compliance refusals—but before we put standards in place, there were none. Under the previous Administration, files were simply left to gather dust on the shelves of the immigration and nationality directorate. There was no processing whatsoever. That is why we have made 110,000 decisions in the past year—the largest number of decisions that the Home Office has ever taken.

The House will probably debate no more important moral issue than how we treat asylum seekers and deal with the problem of refugees. We must ensure not only that we get the statistics right, but that we place the issue in an international context. We are determined to deal with the problem and are putting measures in place to do so.

I commend the Government's amendment to the House.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 126, Noes 304.

Division No. 97] **[4.3 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Randall and
Mr. Peter Atkinson.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Bailey, Adrian
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Macdonnan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallober, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sailer, Martin
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Sloate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Webb, Steve
White, Brian

Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Woodward, Shaun
Wooles, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and Mr. Clive Betts.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments)*:—

The House divided: Ayes 268, Noes 152.

Division No. 98] **[4.15 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browns, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Heasley, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire

Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and
Mr. Clive Betts.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John Randall and
Mr. Peter Atkinson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House reaffirms the obligations of the United Kingdom under the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees to provide asylum for those fleeing from a well-founded fear of persecution; approves the Government's strategy for reform of the asylum system and welcomes the practical improvements which have already been delivered, including substantial additional investment to provide the Immigration and Nationality Directorate with the staff and other resources essential to operate an efficient and humane asylum system; congratulates the Immigration and Nationality Directorate staff on their recent achievements including taking 110,000 initial asylum decisions in 2000; welcomes the effect which the provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and other measures have had in reducing unfounded asylum claims; welcomes the successful introduction of a coherent, national system of support for asylum seekers to replace the chaotic arrangements created by the previous Government which imposed an intolerable burden on local authorities in London and the South-East; notes that the civil penalty, a measure which was opposed by the Official Opposition, has successfully encouraged hauliers and ferry operators to introduce additional security measures to tackle clandestine and illegal entry to the United Kingdom; welcomes the Government's expansion of detention capacity to support substantial increases in the number of asylum seekers with unfounded claims who are removed from the UK; and supports the Government's commitment to working closely with other countries to deal more effectively with asylum pressures affecting the whole of Europe.

4.25 pm

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The debate that we have just concluded was foreshortened by the very important statement made before it began. Nevertheless, in 111 minutes of debate, only 19 minutes were left for Back-Bench contributions, so that many hon. Members on both sides of the House who wanted to take part were unable to do so. I appreciate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you cannot control the length of Front-Bench speeches, but in your role as guardian of the rights of Back Benchers, might you seek to use some influence in that matter so that it does not happen again?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I sympathise with what the hon. Gentleman says, but as he will appreciate, it is not a point of order for the Chair. In recent years, it has become a convention that Oppositions split Supply days; that in itself reduces the amount of time for Back Benchers. There were obvious reasons why the statement was made today. I know that it is usual for the Government of the day to try to avoid statements on Opposition Supply days, but there was a powerful reason for that particular statement. Perhaps I should waste no more time by adding to that.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Crisis in Agriculture

4.27 pm

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I should inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I beg to move,

That this House expresses its profound concern about the crisis in British agriculture, demonstrated by the collapse in farm incomes and loss of jobs; notes that, since the launch of the Government's Action Plan for Farming, incomes have continued to fall and many of the promises remain unfulfilled; condemns the Government for its failure to address this crisis and for its damaging policies which have made matters even worse; and calls on the Government to end the competitive disadvantage suffered by British farmers as a result of red tape, gold-plating and over-regulation, to introduce honesty in food-labelling and to restrict the flow of sub-standard food imports.

I welcome the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to the Dispatch Box for what may be his last speech in the House in a general agricultural debate. I pay tribute to the almost unfailing courtesy that he has shown during the two and a half years that he and I have debated such matters. I also pay tribute to his genuine willingness to listen to farmers and their problems, which is in happy contrast to the attitude adopted by his immediate predecessor. Sadly, most of what the right hon. Gentleman has done stopped at that point—at listening rather than acting.

In the two and a half years since the right hon. Gentleman was appointed, he has spoken in seven major debates on agriculture—no fewer than six of which were called by the Opposition. This is the first agriculture debate in the House since July. It is six long months since we last discussed the subject—six months characterised by terrible weather and more pressure on farm incomes.

Labour's reluctance to discuss the worst crisis in agriculture for two generations is odd for a party that keeps claiming to represent the countryside.

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): On the point about debates, it is my recollection that a Conservative Opposition day debate on agriculture—because of the pressing need for such a debate—was scheduled for 13 July, but was dropped at the last minute. It was rescheduled for today. Could not the hon. Gentleman have rescheduled his debate a little sooner?

Mr. Yeo: We actually held a debate in July. If that is the best that the Minister can offer to justify his refusal to come to the House and debate these issues in Government time, it will be regarded as pretty thin gruel by those people in the industry who are suffering the consequences of his policy.

It is not only in Parliament that the Minister is so reluctant to discuss agriculture; last autumn, at the Labour party conference, he made a speech in which he referred to shipbuilding and coal mining, but did not once mention dairy farmers or pig farmers. That is an appalling reflection of his priorities and those of his party. It makes it clear to Britain's rural communities that Labour simply does not care whether farming survives as an important industry.

Labour do not merely refuse to discuss the crisis; they refuse to do anything about it—or, on the rare occasions when they do, they make matters worse rather than better.

Since 1997, farm incomes have fallen by three quarters. Even the Minister admits that they are at their lowest level in real terms since the 1930s, and yesterday's figures showed that average total incomes for farmers are down to just over £5,000 a year. In each of the last two years in Britain, some 20,000 jobs in farming have been lost and every day 60 people leave the industry. The arable, dairy, pig, beef and sheep sectors have all suffered—none has escaped. When farming struggles, the whole rural economy is damaged and the countryside environment starts to deteriorate.

While this human, social and economic tragedy is devastating rural communities throughout Britain, the only countryside issue that Labour wants to talk about in Parliament is hunting. Labour's attack on hunting is a bone thrown by a cynical Prime Minister to the class warriors on his Back Benches to keep them occupied until the election. It is a disgraceful attempt to divert attention away from the real problems facing the countryside. The past two weeks have exposed more clearly than ever before the deceit and dishonesty at the very top of this Labour Government—deceit and dishonesty with which farmers have been living for years.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): The Labour Government have provided £650 million in agrimonetary compensation. How much did the previous Tory Government provide to farmers?

Mr. Yeo: I am afraid that the hon. Lady has clearly relied on a Whips' handout. However, let us use it to nail a myth once and for all. The agrimonetary compensation regime started three months before the last election. The Government have had 10 months in the current year to decide whether to take up all the available agrimonetary compensation. They have to decide that against a background of farm incomes that are a quarter of the level they were in 1997. There is not a shred of evidence that the Minister, of all people, would have decided—in the space of only three months, when farm incomes were four times their current level—to take up any agrimonetary compensation at all. It is scandalous that farmers still do not know whether the compensation will be taken up in the current year.

The purpose of the two packages that the Minister announced in 1999 and again last year was not to help agriculture; it was to help the Government win headlines. In September 1999, the Minister announced what he claimed was £537 million of new aid for agriculture. All but £150 million of that was already due to British farmers under the common agricultural policy and, of the rest, £89 million was temporary exemption from charges that the Labour Government had introduced and £60 million maintained the previous level of support for hill farmers. That left just £1 million of actual new money from a package worth half a billion pounds.

In March last year, the Minister was at it again, and this time he was joined by the Prime Minister. The Downing street summit produced a new package called the "action plan for farming", which Labour claimed this time was £203 million of cash help for farmers—another claim that turned out to be bogus. Part of what Labour said was cash help for farmers turned out to be simply a promise not to raise meat hygiene inspection charges by more than the rate of inflation.

[Mr. Yeo]

That package included £66 million in agrimonetary compensation for the weak euro, which was not extra at all. It was actually a cut of £76 million compared with what had been spent in the previous year. It included again the £60 million of help for hill farmers, again simply maintaining the existing level of support. It included £26 million to help pig farmers restructure, and not a penny of that money has been spent. The best that the Minister can do about that is a bit of vague waffle this morning about trying to carry the money forward to next year. The package also included money under the Small Business Service and the redundant building grant programme, scarcely any of which has been taken up 10 months later.

Mr. Nick Brown: The hon. Gentleman is being a little bit mean-spirited in not giving us the credit for the increase in hill farm allowances—the £60 million year on year for three years. He said that it was money that was already there, but it was put there by the incoming Labour Government; it was not there under the previous Conservative Government. In any event, the main thrust of the hon. Gentleman's remarks is clearly that more money should be spent on farming. How much more money should be spent, and how would that square with a policy of cutting taxation and reducing public expenditure?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I call for brief interventions in what is a short debate?

Mr. Yeo: The thrust of my remarks is that twice in the past two years, against a background of an industry facing its worst crisis for two generations, the Minister has made a great public relations and presentational triumph out of announcing hundreds of millions of pounds of what he calls new money. On examination, it turns out to be merely a continuation of the previous year's expenditure, or money that never sees the light of day.

Mr. Brown *rose—*

Mr. Yeo: The Minister will have his chance to speak later.

I want the truth about the money that the Minister is spending, instead of the claims that he is helping farmers when he is doing nothing of the sort. The two packages were stuffed full of false promises; they were cynically designed to deceive the public into thinking something was being done for an industry on its knees. They were packages presented without a care for the damage that raising hopes and then dashing them has on the morale of individual farmers struggling to earn a living for their families. In December 1999, the Select Committee on Agriculture concluded:

"The Minister should take care not to give false hope to farmers."

How right it was.

The story of the past two years is the story of Labour's missing millions—money promised to farmers that turned out not to exist. The prospects for 2001 do not look much better. There has been a very small improvement in some product prices, but incomes remain tightly squeezed. Labour has still not claimed all the agrimonetary compensation available this year. There are less than three months left to secure £200 million for the industry and, during oral questions this morning, the Minister refused to say whether he would claim it.

Mr. James Plaskitt (Warwick and Leamington): Does the hon. Gentleman recall that the previous Conservative Government had the opportunity to take £500 million in agrimonetary compensation but did not take it?

Mr. Yeo: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman did not listen to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins). I have explained the answer, and I shall not waste time explaining it again. It is on the record in *Hansard*. However, I give the pledge today that, as long as the Conservative election victory comes before 30 April—the last day for claiming the money—we will claim every penny of it. Perhaps the Minister will tell us what he expects will happen when the agrimonetary regime runs out in two years. The first act of the next Conservative Agriculture Minister will be to start talks about what will replace that regime.

Not content with misleading farmers, Labour is up to its old trick of increasing the burdens on them. The pre-Budget report published by the Chancellor last November confirmed his continuing support for a pesticide tax. The horticulture industry is threatened with the climate change levy, which is yet another stealth tax penalising British employers, and one that the next Conservative Government will repeal. *[Interruption.]* The Parliamentary Secretary says that abolishing that tax means that more money will have to be found. That is interesting, because the Government pledged that the money raised by the climate change levy would be entirely recycled to other businesses. Perhaps the Minister has blown the gaff on the Government's post-election plan for the proceeds from the climate change levy.

Horticulture faces another new burden through the proposed extension of the licensing scheme to previously unregulated trickle-in irrigation. In the arable sector, Labour supported the everything but arms proposal, which would have damaged growers of sugar, one of the few remaining profitable crops. Beef producers have been undermined by Labour's refusal to restrict imports of beef from cattle over 30 months old entering Britain following the collapse of confidence in beef in France and Germany.

In that case, it is not only farmers who suffer, but consumers. Inch by painful inch, we extracted the truth from the Minister about the lack of protection for British consumers, such as the absence of checks at ports of entry and the inadequacy of the paperwork attaching to imports. Processed beef products containing beef from cattle over 30 months old are being imported and sold here, but we would have known none of that from the story that the Minister was telling last year.

In Parliament last April, the Minister said:

"The fact is that we do not allow meat products over 30 months to be imported into this country."—[*Official Report*, 13 April 2000; Vol. 348, c. 485.]

A week later, he wrote to me and said:

"The sale of meat and meat products from cattle over 30 months in this country is banned . . . It is untrue and irresponsible to imply that UK consumers are exposed to dangerous imports."

Seven months later, the Minister said:

"This country's public protection measures, which are very powerful, include a ban on selling any beef product derived from animals that are over 30 months."—[*Official Report*, 16 November; Vol. 356, c. 1053.]

Unfortunately, every one of those statements turned out to be wrong.

Professor Harriet Kimbell, a member of the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, pointed out before Christmas that the ban on over-30-months meat applied only to fresh meat, which is a crucial distinction. She said:

"The regulations are not as we thought they were. It is highly likely that meat from cattle over 30 months old is being sold in this country."

Finally, the Minister himself came clean in a letter to me on 10 January. He said that the Food Standards Agency had

"explained that the Over 30 Month Rule is difficult to police on imports. It is also the case that this rule does not apply to the sale of imported processed products."

How lucky that the Minister gave his answers in Parliament. Imagine where he might be now if he had given them to Alastair Campbell. It is the old story: the Minister is the farmer's friend as long as the farmer is foreign. Labour is always ready to crack down on British farmers, but it never acts against imports, perhaps for fear of upsetting its friends in France, who have been so incredibly helpful over the sale of safe, healthy British beef. No matter what France does, legally or illegally, to undermine Britain's farmers or to put Britain's consumers at risk, the Minister will never lift a finger against France.

The whole countryside is now in crisis. That crisis has been made worse by Labour's neglect and hostility, by fuel taxes that uniquely damage rural communities and by cuts in the police that leave our villages unprotected. In thirteen weeks, in all probability, the British people will have their chance to save the countryside. Much will need to be done urgently by the incoming Conservative Government. In our first days in office, we shall take three steps, none of which will cost a penny of taxpayers' money.

First, we shall lift the burden of red tape and regulation now strangling Britain's farm and food industry. We fully endorse the conclusions of Lord Haskins's better regulation task force. We shall stop the gold-plating of regulations. We shall stop enforcing European directives, such as that on integrated pollution prevention and control, sooner and in a tougher manner than other countries.

If the Minister wants to show that he is concerned about red tape, he could start with the European charging directive in his Meat (Hygiene and Inspection) (Charges) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2001, a statutory instrument laid in the past few days. In those regulations, the words "may be" in the European law relating to extra inspection charges payable by food processors are changed to "shall be" in Britain. That typical example of gold-plating by the Government has nothing to do with the European Union. Incidentally, the people who will be affected by those regulations were given two days to comment on a draft that Ministers had taken six months to prepare.

Our second step will be to introduce honesty in food labelling so that consumers know the country of origin and the method of production of the food that they buy. Selling food that purports to be British when it contains not a single item grown in this country is simply a fraud on consumers. As fears have grown about the safety of imported beef, Ministers and the Food Standards Agency have suggested that consumers should decide for themselves whether to eat it. However, those Ministers have prevented consumers from being given the information on which they could base that choice.

The third step is to restrict the import of food that is produced in ways that are not permitted in the United Kingdom. There are persistent reports that some of the poultry from the far east is reared using growth-promoting drugs that are banned throughout Europe on health grounds. It is wrong that our farmers should be placed at a competitive disadvantage and that our consumers are put at risk because of Labour's refusal to challenge these imports.

Mr. Nick Brown: On that, at least, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. If he has hard evidence, will he please give it to me?

Mr. Yeo: The Minister said earlier today that it was open to the European Union to inspect the plants in which such food is produced. It is interesting, however, that he relies on the Food Standards Agency and not the EU to tell us whether imported food is correct or not. Is he confirming that the agency has no intention of inspecting any of the plants? That will not fill consumers with much confidence about the care with which assurances are being given.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Ribble valley farmers are of a mind that, whereas we comply with all the rules and directives that we sign up to, farmers in the rest of Europe seem to be under a new and lax regime. Will my hon. Friend ensure that under the next Conservative Government, the rules and directives that countries sign up to will be properly enforced?

Mr. Yeo: The lack of enforcement of existing rules in many European countries is one of the scandals of the EU. Instead of endlessly seeking to pass new laws and to extend its regulatory powers, the Commission should try to ensure that existing regulations are enforced in a timely and even-handed manner throughout the EU.

Above all, farming needs a Government who will stand up for its interests, insist that the public sector buys only food that meets British standards, help the organic sector by leading the way towards a common international standard, recognise the problems facing older farmers by introducing a retirement scheme for tenants, and protect the integrity of existing farms by exercising proper controls over genetically modified crop trials, instead of doing the bidding of their friends in big business and allowing the commercial planting of GM crops before their environmental effects are understood.

It is time to end the scandal of Labour's missing millions. Cash is promised to the farmers and then taken back by the Treasury. It is time to treat farmers as grown-ups in an industry that is fighting for survival, rather than as victims to be duped by Labour spin doctors. Farmers, consumers, taxpayers and the countryside need a Government who believe that the survival of agriculture is important to the future of Britain. Conservatives believe that, and I commend the motion to the House.

4.48 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"recognises the continuing difficulties faced by the agriculture sector as a result of the low level of farm incomes; endorses the Government's long term vision for agriculture as sustainable, competitive and diverse, environmentally responsible, and an integral part of vibrant rural economies; recognises the important role of the new Rural Development Programmes in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in delivering this vision; welcomes the measures in the Action Plan for Farming and the Rural White Paper to give immediate financial relief to the hardest-hit sectors and to reduce the burden of regulation on farming; supports the Government's constructive engagement in Europe to reform further the Common Agricultural Policy; notes that the Conservative party's policies of banning foreign imports and taking unilateral action in areas of European Union competence are illegal and would lead to heavy penalties being levied on UK taxpayers as well as retaliatory action against UK exporters; notes that the Conservative Party have not indicated how much of the £16 billion they propose in public expenditure cuts would fall on British farmers; and calls on the Conservative Party instead to come forward with practical and constructive policies to help farmers through very difficult times."

I thank the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) for choosing agriculture for the Opposition Supply day and for his first two sentences. After that, I thought that his speech rather fell away.

The hon. Gentleman was kind enough to express his good wishes for my future. He commented that this may be the last time I appear at the Dispatch Box as Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. Unless he knows something that I do not—I think that unlikely in this context—I expect to be at the Government Dispatch Box on 15 February to discuss a matter of enormous importance to agriculture, a matter for which the Conservative party can properly take a great deal of—*[Interruption.]* I am not sure that credit would be quite the right word. I shall explain the Government's response to the Phillips report and the national tragedy of BSE. It is very much an agriculture issue, and I expect to be in my place to discuss it.

I notice that the hon. Gentleman did not go so far as to say that, on my departure he expected to succeed me. I know that the farming community will be grateful for that.

It is clear that British farming continues to suffer from a severe and prolonged downturn; there is no quarrel between us on that. The principal causes are widely agreed on, although one would not have learned that from the speech of the hon. Member for South Suffolk. Those causes are low world commodity prices, the weakness of the euro and the continuing impact of BSE, not just on the beef sector, but right across the livestock sector. I acknowledge further recent difficulties, including the outbreak of swine fever in East Anglia, widespread flooding of agricultural land and increases in world oil prices.

I want to set out what the Government have done to help, and explain our long-term strategy for the future.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): May I just clear up a certain point? The Minister has often said that he will do what he can to help, although he also asks what he can do, given the restrictions. Agrimonetary compensation is one thing that can be tackled, and every Government must examine that against the background of agricultural circumstances. The Minister has announced that the hourly wage rate in agriculture is now about £1, if a profit is being made. The position is desperate: he spoke about a downturn, and there may well not be an upturn.

The Minister knows that the Chancellor has a substantial budget surplus. Surely now is the time when, if the Minister wishes to keep agriculture going, agrimonetary compensation should be asked for.

Mr. Brown: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I have a lot of sympathy for that. Since the Labour party came to power, we have spent £629 million on agrimonetary compensation. The right hon. Gentleman will know that when the president of the National Farmers Union and the chairman of the NFU arable sector committee came to see me last autumn and made the case for agrimonetary compensation in the arable sector, I was able to add to the mandatory payments—which I negotiated to be mandatory—part of the voluntary amount as well. I know that that was welcomed by the sector.

That is the first time any Government have paid out voluntary agrimonetary compensation in the arable sector. We did that in recognition of the difficult times that the arable sector in the area represented by the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), among others, was going through. Those things are judged on a case-by-case basis. The right hon. Gentleman was a Cabinet Minister and knows that, in government, expenditure under the regime has to be argued for against competing claims for public expenditure. I put the case for the industry when I think it justified, and I have fought for it very hard indeed in recent circumstances, as the NFU and others, including Members of Parliament with constituency interests, have made a case for it. However, I cannot make an announcement in today's debate.

Since coming to office, the Government have provided short-term assistance worth £1.2 billion, which includes agrimonetary compensation of £289 million to arable farmers, £236 million to beef farmers, £82 million to sheep farmers and £22 million to dairy farmers. To answer the intervention of the right hon. Member for Bridgwater, because of the difficulties in the dairy sector, last year we drew down every single penny that was available across the agrimonetary regime.

We have allocated an extra £300 million to hill farmers, above the level of hill farming grants that we inherited from the previous Government—I made that point in my intervention on the hon. Member for South Suffolk. We have offset a range of regulatory charges, including those for cattle passports, specified risk material inspections and dairy hygiene inspections. We have increased payments under the over-30-months scheme by lifting the weight limit for cattle entered in the scheme. The NFU especially asked us to do that, and we have responded.

We have dramatically increased grants available for organic conversion, processing and marketing projects, and the conversion of redundant farm buildings. We have opened a new pig industry restructuring scheme, which will provide grants to outgoers reducing capacity and ongoers seeking to make their operations more efficient. We successfully contained and eliminated the recent swine fever outbreak in East Anglia and invented from scratch the pig welfare disposal scheme to give unprecedented compensation to pig farmers affected by

movement restrictions. Those are not the pig farmers who suffered directly from the classical swine fever outbreak, but those who were affected by the movement restrictions that were necessary to control it.

In November, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the abolition of vehicle excise duty on tractors and agricultural vehicles and the halving of excise duty on lorries. He is freezing all road fuel and oil duties and, as the House knows, he will be cutting by 3p a litre duty on ultra-low sulphur diesel and petrol. Furthermore, in the light of the severe difficulties caused to farmers by recent flooding, we have proposed to allow some flexibility in CAP scheme rules so that those who suffered from flooding do not lose their subsidy payments. I am pleased to tell the House that Commissioner Franz Fischler has written to confirm that those exceptional changes can be made.

In partnership with the Small Business Service and business links, we have launched the farm business advice service. In the service's first four months, almost 3,000 farmers have requested consultations and more than 1,300 initial consultation visits have been made. However, whatever action we take to help farmers through in the short term, a longer-term strategy is needed. I understand that the political cycle is coming to a close and that the hon. Member for South Suffolk wishes to make a robust contribution. However, his remarks did not make the Conservatives' long-term strategy clear to me. Indeed, I suspect that they did not do so for any hon. Member.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I am willing to give way, but I hope that the hon. Member who intervenes will provide an answer.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): The sort of long-term vision and strategic perspective on agriculture that the Secretary of State describes has been continually called for by the Select Committee on Agriculture, virtually ever since the Government came to power. When I was a member of that Select Committee—the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd), who will also remember this, is present—it asked the previous Minister and the current Minister to provide exactly such a vision. What does the Minister envisage with regard to the number of farmers who will work in the sector, and to production levels over five or 10 years? Those are the questions that need to be answered. Will he answer them today?

Mr. Brown: Oddly enough, I was about to give the hon. Gentleman the answer that he seeks, but I was wondering whether somebody would first spell out the Conservative party's vision.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Now that the European Commission has published a damning report on the French Government's failure to take effective measures to stop the spread of BSE, is there not an unanswerable case that the Commission should impose an embargo on French meat? If it will not take such action, does not the Minister owe it to consumers and farmers alike to impose a ban on importing French meat? Those would be practical steps and he could take them. We would do so; will he?

Mr. Brown: In fairness to the hon. Gentleman, that is a partial response—protectionism and a trade war.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Before the Secretary of State completes his self-congratulatory list of all the things that he claims to have done to redress problems in agriculture—problems that are at least partly of his own making—will he tell the House whether he will add in the tax income forgone by his Government? The collapse in farm profits means that the Treasury has had no profits to tax.

Mr. Brown: The list is not intended to be self-congratulatory. Nobody has yet explained how the problems that I have outlined, including BSE, flat world commodity prices and the weakness of the euro, are my personal fault. I shall wait to hear the hon. Gentleman's thesis on that point. We should not be quarrelling over forgone tax or the need to return farm businesses to profitability and to ensure a decent return on the work and capital that are put in.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): There is one issue with which the Minister has not wholly dealt. According to the National Farmers Union, £202 million in agrimonetary compensation can be claimed by the end of April. Is he going to get that money?

Mr. Brown: We have just had that discussion. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman came in a bit late. I confirm that the figure to which he referred is approximately correct, although we will not know the final figures until later in the month.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): The Conservatives would do two things. First, we would insist on radical reform of the common agricultural policy. Secondly, we would exclude sugar from the everything but arms talks that are currently under way.

Mr. Brown: I knew that if I tried hard enough, we would get there. The hon. Gentleman makes two strong points. Reform of the common agricultural policy has to be at the heart of any strategy that the British Government adopt. Moreover, that should not divide us; the previous Conservative Government pursued a reform agenda. I gently point out that pursuing it by quarrelling with all the partners whose support one hopes to gain is not the best way to proceed. At least they pursued such an agenda, however.

The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) is right. We have an essentially protectionist regime for the sugar sector. Sugar is produced in the European Union at approximately three times the world market price. We produce 40 per cent. more than we consume and we get rid of the surplus with export refunds on the international market, much to the distress of our major trading partners, who would also like to sell to those markets at real rather than supported prices. In those circumstances, it is not sensible to open the market to large amounts of the product at a lower price. It would simply cause more disruption.

[Mr. Brown]

The hon. Gentleman is right; reform of the sugar regime and the everything but arms initiative must be considered together. It would not be consistent to retain one policy without reforming the other.

Mr. Evans: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Brown: No, I must make progress.

Mr. Evans: On a small point.

Mr. Brown: How can one resist?

Mr. Evans: The Minister is courteous, as ever. I have asked him several times about farming in the Ribble valley, but I shall change tack a little. On Friday, I was with Mr. Eddie Topping of Barton Grange, a horticulturist in my constituency. He employs 35 people in winter and 70 people in summer. He says that the introduction of the climate-change levy will have an enormous knock-on effect on horticulture in this country. We will scrap that levy. Will the Minister campaign to persuade the Chancellor to abolish the climate change levy?

Mr. Brown: The levy is supposed to be neutral, as was pointed out earlier. If it is Opposition policy to scrap the levy, they will not be able to spend the fruits of it. Their policy must also be to adjust national insurance accordingly.

Mr. Evans *rose—*

Mr. Brown: Perhaps the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) can tell me whether that is correct.

Mr. Evans: Will the Minister direct his remarks to horticulture, which will be hit by the climate change levy? He knows that the introduction of that stealth tax will affect employment in the industry. What will he do about it?

Mr. Brown: It is inevitable that the hon. Gentleman wants to stress the part of the debate that he believes will tell for the Conservative party, but he is not willing to face the consequences. That characterises Conservative policy generally. The Opposition urge me to spend more money, and they say that they will cut taxes and reduce public expenditure. I presume that they will not cut expenditure on agriculture.

The hon. Gentleman asked specifically about the horticulture sector. We were engaged in discussions with the Chancellor before the climate change levy was introduced. We secured concessionary arrangements for horticulture, and I am in continuing dialogue with those in the sector to ascertain what more can be done to achieve the Government's objectives, as well as those of the industry.

Mr. Evans: They do not want to pay that tax.

Mr. Brown: That is not unusual. If one asks people whether they want to pay tax, they tend to say no. Well done the Conservative party for discovering that. However, there are consequences when people do not pay taxes. The Opposition should spend a little time considering that. I do not know whether the Conservative party still bothers to address the electorate as an audience. However, the electorate will not find the Opposition's policies plausible. On every aspect of Government spending, they call for more, while claiming that they will spend less overall and be able to cut taxation. Such an achievement would be miraculous. I await the day when someone spells out how it can be done.

Let me discuss what needs to be done to help British agriculture in the medium term. Reform of the common agricultural policy is needed. It is an expensive instrument, which costs the British approximately £8 billion a year. Agricultural protectionism is unsustainable in the face of remorseless trends towards further trade liberalisation. There was a time, although perhaps this does not apply now, when such a remark would not have been exceptional coming from Conservative Members. Now, they look at me as though it were a terrible thing to say.

Most importantly, as I think we can all agree, the common agricultural policy is failing to deliver its objectives of ensuring a fair standard of living for farmers and reasonably priced food for consumers. It encourages over production, leading to food surpluses and widespread degradation of the rural environment. In 1999, the Agenda 2000 reforms signalled the beginnings of a new common agricultural policy based around the instruments of the rural development regulation.

The Government are strongly committed to what is known as the second pillar of the CAP. We have committed an extra £472 million over seven years—that is extra money—for rural development programmes across the United Kingdom, of which £300 million is extra money—the match funding for modulation—for England.

The England rural development programme is an ambitious combination of environmental and economic development measures. It will cost £1.6 billion over seven years. That represents a 60 per cent. increase in the baseline expenditure. Spending on the countryside stewardship scheme will increase more than fourfold. Spending on organic farming will be tripled. Spending on farm woodlands will double, and we are reintroducing the processing and marketing grants scrapped under the previous Government. There will be new measures, such as a £152 million rural enterprise scheme, and new money for training and for the development of energy crops.

The rural White Paper contains further measures to help farmers. The Government are revising planning guidance so that it will be easier for farmers to make successful applications for diversification projects. We plan to grant time-limited rate relief for farm diversification projects.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: I will give way, although there is a lot of pressure from other hon. Members to speak in the debate.

Mr. Thomas: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. He mentioned organic farming and the rural White Paper for England. For the first time, there is an acceptance of a target for organic farming buried in the

detail. Will the Minister consider developing that into a more ambitious target and developing the action plan needed to achieve it? Will he consider doing that early in the next Parliament?

Mr. Brown: The figures to which the hon. Gentleman refers are forecast outcomes, not targets. Indeed, the Select Committee has cautioned against setting targets. There might be consensus in the House on that, although perhaps not entirely. I understand that there are similar arrangements in place in other parts of the United Kingdom. In any event, we all envisage an expansion in the amount of farming given over to organic farming, for three good reasons: it is environmentally friendly; it is what consumers want, and it is right that the Government should try to underpin consumer choice; and it is an economically rational way forward for farmers, because of the premium that organically produced goods command in the marketplace. Those are the reasons for providing support for organic farming.

The Government are doing more. On small abattoirs, the Food Standards Agency will be implementing the recommendations of the Maclean report on meat hygiene service charging. We are improving public services such as transport, health care and education in rural areas. We are providing more affordable housing for rural communities, and new funds to revitalise market towns.

Work is under way across Government to make regulation less burdensome for British farmers. I agree that the Government have a duty to bear down on unnecessary red tape in farming, just as they do with other businesses. We have already pledged that there will be no gold-plating or early implementation of European regulations. The Opposition motion claims that British agriculture is disadvantaged by over-regulation. In fact, Lord Haskins' report for the better regulation taskforce found no evidence that regulation creates a competitive disadvantage for British farmers. The taskforce made a wide range of constructive recommendations, and we will soon publish a positive response to the report.

The Government have accepted 98 of the 107 recommendations of the first three industry-led red tape working groups. Further reviews of farm inputs and veterinary medicines are under way. We continue to press ahead with animal disease reduction strategies. We are strengthening our strategy for tackling the spread of bovine TB, and increasing resources for TB testing. We have increased the compensation payments from 75 to 100 per cent. for cattle slaughtered as TB suspects. We are committed to completing the Krebs-Bourne trial. All 10 matched triplets are now in place and we hope for results by 2004, or possibly earlier.

The 2000 spending review provides £115 million for the national plan to get as close as we can to eliminating scrapie from the national sheep flock. We are considering the BSE inquiry report and its 167 wide-ranging recommendations. I hope to present the Government's substantive interim response to the House very soon, and business managers have provisionally scheduled the debate for 15 February.

A lot can be done to help British farmers by improving the way in which the food chain operates. That was the finding of the high level food chain working group that brought together leading figures from the farming, food processing, manufacturing, distribution and retail sectors. At the heart of the matter is the fact that every part of the food chain has a vested interest in the long-term success of every other part. The working group found the need for more communication and co-operation throughout the food chain, from farm to fork.

The group's work is being put to practical use in the new taskforce that has been brought together to examine the workings of the dairy supply chain. No matter how hard pressed dairy producers are, what the Government can do to help is limited. The real answer to the producer problems in the sector is to be found in the marketplace and in the supply chain.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I shall give way in a moment.

I warmly welcome the National Farmers Union's new British farm-standard tractor mark, which allows shoppers clearly to identify foods produced to British farm assurance standards.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Brown: Of course, and then I shall give way to the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith).

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. Is it true that there are instances of France or other countries sending produce to this country marked with a red tractor, carrying wording that implies that the produce reaches the same standard without making it clear that it is not British? People want to buy British food, but we need an efficient system that enables them to identify it.

Mr. Brown: My understanding of the position is that the answer to my hon. Friend's question must be no. Although it would be possible for any supplier to this country to join the quality assurance mark scheme, it would not be proper for a non-member to use that mark and claim the quality assurance. The red tractor is a British quality assurance mark, not a point of origin mark. If people want to make a point of origin claim, it is perfectly lawful to do so. Suppliers from Germany, France, the United Kingdom and different parts of the United Kingdom can make a point of origin claim provided that it is truthful. They must comply with the trading standards legislation. Enforcement is a matter for the trading standards authorities, just as the lead agency on labelling is now the Food Standards Agency.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow) *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I had promised to give way to the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, but with the courtesy that is so common among Liberal Democrats, he allows me to take this intervention.

Mr. Gill: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Does he really think that it would be wrong to insist on mandatory country of origin labelling? Such labelling would allow the question asked by the hon. Member for

[Mr. Gill]

Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) to be answered truthfully, and consumers could see exactly which country produce came from.

Mr. Brown: I believe that consumers have a right to know the origin of product as well a right to a factual description of product. Indeed, on the beef labelling scheme, European Union law is moving in that direction. I shall say more about that, but first I give way to the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine.

Sir Robert Smith: I thank the Minister for giving way. He talks about the medium term, and mentioned marketplaces a while back. For farmers in countries outside the eurozone, what replacement for agrimonetary compensation does he think will develop to deal with the marketplace in the European Union?

Mr. Brown: The development of the agrimonetary regime and the enlargement of the EU are both big questions, but the hon. Gentleman should focus on the fact that as more and more member states join a single currency—indeed, it is a condition of membership for the candidate countries that they will come into the single currency arrangements—the case for agrimonetary compensation, which is, after all, designed to compensate for currency movements, rather recedes. I would not have thought that the agrimonetary regime was among the many concerns that the candidate countries have, but I stand to be corrected.

Sir Robert Smith: The United Kingdom is outside the eurozone, and British farmers are concerned about what will happen to them in future as a result of currency fluctuations in the single market.

Mr. Brown: The point that I am trying to make to the hon. Gentleman is that we are not the only country concerned about that, but we are increasingly becoming the only country for which it is a substantial issue of interest. I cannot stand up today and announce a successor regime.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the payments are made in tranches over three-year periods— half the total money in the first year, a third in the second year, and a sixth in the third year. When the regime comes to an end, will there be successor arrangements? I cannot stand at the Dispatch Box and say that there will. I am pointing the hon. Gentleman to substantial factors in the international arrangements for the European Union that rather suggest the opposite.

I do not want to make a definitive statement now, as I am not in a position to do so. However, as I have said before, it would be wrong for British agriculture constantly to look to the supply side of the common agricultural policy, including the agrimonetary arrangements, for its future. The direction, I think, is very different.

We have clamped down on misleading country of origin labelling. It is illegal now to sell imported food as British just because it has been repacked or processed in the UK. As I said in reply to the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), trading standards officers have the power to undertake prosecutions.

Following the report of the Competition Commission, the Office of Fair Trading is working on a statutory code of practice for the major retailers, governing their relationships with suppliers. That will complement the voluntary code developed by the Institute of Grocery Distribution. I strongly encourage the industry to take that up. In part, that answers the hon. Member for Ribble Valley, who has moved to the Front Bench. It is good to see him there.

Mr. James Paice (South–East Cambridgeshire): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Will he clarify his remark that it is now illegal to describe as British in origin a product that underwent only its last process in Britain. Which legislation has made that illegal? I understood that the right hon. Gentleman had only issued guidance to trading standards officers. Guidelines do not have the force of law.

Mr. Brown: Guidelines are exactly that: they guide trading standards officers in their enforcement activities. Of course, the law is ultimately interpreted by the courts, not by politicians. Every experienced parliamentarian is familiar with that.

I did everything that I could with the regime, before it transferred, with the Food Standards Agency, to the Department of Health. If Conservative Members had really cared they had 18 years to tighten up the regime.

I shall spell out the policies that we are putting in place to help farming through very difficult times. We are providing direct financial support, practical help to individual farm businesses and a long-term vision for the future.

The House will search in vain to find such measures in the Opposition's motion. Let us consider what the Opposition propose. They call for "honesty in food-labelling". That implies that we do not have that at present, and that for the 18 years they were in government, we did. As I understand it, they mean compulsory country of origin labelling of food. That is an occupied field in the European Union.

The Opposition know full well that by acting unilaterally on food labelling, we would be in breach of the rules of the European single market. We are lobbying the Commission for improvements in Community food labelling laws. In particular, we strongly support proposals for country of origin labelling of beef throughout the single market as a first step in that direction. In the meantime, however, as I said a moment ago, there is nothing to stop British producers labelling their produce as British. The NFU's tractor mark clearly identifies a wide range of high-quality foods produced to British farm assurance standards, and, as I have said, it is illegal to suggest that food is British if it is not.

The Opposition motion calls for a restriction in the flow of food imports. Although food standards are now a matter for the Food Standards Agency, in which health Ministers lead, I assure the House that the Government will not hesitate to ban imports that present a risk to human or animal health; but as most Opposition Members know, banning imports for other reasons is illegal under

European law. Those who do not know that are welcome to consult the Government's legal advice, which I placed in the House of Commons Library more than a year ago.

Mr. Nicholls: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: I am being very generous—I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Nicholls: The right hon. Gentleman is characteristically generous.

In my earlier intervention, I said that I was not calling for a trade war. I was saying that action should be taken when there was evidence from the European Commission that the French Government had not taken sufficient steps to prevent the spread of BSE. No one is asking the Secretary of State to start a trade war; we merely ask him to accept that there is overwhelming evidence—from the European Commission itself—that the import of French beef is not safe. If the right hon. Gentleman will not act even when it is a question of public safety, why on earth does he think that anyone should take him seriously when he dismisses the evidence and accuses us of starting a trade war?

Mr. Brown: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman should take more interest in current affairs. He will have noted that the House has passed legislation setting up the Food Standards Agency, that the responsibilities that he urges me to carry out are now matters for the Secretary of State for Health, and that Government collectively are now professionally advised by the agency.

The hon. Gentleman would like to ban French imports for chauvinist and protectionist reasons, and to present the outcome as though it were a food safety measure. If there were a food safety reason, we would be told by Sir John Krebs, the head of the agency, and the Secretary of State for Health would produce legislation to protect the public. What the hon. Gentleman cannot do is wish into existence a food safety reason to disguise what are, in fact, anti-European and ideological reasons. That is not a rational way to proceed.

Mr. Yeo: I am sure that the Minister would not wish to mislead the House unwittingly. He tried to suggest that the Conservative party was advocating an illegal action in terms of a ban on imports on grounds other than health. He will be aware, however, that under the treaties imports can be prohibited or restricted on grounds of public morality. On 22 June last year, he gave me the following written answer:

"'Public morality' is not susceptible to an absolute definition: it inevitably involves subjective judgment . . . The European Court of Justice has held that in principle it is for each member state to determine in accordance with its own scale of values the requirements of public morality in its territory."—[*Official Report*, 22 June 2000; Vol. 352, c. 300-01W.]

Mr. Brown: Because I quite like the hon. Gentleman—although it does not always show—I shall rescue him from the folly towards which he is slowly drifting, in terms of protectionist sentiments.

The fact is that this law has been much invoked and much tested by the courts. I am thinking of, for instance, a case with which I suspect some former Conservative Ministers sitting behind the hon. Gentleman will be very familiar—the one relating to veal calves; but Conservative Governments have got themselves into trouble before by going down the protectionist route. I remember Lord Walker, then Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, banning the importing of turkeys from France—

Mr. Yeo: And very popular it was too.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman gives the game away. It may well have been popular—

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): Not least with turkeys.

Mr. Brown: Indeed, but it was also found to be illegal, and the court case cost the British taxpayer a substantial sum.

Let me also remind the House of the Factortame dispute, which had similar protectionist origins. If Conservative Members find no other argument persuasive, however, let me cite self-interest. As a nation, we export some £10 billion worth of food and drink per year, and hundreds of thousands of jobs are involved in those important British industries. More than half of that is exported to the European Union. What is the sense in putting all that in jeopardy? The case for protectionism is always very specific. The case for free trade is general, but it is overwhelming.

There was a time when Conservative Members stood for trade, markets and freedom to buy and sell things without restraint—but not now. The response from the hon. Member for South Suffolk is very English and very protectionist. If things carry on as they are, he will be promising to reintroduce the Navigation Acts and there will be a fight in the Conservative party over the corn laws. That is the direction in which Conservative Members are going—back to the future with a vengeance.

I do not ask Conservative Members to take my advice; perhaps they can take the advice of the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry). He told the House that he could not

"imagine a single action more calculated to extinguish the last flicker of life in hill farming in north Yorkshire than encouraging a trade war that puts at risk £136 million worth of live lamb exports to France".—[*Official Report*, 28 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 1146.]

In opening the debate, the hon. Member for South Suffolk gave the House no indication of how much of the £16 billion Tory cuts guarantee would fall on farming.

Mr. Yeo: I had a feeling that the Minister would try to get on to this point. I make it absolutely clear that not a single penny will be found from the agriculture budget to fund the substantial and popular Tory tax cuts.

Mr. Brown: I knew that I was right to say that I actually quite like the hon. Gentleman, and I thank him for that. Would he like to intervene again and explain where the money is coming from? More fair-minded than that one cannot get. Then perhaps he could help me on this: which Opposition Front-Bench spokesman can explain to me where the cuts would fall?

Mr. Yeo: The shadow Chancellor will explain that, because that is his job. The Minister has been notable in

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refusing to answer questions on the pesticide tax and the climate change levy because they are Treasury matters. I tell him fair and square that we will not cut the agriculture budget by a single penny to fund our tax cuts. We will, if we have to chance to do so before 30 April, claim the agrimonetary compensation in full. The Minister, however, refuses to say anything about that.

Mr. Brown: I know that the hon. Gentleman is only shadowing a ministerial job, but I do not think that he will get very far just by blaming the shadow Chancellor. What if the shadow Chancellor were ever to become the real Chancellor? Still, I am grateful.

The hon. Gentleman says that he is planning to keep to our spending plans. I thank him for that; no cuts in agriculture spending; our spending plans are the right ones; Conservative Members would do what we do—but the electorate may be tempted just to let us get on and do it. If he stuck to our plans, how would he finance the new raft of policies set out in "Fair Deal for Farming", the Conservative party's policy document? If it is his intention—this is implicit in his remark—to finance it by taking money from policies that we are spending money on and spending that on other policies that he wants, will he say which policies those will be—or will there be more money for agriculture? The hon. Gentleman has no response; farmers will be interested in that.

Mr. Paice: This is an Opposition debate.

Mr. Brown: Yes. However, the hon. Member for South Suffolk was speaking confidently of winning the general election. Although I am not sure that much of the public think that that is a real possibility, if he does think that, surely he should say what he will spend money on.

Mr. Gill *rose—*

Mr. Brown: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can help me.

Mr. Gill: The Minister is obviously running out of material. May I ask him a question that relates to tax? Who will pay for the continental purchase for slaughter and destruction scheme? Will it be the taxpayers of the countries in which the cattle are slaughtered or the European taxpayer—which of course would include the British taxpayer? Would that not be in stark contrast to what the British taxpayer had to do on our own BSE initiatives?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The purchase-for-destruction scheme puts enormous pressure on the budget for the common agricultural policy, which has a ceiling. He is also right about Ministers having to discuss a range of ways in which to move forward. That includes national contributions, which I would not rule out. Clearly, much depends on how much pressure is put on the scheme. If that pressure is as substantial as some of the estimates now being discussed in the public domain suggest, the implication is that the costs will go well beyond the budget ceiling for the regime that has to deal with it. The hon. Gentleman is right: this is a very big question indeed.

We have had the political knockabout, and I regret that there has been no real response from Opposition Front-Bench Members.

Mr. Yeo: The Minister has taken a long time.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman says that I have taken a long time, but in debates such as this there is a straight choice to be made when it comes to interventions. I am always generous in that regard, as I know that hon. Members like to intervene on the Minister, but the quid pro quo is that interventions take time out of the debate. The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways: he cannot complain about the time and then also want to intervene.

I accept that there are difficulties facing agriculture, and that it is right to debate the way forward. I have made it clear that we are listening. I have set out what we have worked hard to provide in the short term, and I have addressed the longer-term considerations. We have an action plan, and we are delivering on that vision.

I call upon the House to support the amendment in the names of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and myself, and to reject the motion.

5.31 pm

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): I am extremely grateful to be called to contribute to the debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) on the way in which he introduced it.

I am glad that the Minister, at the end of his speech, finally found it in himself to agree that agriculture was in crisis. A survey compiled by a firm of accountants based in Norwich and published in the *Eastern Daily Press* last September showed that farm incomes in Norfolk have fallen by 50 per cent. over the past four years. That is before losses due to fuel tax and swine fever are taken into account.

The Government's own figures, reproduced by the National Farmers Union, show that total income from farming fell by 29 per cent. in real terms in the year 2000, compared with 1999. In other words, in one year there has been a fall of more than 70 per cent., and farm incomes are at their lowest for three generations. Bank borrowings now amount to some £10 billion, and investment levels are at their lowest since 1970.

In England and Wales, more people have left the land over the past two years than in living memory. It behoves the Minister to admit that he is presiding over a crisis. He has repeated today that he is sympathetic and concerned. That, of course, is what we get from Ministers.

The Minister has said—correctly—that some funds are being invested in agriculture and in rural areas. It is true that some of the schemes are useful and that some can help. However, I wonder whether the Minister has any idea of the time, effort and frustration involved in applying for the multiplicity of schemes that he is putting in place, and on which he is relying to be able to say that he is responding to the crisis. Does he realise that the difficulty involved in applying for the aid that he says he is spreading about, and the amount of regulation that he is loading on the industry, are combining to cause the industry to sink slowly from view?

I wrote to the Minister nearly a month ago about the plight of my constituent, Mr. James Nelstrop of Roudham. I have not, of course received a reply—I do not expect one from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food any more so the matter is absolutely academic.

Last May, Mr. Nelstrop submitted an application under the stewardship scheme. He took considerable trouble preparing the application, and engaged in full discussion with MAFF and regional officials. He was given to understand that the work was in order. However, at the last minute MAFF told him that he was ineligible, as his farm was eight miles from an airfield.

In fact, Mr. Nelstrop had not moved his farm, and the airfield was where it had been for 50 years. It was merely that after he had spent nearly £10,000 to do the work required to prepare the application, his farm's location became evident to the Ministry.

Mr. Nelstrop has written to me about the other efforts that he has made. He says that immediately post-Budget, in March, he applied to the regional development office for details of the redundant farm buildings scheme—one of the schemes mentioned by the Minister. Mr. Nelstrop says that after making several telephone calls, he received the forms in late July. Having compiled a draft application, he was informed that the money available had to be spent by the end of January 2001 but that the application could not be considered until formal planning permission had been received. The earliest planning decision had to be taken by 21 September last year, the earliest scheme application decision by 21 October last year. Clearly it was impossible for this farmer to carry out the work in the three months of the worst weather period, including Christmas and the new year, because it would take six months to do. The scheme was abandoned, at an additional cost to his business of £500.

Mr. Nelstrop then decided to use a new Government scheme to help fund restoration and conversion of redundant buildings. He had three meetings with the Forest Heath development officer and was advised that he should consider conversion to small offices. Following discussions with MAFF in Cambridge, he decided to proceed. He applied to the Forest Heath district council for change of use and has now been told that it is Suffolk county council's policy to oppose rural development on the basis that it is not sustainable, owing to lack of public transport.

What I have recounted is the cumulative experience of one farmer who is trying to make a living and trying to use the schemes that the Minister is congratulating himself on putting in place. Mr. Nelstrop adds:

"Small businesses do not have the resources to deal with this legislation, filling in the forms, reading, remembering and implementing all the rules (even if you know where to look for the ones that may apply to your business). Add to this the time, costs and risks in applying for Government assistance programs, less and less of our time is available for the core business. Eventually this will lead to the demise of small businesses and the basis of our economy/society as we have come to know it."

Mr. Hayes: Is it not also the case that those most vulnerable and hard hit—such as tenant farmers—those in very isolated areas, and smaller farmers find it harder to take advantage of these schemes? Diversification, in particular, does not mean a lot to someone who farms poor land, lives in an isolated community or is a tenant farmer.

Mrs. Shephard: That is one of the points that I want to get home to the Minister this afternoon. I want him to understand that before he congratulates himself on these schemes, he should do an audit on the amount of paperwork, frustration and abortive effort that he and his schemes mean for the agriculture industry. He seems to believe that they are the solution to the problems in the industry, but he needs first to understand and remove the reefs and hurdles he has put in place because, believe me, they are making everything much worse.

Of course, along with the Minister and most people in the Chamber, I support greater diversity in British agriculture and the production of non-food crops. However, I question the kind of thinking that means that my constituents can tell me that there are plenty of funds available for camomile co-operatives, for example, while at the same time I hear of redundancies at the Wissington sugar factory.

It must also be evident to the Minister that there is a certain irony in the Government's trumpeting of special funds to help the economy of Great Yarmouth, while they also pursue policies that could result in the closure of the Cantley sugar factory a few miles from Yarmouth, and which will also deal a hammer blow to trade in the Great Yarmouth docks. There again, perhaps not—after all, a Minister who, in the week in which he and his colleagues vote to ban hunting, can announce the appointment of a Minister for the horse may not possess a highly developed sense of irony.

The Government say that they sympathise with the current crisis in agriculture, but they have provided little effective help. Although there have been a lot of words and efforts, they have sometimes made things worse. The technical aspects of the outbreak of classical swine fever in East Anglia were dealt with very professionally by MAFF officials, and I took the trouble to write to the Minister to tell him so. However, my constituents continue to be nerve-racked, not only because many of them have lost thousands of pounds—some of them hundreds of thousands of pounds—but because, six months on from the original outbreak, they still face uncertainty about the eventual compensation.

On sugar beet, do the Government support the everything but arms initiative, which would threaten 23,000 jobs in the British economy, or do they support the on-going EU review of the sugar regime? As the Minister has said, they are not compatible either they must be made compatible, or the Minister must say which side he is on. We have not heard much from any Minister on that matter.

Mr. Nick Brown: My policy is not very different from the one that the right hon. Lady pursued when she was a Minister.

Mrs. Shephard: The policy that I pursued, which was for an on-going review of the sugar regime, was not threatened by the everything but arms initiative, supported by other branches of the Government of which I was a member. That is the right hon. Gentleman's position.

Mr. Brown: I am sorry that the right hon. Lady does not understand why she pursued that policy as a Minister; but the truth is that, yes, the regime was threatened by market access, regardless of whether that came under a regime specifically tailored to the poorest countries in the world, or whether it came more generally. That is

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precisely the reason why she used to argue that the existing sugar regime was not sustainable, and why I argue that now.

Mrs. Shephard: The Minister should use a great deal more force in that case, and perhaps a little more knowledge. Ten days ago the European Commission reported on its website that it had decided to adopt a new timetable for duty and tariffs on imports of cane sugar to start from 2006. I think I am right to say that the original plan for the EBA proposals was that they should begin on 1 January 2001. That news was reported widely in the farming press and welcomed, but Ministers said nothing, so we could be forgiven for thinking that they either had not noticed or did not know.

Last week, therefore, I tabled questions to the Minister and to the Minister for Trade to ask for clarification. After four days, they gave holding replies, so I assume that they did not know that the Commission had changed its mind. If they did know, why did they give holding replies? Why did they refer me to the position before Christmas in their definitive answers?

Mr. Brown: The right hon. Lady could always turn up during oral questions to ask about those matters.

Mrs. Shephard: I do not think the right hon. Gentleman gave any indication of that position during oral questions this morning. Perhaps the Minister of State will give an answer in winding-up the debate. Although she usually answers by saying that she will place a letter in the Library, I shall ask her the questions that she should answer in summing up today. Has the Commission changed its policy? Is the starting date now 2006? Was the farming press right to welcome the change? Did she and her colleagues know about it? If so, why was I not given the correct answer to my question?

The simple conclusion, even from this exchange, is that Ministers have so little understanding of the real issues affecting agriculture, and so little appreciation that agriculture is the cornerstone of the rural economy, that they think the schemes and plans that they put about are helping, whereas they are in fact stifling with regulations the industry's ability to produce the crops that the market needs. It is time for a change in rural Britain, and we will have one.

5.44 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am delighted to take part in this debate. I begin by responding to the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard). It is somewhat cheap to concentrate only on what is apparently a national crisis, although I shall make some points about its British dimension. After my recent visit to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland with the Select Committee on Agriculture, it is evident to me that every agricultural system in the developed world is undergoing problems at present.

In the Irish Republic, a huge changeover from full-time to part-time farming is under way, with all the repercussions that one might imagine. We cannot and must not identify the crisis as purely a British problem—although there are problems for which not only the Labour Government but the previous Conservative Government have responsibility. There is a British dimension; we have additional difficulties that are only too well known—BSE, bovine tuberculosis and the recent floods all add to a legacy of problems that the Government have to do their best to sort out.

I am glad that the problems of the CAP have been mentioned. My political perspective means that I have never been a great fan of the CAP—let alone many aspects of the EU—but at least we are moving in the right direction. The problem is that there have been wild fluctuations in policy: from our own deficiency payment system, to price support systems and sectoral support payments, right up to the type of initiatives that many of us want for agriculture, not only in this country but throughout the western world—support for countryside management and rural development regulations that would ensure that agriculture was genuinely environment-friendly.

Mr. Hayes: I know that the hon. Gentleman takes an assiduous interest in these matters. Agenda 2000 was heralded as the great opportunity to reform the CAP exactly as he describes, yet once it was implemented, it was widely regarded as a damp squib. Surely the changes that he describes may take a generation or more—by which time, there will be precious few farmers left in Britain.

Mr. Drew: I have some sympathy for the hon. Gentleman's argument. Agenda 2000 was a missed opportunity—less in this country than for other EU Governments. They must rue the day they did not make radical and more dramatic changes. We must continue to push them to ensure that they do so in the future.

At present, the most important matter is how to provide support to those farmers who so desperately need it. In the initial exchanges between Front-Bench speakers, we were reminded that for every pound raised in compensatory payments, 69p has to come from our Treasury. Looking back, one sees that it was no great success—to save our budget then could cost us much more money in future. However, we know that and we must build it into our calculations.

None of that would be necessary if we did not have to engage in all the fiddles and fudges of the exchange rate. I blame the CAP in particular; that was bound to lead to disaster. No country can rely indefinitely on a depreciating currency to finance its farmers. The currency began to appreciate under the previous Conservative Government and that continued under Labour, but unfortunately there are repercussions, on top of many other problems.

I hope that we shall debate BSE in a fortnight, so I shall not discuss it at length now. However, we must never underestimate the extent of the problems caused by BSE. They do not affect only farmers in the livestock sector; there is an integrity in agriculture—all the sectors work together. Phillips exposed the problems caused by BSE—not only health problems but income difficulties that farmers continue to face. We must keep revisiting them.

Although I have some comments on regulation, we must get it into our head that, after all the problems and all that we have learned, merely to remove regulation is not the way to rebuild confidence in our food chain. It

would do just the opposite. Although it is schadenfreude to talk about what other countries are going through—we heard the earlier exchanges about those horrible French and those horrible Germans—at least we can give them a few lessons. However, we must never let the idea that we welcome their plight enter our consciousness. British beef farmers will also suffer because there will again be a lack of confidence in beef, and in other meat.

We must consider regulation and take up the arguments of Lord Haskins and the work of the three working parties that were set up by the Government to examine red tape. We must understand that it is possible to gold-plate some sectors, but we can do that only if we take a measured approach and are careful how we reduce the number of regulations. We must also ensure that regulations are enforced in the most appropriate manner.

It concerns me when people talk about investigation as though it can automatically be carried out by people who have the time to do it. However, we put enormous pressure on trading standards officers, environmental health officers and the Meat Hygiene Service. We must support them in whatever way we can, and that often means finding more resources, and not fewer, as those who advocate less regulation sometimes argue.

I know that other Members wish to speak, so it would be wrong if I spoke for my whole 10 minutes. However, it is important to develop a partnership so that those involved with the different elements of the food chain can understand and work more effectively with each other. This debate comes at an important time for my constituency, because Dairy Crest has announced a rationalisation of the dairy processing sector. I declare an interest: my dairy was the biggest winner. Severnside has become the so-called super-dairy, but I do not claim that my lobbying prowess had anything to do with that. I am sad for the dairies that lost out.

However, it has long been argued that there is a need for rationalisation in the sector, and we must accept that. Farmers have always told me that although the price that they receive for milk is not high enough, they want to be in a sector that is more efficient. Such developments are taking place in the processing sector, and it would be nice to see them happening in retailing, so that retailers pay the going price, even though most of us believe that it is too low. If consumers pay a fair price, that will help to keep dairy and other farmers in production.

I have been saddened by the shake-out in the processing industry, so we need to examine how we can bring people together. For the past week or so, farmers from Farmers for Action have been demonstrating outside the Severnside plant, and I gather that there will be a big demonstration tonight. Although I understand their frustration, that is not the way to build bridges.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I do not know the particular circumstances of what the hon. Gentleman described as his dairy. However, I know that farmers throughout the country are angry. I declare an interest in that I come from a farming family. I have listened to what the hon. Gentleman said about shake-outs, but does he not realise that farmers are angry because of the inaction and incompetence of the Government whom he supports?

Mr. Drew: I wish I had not taken that intervention because it is so far from the truth as to be unreal.

If we are to have an effective national food chain in this country, the different sectors must come together. There is no more obvious example than the dairy industry, where there has been a poisonous atmosphere in the recent past. That has to be overcome, but the situation is not helped by farmers demonstrating, trying to shut down a dairy and intimidating people who, in the main, are paid much less than many of them, even in these difficult circumstances. I condemn that, as I hope the Opposition will. It is important that we find a way forward, and that will not be achieved by demonstrations and intimidation.

We understand the way in which the Government's policy is proceeding. There are matters on which I have something in common with the Opposition. There is a case for considering early retirement. I understand the arguments about dead weight and how it will be financed, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister considered that carefully. If we are to help those who are, unfortunately, to leave the industry, whether temporarily or permanently, or to work part-time, we must give them the means to make that move successfully.

There is a need for retraining, and I am pleased to hear about the Small Business Service and rural development regulations. We have to encourage more diversification. The environmental side of farming must be paid for by the Government, and the tourists who want to visit our wonderful countryside should contribute to its management.

Much is being done to help agriculture, and the industry has not been and will not be isolated, but is being viewed as part of the wider rural economy. That agenda has a cost. I am pleased that the Opposition have now agreed to ring-fence support for agriculture, along with health, education, defence and law and order. If they were given the opportunity, I should like to see them manage the Budget, given that they are also talking about tax cuts.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): My hon. Friend made an interesting point confirming that the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) said that the Opposition would ring-fence the agriculture budget. Has he heard any confirmation of that from the shadow Chancellor?

Mr. Drew: No, but I am sure that in the days to come many Labour Members will be quizzing the hon. Member for South Suffolk about the spending commitment that he will have to meet.

There is much for the Government to be proud of, despite the current crisis. However, it was said earlier that farmers must not be given false hope. We have to provide them with a realistic way forward, and that will involve structural changes. The argument concerns how we fund those changes and ensure that agriculture can survive not only these immediate problems but long into the future.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Before I call the next Member to speak, I say to the House that although there is not a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches in this debate, many Members are seeking to catch my eye, and it would be helpful if contributions were as brief as possible.

5.58 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I am pleased that we have another opportunity to discuss agriculture, and I congratulate the official Opposition on providing that opportunity.

There is no doubt that we are still in the depths of a major crisis. Anyone who doubts that has only to look at the recently released estimates of farm income. Whatever slight improvement there may have been in the pig and poultry sectors, and possibly even in hill farming, one has only to look at the base from which they are improving to realise that they are still in the depths of a recession.

In other sectors, the problems are still getting worse. The net farm income in the dairy sector is only 20 per cent., in real terms, of what it was a decade ago. In cereals, the figure is only 25 per cent. Even more telling are the figures for cash income, which relate to farmers who work their own farm and do not pay a wage bill. Dairy farmers have experienced a 15 per cent. drop in their cash income since last year, and cereal farmers have suffered a 25 per cent. drop.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Has my hon. Friend noticed that the worst changes took place pre-BSE? The BSE disaster was not the cause of the present problem, although it has obviously aggravated the situation. Farm incomes have fallen by two thirds from 1995 onwards, pre-BSE.

Mr. Heath: My hon. Friend is right. There has been a long-term decline in farming. It is almost impossible now to gain a living wage by working a small or medium-sized farm, without dipping into capital. The average income per farmer is £8,500, which is the lowest ever in real terms since records began. If we consider the comparators, only Sweden—I suspect that the figures for Sweden are not entirely accurate—and Portugal have lower average farm incomes than those in the United Kingdom. That is bad for the owner farmer, but at least he has capital employed in his farm. It is even worse for the tenant farmer, who does not have the satisfaction of knowing that he has assets on which he can call. We still wait for a retirement scheme that would allow many such farmers, especially those in late middle age, to retire with dignity.

Institutional landlords could play a part in ensuring that agricultural rents are a genuine reflection of agricultural profitability. I am not convinced that some institutional landlords, even those with a clear social intent such as the Church of England, have got their minds round what is required. It is not only agriculture directly that is involved—many other industries depend upon it.

The Government's responses, certainly during the period in office of the current Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, have been largely well intentioned. I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the assiduity with which he has listened to what many of us have had to say in the Chamber, as well as, more importantly, to what many outside the House who are directly involved in agriculture have had to say.

Good intentions are not enough. Often schemes have been announced that have taken time to come to fruition. Often they have not delivered what was claimed for them. Some of the schemes to which the Minister referred are not in place and are not delivering. There is incompleteness about the Government's response. The good intentions of the Ministry are not necessarily matched by other areas of government.

We do not have joined-up government. We do not always have the co-operation of the Treasury, the Department of Trade and Industry and the other Departments that play a part. That is why we still have rather malign chuntering about the pesticides tax, which would be disastrous for cereal farmers were it to be introduced and implemented now. We still have the DTI taking what I think is a perverse view of Milk Marque. We still have the Treasury causing obstructions to carry-forwards, which are needed if the Minister is to do the job that he wants to do.

Mr. Livsey: My hon. Friend has referred to the Department of Trade and Industry, which today announced, sadly, the loss of 6,000 jobs in the steel industry. Is he aware that in Wales, between 1998 and 2000, 6,000 farmers left the land?

Mr. Heath: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. His intervention underlines the depth and scale of the problem that we face. Individual farmers do not show up in the statistics in the same way as a major plant closure. However, they are no less important because of that, and we should pay the same attention to them.

There is still uncertainty about the Government's intentions. There was a debate in serial fashion this afternoon on the future of agrimonetary compensation. I hope that the Minister will make an early announcement that he does intend to draw down on that. There may be a temptation to wait until three or four days before an election to make the point. I hope that he will not do that, and that there will be an earlier announcement.

I also hope that the Minister will give serious consideration—it is a point that I have raised repeatedly in debates on agriculture—to what will succeed the agrimonetary compensation mechanism. It is not good enough merely to hope that something will turn up. That is not doing our best for farmers. We are currently outside the eurozone. We are the only country that will be in such a position because of the weakness of the Swedish kronor and the fact that the Danish kroner is pegged to the euro. Our position is therefore unique, and we must persuade other EU countries that we need a mechanism to cope with it.

I should like to deal briefly with agricultural sectors. The dairy sector is close to my own heart, and is important in my Somerset constituency. I shall re-examine the scale of the milk problem. Output value is down by £273 million—10 per cent. of its value. That is the real problem: its beginning and end are the price that the farmer can get for the milk that he sells. Until we get that right, any amount of marketing and promotion will not cure the problem.

Mr. Hayes *rose—*

Mr. Heath: If I give way to the hon. Gentleman, that will take time from other Members. However, I shall happily do so.

Mr. Hayes: I shall be brief.

Is that issue not indicative of a wider problem—the distortion of the food chain? The relationship between producer, retailer and consumer is distorted. Supermarkets play an important part because they carry a lot of responsibility for that distortion. That is the heart of the problem, which has not been addressed by the Government.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman is right: that is precisely the point that I was about to make. However, the problem is not a new invention by the Government. The supermarkets were given much too free a rein under the previous Government, which they took, as any commercial business would. However, there is a gross distortion in the market. As the Minister knows, I was bitterly disappointed at the outcome of the Competition Commission report on supermarkets. It did not ask the right questions, so it came up with the wrong answers.

We need to re-examine seriously the dairy supply chain. On 16 November, in answer to the hon. Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards), whom I am pleased to see in the Chamber, the Minister spoke about the need to establish a group to consider the current problems. The Minister also gave a heavy hint that a report would be commissioned to study in depth the milk supply chain. That cannot come soon enough, as it would enable us to take the required remedial action.

The state of the beef market in Europe is extremely serious, not just for beef producers in Europe but for beef producers in this country. We underestimate that at our peril. I do not believe that even the European Commission, in its recent assessment of the situation, has estimated properly the difficulties that we may be about to experience. It assessed the reduction in domestic markets, but they will reduce much more than is currently estimated.

There is undue optimism about the ability of European Union countries, including the United Kingdom, to find export markets outside the EU. Exactly the same barriers that Britain experienced in the past will be put up against all EU beef. That will have a hugely distorting and possibly catastrophic effect on the beef regime under EU rules. I shall give the Minister a warning. He will be tempted to try to achieve consensus on public health, veterinary health and public safety in the Council of Ministers. However, he must not be tempted to allow our farmers and our taxpayers to pay twice for that problem, as could happen.

I also hope that the Minister will not accept measures to restore confidence that are entirely unjustified in this country. One matter currently on the table is the fishmeal ban. The Minister will know that there is not a problem here with possible cross-contamination between fishmeal and meat and bonemeal. A fishmeal ban would have a disastrous effect. I have a letter from Countrywide Farmers, based in Melksham near my constituency, which estimates that a ban

> would cost the feed industry £20 million, plus an annual £10 million

because of transport costs. Those are substantial additional costs for our farmers and food producers.

Hon. Members have mentioned regulation, which is still an important issue for many of our farmers. I hear what is said about our pledge not to introduce gold-plating, but I take seriously the point made by the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) about the introduction of new regulations. Over-regulation stifles our farming industry, but we still do it. The 26 January edition of *Farmers Weekly* contains a report on the annual Lloyds TSB Scotland agricultural survey. It tells us of the estimate that farmers

> "are spending the equivalent of more than five working weeks a year filling in government-generated forms."

That still happens after the so-called war on red tape. We must deal with the matter. We need to introduce rights of appeal, simplify appeal mechanisms and establish an agricultural ombudsman who can challenge the decisions of MAFF inspectors. We also need to consider the effects of the new meat inspection regime.

We must also consider some of the simpler issues. I have received a letter from Mr. Paul Cary of Dangerfield farm in Buckland Dinham. Mr. Cary, who is one of my constituents, speaks about the red tape associated with the slaughter premium scheme. I shall not take up time by dealing with that issue now, but I believe that it needs to be addressed and I shall write to the Minister about it.

I should like to mention the environmental schemes with which the Government have rightly pressed ahead. Countryside stewardship schemes and protection for environmentally sensitive areas should be promoted. Such schemes are in many ways the future of the common agricultural policy, and I hope that we will provide more support for those who maintain our countryside through them. However, I have serious concerns about the way in which they often operate. They must be redesigned and their scope should be increased. They need funding that is guaranteed year on year. If people enter such schemes, they must know that some bright spark in MAFF will not put a red line through the initial proposals at some later stage. The schemes must also reflect the realities of life. It is no good introducing a scheme that suddenly pays less, perhaps because the average farm income has fallen and the original investment decision was based on an assumption of income. We need to ensure that the arrangements are brought into line in order to guarantee farmers a future. We must also ensure that all such schemes have the correct design and focus.

Again, I do not want to take up too much time, but I should like briefly to refer the Minister to a study by the Environment Agency. I have enormous respect for much of the agency's work, but I am concerned about its impact statement on agriculture and the environment. If he turns to the pages on the environmental external costs of agriculture, he will see statements that, in my opinion, cannot be substantiated and do not reflect the true costs of agriculture. There is a problem with such information: if the agriculture industry can see that it is not real and that it does not reflect genuine circumstances, people will turn away in droves and we will not achieve our objectives. I invite the Minister to consider the statement and to reflect on whether its accounting is correct.

I considered the motion carefully and I believe that much of the analysis that it contains is correct. Indeed, I think that Opposition Members have identified in the motion many of the Government's failures. The problem is, however, that almost every single one of those failures could be applied to the Conservatives' term in office. It would better if they recognised that that was the case, as our memory is not as short as they would like it to be. We remember that farm incomes were in steep decline before 1997. We remember who presided over BSE and

[Mr. Heath]

its aftermath and who created a completely artificial beef war that poisoned our relations with the rest of Europe. We also remember who failed to start effective CAP reform, did not utilise agrimonetary compensation and produced a rebate formula at Fontainebleau that hobbled our negotiations year after year. Incidentally, we also remember which party introduced legislation to prevent local authorities from buying British when buying British was best.

Mr. Paice: Are the Liberal Democrats against the Fontainebleau agreement and the rebate that was gained for this country? The Prime Minister applauded that rebate only yesterday and claimed its maintenance as one of his achievements.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman comes late to the debate; I have made the point many times. The Fontainebleau rebate is a poor mechanism because of the problems it has created for our farmers and other primary producers. We should have had proper equivalence in the European Union between the amount that Britain spent and the amount that we received. We need an alternative mechanism, which is better designed than the Fontainebleau agreement and achieves the same objectives without crippling our farmers. We should be negotiating for that in Europe.

We have considered the motion and the Government's amendment, and we believe that successive Governments have failed farming and the rural areas in this country. Farmers and those who live in the country deserve better.

6.16 pm

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), who speaks with great authority, which I remember from his service on the Committee that considered the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill. He presented a powerful reminder of the previous Government's legacy: BSE, long-term decline in incomes and Conservative Members' general anti-European instincts, which are relevant to a debate about farming.

There is no doubt that farm income has declined at least in the past five years. The weakness of the euro partly reflects the strength of the economy and the Government's good management of it. When the economy does well, agriculture tends to do badly. The reverse is also true: when agriculture does better, the economy tends to be weaker. I wish that the two cycles could coincide.

There has been a decline in the consumption of meat, and in world commodity prices, which seem to be improving now. The difficulties in Russia and Asia have also had an impact on the world economy. The Russian market is especially important for British farming. The effects of BSE and the loss of the export market have taken their toll. The Government regained the export market and removed the ban that was imposed by the European Union and other countries.

The Government have introduced regulations to improve consumer confidence. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) made some powerful points about the need not to overstate the significance of red tape. Many of the regulations have been introduced to ensure consumer safety.

The Government have increased the regulatory framework for labelling. A farmer that I met recently drew my attention to the fact that when he went to his local supermarket, the new labelling rules had not been followed. I hope that the Government and the Food Standards Agency can consider that.

The Government's review of meat hygiene charges will be welcomed in the small abattoir in Raglan in the middle of my constituency. There is anxiety in my constituency about the delay in the payment of subsidies such as the suckler cow premium and the beef annual premium. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome made the valid point that many farmers are penalised when they do not submit their applications in time, but that they suffer greatly from delays in their payments. There should be an appeals system. I know one farmer who lost £6,000 through making an inadvertent mistake. The Inland Revenue does not treat people like that, and neither should MAFF and the Rural Affairs Department of the Welsh Assembly.

Britain has higher welfare standards than other European countries and countries outside Europe. There is a thriving poultry industry in my constituency and it has suffered from the import of poultry that are fed on inferior foodstuffs, which would not be allowed in this country.

The farming community has also felt the effect of additional costs. I have sympathy for the farmers in my constituency who have been affected by rising fuel costs. Many small farmers are also small hauliers, and at a time of falling incomes, rising fuel costs were hitting them hard, especially the cost of red diesel. It is encouraging that the world oil price has gone down, and that has now reduced the cost of red diesel. The Government have also frozen fuel duties.

I am surprised by the Conservatives' motion. They have committed themselves to a saving in expenditure of at least £8 billion. They have said that they would protect the Government's commitments on education, the national health service and, apparently, policing. I wonder whether we have heard a genuine announcement tonight that they would protect the Government's future expenditure plans on agriculture. They have given no commitment that they would protect the industry budget. The biggest contribution that the Government give to industry is in agriculture, and it would be significant if the Conservatives would make a commitment on that. I suspect that they will not.

Mr. Yeo: If I did not make it clear before, when I intervened on the Minister, let me make it clear again that the Conservative party will honour the MAFF budget, as it has been set out, in full. The question that I asked earlier was whether the Labour Government would honour their own MAFF budget.

Mr. Edwards: I have every confidence that my right hon. Friend will honour the budget that the Government have planned for the next few years. However, I have doubts as to whether a Conservative Government would do so, especially when we consider that, under the previous Conservative Government, not one penny piece of agrimonetary compensation was paid. The present Government have paid over £500,000. Surely the Conservatives would want to save in an area on which they never spent a penny when they were in government.

Under the Conservatives' proposals, what would go? What would be cut? Would it be support for sheep farmers, or the sheep annual premium? Would it be support for beef farmers, or the beef annual premium? Would it be the suckler cow premium, or agrimonetary compensation, as I have suggested?

Would agri-environmental schemes be cut under the Conservatives' proposals? To their credit, the Government have invested a considerable amount of extra money in such schemes. In Wales, we have the tir gofal scheme in the lowlands, and hill farmers have access to tir mynydd. Those are important contributions to farm income that would be under threat unless the commitments that we have, supposedly, heard tonight were fulfilled and confirmed by the shadow Chancellor and the Leader of the Opposition. Would organic conversion support be maintained under the Conservatives? It has been substantially increased by the present Government.

A week ago, I attended the annual general meeting of the Monmouthshire National Farmers Union. I was pleased that the Deputy First Minister of the Welsh Assembly, Mr. Mike German, was there. The meeting was addressed by Ben Gill, the president of the NFU, and by Anthony Price, the union's chairman, who is retiring. I pay tribute to the work that Mr. Price has done, and wish every success to Glyn Williams, the new chairman.

Ben Gill had a powerful message about the difficulties facing the industry. There was no doubt about those difficulties, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend has heard such messages a number of times. Mr. Gill also said that farmers need to fight back, and to work together. To their credit, Monmouthshire farmers have been working in co-operation. They were influential in establishing the farmers ferry and farmers fresh schemes. I have also visited the abattoir in Kenilworth, where a thriving meat export market is being developed because of the co-operative initiatives achieved by the farmers of Monmouthshire and elsewhere.

In Monmouthshire, the farmers make an enormous contribution to the environment and to producing safe food. We have had some good news stories there. Two days ago, I attended the launch of CCET, the new rural training initiative. One of the key bodies involved with the scheme will be Coleg Gwent. At the heart of Coleg Gwent, which is in my constituency, is the former Usk agricultural college. I would be the first to admit that the further education sector has been very slow to respond to the educational and training needs of the established farming community. It used to train young people coming into farming, but their numbers have declined in recent years. In the past six months, an important new initiative has been produced to support those farmers who are established in the business, those who want to retrain to develop IT skills, and farmers' wives who want to retrain. The college makes an important contribution.

The farming community also makes a valuable contribution—to maintaining the beautiful countryside of Monmouthshire and to providing high quality food. I appreciate the difficulties that it faces and I want to work with farmers to ensure a more secure future for farming in Monmouthshire and the rest of Wales.

6.25 pm

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): I must declare an interest. I was born and brought up on a farm and my family is still directly involved with farming.

Although the current recession is a disaster for British farmers and a particular disaster for small and medium-sized family farms and livestock farmers, it affects all farms, whatever their cropping or activity, and whatever their size. Farm incomes have fallen by 90 per cent. in the past two years. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) pointed out, bank borrowings have risen to more than £10 billion and 47,500 farmers and farm workers have left the industry over the past two years.

Those figures mask the suffering of thousands of farmers who have seen generations of effort, hard work and dedication turn to ashes. The National Farmers Union estimates that up to 40 per cent. of farmers receive or are entitled to the working families tax credit, so let us be in no doubt about the extent of the crisis. Many people—some on the Government Benches and some elsewhere—shrug their shoulders at that. They argue, "Why does it matter? What is so special about agriculture? Why cannot it go the same way as the textile industry or other commodity-based manufacturing industries that have had to close capacity and cut back?" Those are serious and important questions. They need an answer, which I shall attempt to give.

Most obviously, we need to feed ourselves—if not completely, then at least substantially. There might be a short-term glut of food and short-term price collapses, but who can say that that will always be the case? Natural disasters might cause massive crop failures. Who can predict with certainty the impact of climate change on the world's ability to feed itself? What are the chances of a man-made disaster? Who knows the full consequences, good or bad, of genetic modification? Will the third world, as it becomes richer, demand more food than the world can produce? There might be trade wars or more conventional war. Who knows? Surely there is still a strong argument—which, after all, has been accepted since the second world war—that we should produce a significant proportion of our own food. It would be foolhardy to do otherwise.

The argument does not stop there. The British countryside—or at least more than 75 per cent. of it—has been shaped over hundreds of years by the British farmer. Our birds, insects, trees, flowers, hedges and animals are here because of British farming, not in spite of it. A crisis for farming is a crisis for our wildlife and our unique countryside. The two are inseparable.

A third aspect is alluded to in the rural White Paper, which says:

> "Farming communities have created the fabric of our rural life over centuries . . . Rural life and the rural environment as we know it would not exist without farming".

Although farms no longer employ as many people as they used to, they still directly employ 600,000 people full-time and part-time. That is a great deal more than the steel or car industries. Farming also touches the lives of a great many more. That connection is partly material, because the livelihoods of many depend on our farms, and partly cultural. If we lose our farming roots, future generations will cease to understand what the countryside is all about. It is a place of work as well as a place to enjoy. The latter cannot exist without the former.

[Mr. David Prior]

The countryside march on 18 March will, I hope, show how important the countryside still is in the hearts of those of us who still live there. Its cry, "Liberty and livelihood", touches a deep chord within us.

Mr. Edwards: It is a hunters' march.

Mr. Prior: Some Labour Members are not touched by that cry.

I believe that agriculture is special and different from other industries and that Governments have a vital role to play to ensure its future.

It is time—it is past the time—for agriculture to be returned from Europe to our national Governments. The failure of the Government to reform the CAP or to take more control over it is a failure of resolve and vision—and a failure that threatens the enlargement of the European Union to include the countries of eastern Europe.

I unashamedly advocate an interventionist role for Government. Farming is not an industry that can be tossed on to the waters of global free trade. The Opposition have other objectives: we want family farms to survive, we want to encourage mixed farming, we want to encourage less intensive methods of farming, such as LEAF—linking environment and farming—and organic farming, and we want to make our own rules on set-aside.

There will never be free and fair world trade in farm products. Animal welfare standards will vary, some countries will have different environmental priorities, land prices will vary hugely and food hygiene rules will differ. We can talk about a level playing field until the cows come home, but if we are honest with ourselves, we all know that it will never happen.

We can improve matters, of course, with honest labelling and the like, but different countries will have different priorities, and rightly so, because farming, as I have argued, is about more than trade alone. A country the size of the UK will always have a different approach to farming from that of a country the size of the USA, Brazil, Australia or even France.

Until the Government accept that farming is different, that it is special and that it involves far more than the price of a commodity, they will never have the vision or commitment to provide a future for the countryside.

6.31 pm

Mrs. Helen Brinton (Peterborough): No hon. Member would deny that the situation facing our farmers and the entire rural economy is extremely serious. We recognise that a number of fundamental issues have contributed to that situation, as we heard in earlier contributions—the strength of the pound, food scares and the renegotiation of the complex and troublesome CAP.

Over the past four years, the Labour Government have shown a firm commitment to agriculture and to ensuring that our food is safe. The development of our Food Standards Agency is a leading example in Europe, in which we should all take pride. On many different fronts, the Government continue to tackle the underlying problems that affect British agriculture.

Over the longer term, that will help the industry to develop in a sustainable way—"sustainable" is the key word—in a regenerated, enlivened rural economy. It is essential that we do not rush towards the quick fix or the short-term solution that does not address the issues over the long term.

The rural White Paper was an example of joined-up government. It outlined a radical package of measures to tackle the issues that matter to people who live in the countryside, such as jobs, hospitals, schools, post offices and transport. Those measures will ensure that quality public services and a stable thriving economy are brought to everyone in rural areas, including people engaged in agriculture.

As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said, the White Paper makes it clear that

"farming remains central to the vitality of rural areas".

He went on to say that since 1997 Labour has provided an extra £1 billion to help the farming industry, and that £1.6 billion will back up the comprehensive measures to be taken under the English rural development programme.

I welcome the modulation of the CAP, with the resulting increased funding for the development of agri-environmental schemes. I hope that we will hear more about those later. They will ease the way for many farmers to develop their business through the adoption of stewardship or organic farming, which is moving towards the top of the political agenda.

Under the Conservative Government, research and development funding for organic farming was just over £1 million a year. The Labour Government have increased that to more than £2 million, which means that we are second only to Denmark among EU countries.

In 1997-98, expenditure on countryside stewardship was £19 million a year. Labour has already increased that to £35 million. Under the rural development programme, expenditure will rise each year, reaching £126 million by 2006-07.

The Government have supported the adoption of integrated farm management. I was glad to hear comments on that from Members on both sides of the House. IFM integrates care for the environment with the production of safe, wholesome food at affordable prices. It is an approach to farming that will combine beneficial natural processes and traditional practices such as crop rotation with modern technology and selective targeted use of agrochemicals. The result is the ability to minimise pollution and avoid unnecessary use of chemicals and energy, while maintaining our profit margins.

IFM is supported partly through the DETR-funded scheme linking the environment and farming—appropriately known as LEAF. I visited a LEAF farm near my Peterborough constituency only last autumn, and was extremely impressed both by the personal commitment of the farmer concerned, David Felce, and by the potential of IFM to support a sustainable agriculture in the current economic conditions. In fact, I shall host an event here in March to help to increase awareness.

I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister has also visited a LEAF farm, and that there is a strong possibility that MAFF will give LEAF additional support. LEAF has contributed to the production of sustainable development indicators at farm level, and I am glad to say that that too

has been favourably received by MAFF. I understand that LEAF's contribution has also been recognised by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

This Government recognise that agricultural problems cannot and should not be solved by a quick fix. It is a question of assessing the options that are workable for and available to farmers. There are taskforces whose purpose is to simplify the burden of law, without simply carrying out a "slash red tape" exercise—we have heard about that today as well—that might have undesirable knock-on effects, including endangering public safety.

Work is in progress to develop farm assurance schemes, and to help farmers to get nearer the marketplace. I understand that that includes diversification and the establishment of farmers markets and co-operatives. There is an assessment of the advisory services offered to farmers with the aim of reducing the industry's costs, and ensuring collaboration and better feed-through of information throughout. There are training schemes, free business advice, benchmarking and online information. Farm buildings now house computers as well as more traditional supplies and implements, as I have seen for myself.

In short, this Labour Government are developing a range of solutions for the agriculture industry, as well as tackling the social and economic problems of the rural economy, which will obviously benefit farmers too. Only by adopting a long-term comprehensive strategy will we ensure the sustainable development of a thriving, lively agriculture sector, which is what I believe we all want.

6.38 pm

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): I begin by reminding the House of the interest that I have declared in the Register of Members' Interests.

Our short debate has covered a lot of ground. No doubt the Minister of State will shortly rise with a pained expression, and declare that she cannot answer all the points that have been raised, but—as was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard)—we need answers to many of the points made by Members on both sides of the House. I hope that the Minister will dispose of any pre-prepared speech and seek genuinely to deal with them.

A number of Labour Members were obviously at pains to criticise my party, but went on to recite exactly the points about problems in agriculture that we have made. We welcome what the Minister has done to alleviate at least some of the problems caused by flooding: the derogation with regard to the integrated administration and control system—or IACS—rules was very sensible, although I would not have expected the Minister to do otherwise.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) said, the Minister's account of his achievements sounded remarkably self-satisfied and smug. It could lead people to believe that things were getting better when, as we know, they are not.

The Minister accused Conservative Members of being against free trade and for protectionism. As all Opposition Members know, that is absolute rot. Conservative Members believe in free trade and the market because of political conviction—not because of political convenience, which is what attracts Labour Members to such opinions. Nevertheless, we have to accept that totally unfettered free trade would cause standards to fall to the lowest common denominator. No hon. Member wants that in food standards, in welfare standards or in anything else. There must be a standards threshold to ensure that there is fair trade.

The Minister said a little about BSE and tried yet again to lay it at our door, and I know that BSE will be the subject of another debate. I noticed, however, that he failed to mention that today, Commissioner Byrne said that the rest of Europe should follow Britain's example of how to control a disease. Those controls were put in place by the previous, Conservative Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) made a very thoughtful speech in which he emphasised the importance of agriculture and explained why, for all types of reasons, it is different from other industries. He could also have mentioned the fact that 500,000 jobs in food processing would go abroad if the raw materials were sourced abroad.

Various hon. Members have spoken about agrimoney and compensation. It is essential that the Minister claim the available £202 million or thereabouts not only for its own sake, but because if he does not, we would be denied the opportunity in subsequent phases to claim another £170 million. However, as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) said, the Minister gave us no indication of what will follow the current agrimonetary scheme, which expires on 1 January 2002. I think that the Opposition are justified in asking the Government to tell us their plans to negotiate a replacement—or does the Minister believe that Britain will have joined the euro by the end of this year?

My right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk mentioned the sugar industry. Two major threats hang over that industry, but in both cases, the Minister has gone against the interests of British industry. Although he seemed to try a different line today, I remind him of an answer that he gave only a little while ago in reply to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff). He said:

"The hon. Gentleman overstates the danger . . . The quantities involved are relatively small and there are safeguards in the proposal."—[*Official Report*, 21 December 2000; Vol. 360, c. 550.]

The Commission, however, has published its own impact assessment showing that, if the everything but arms proposals had proceeded as originally planned, they would have cost the common agricultural policy 1 billion euros and reduced the sugar quota within the European Union by 1 million tonnes, which is about the same as the United Kingdom's entire production. Anyone who thinks that that is overstatement is deluding himself.

Now, as we have heard, the Commission has shelved the proposals, including those on sugar, for the next six years. It is doing that because once the French Government lost the presidency, they started to stand up for their own sugar industry. I wonder whether the Minister feels good that the British industry has been saved not by him but by the French Government.

The Minister espouses reform of the regime, but he wants even bigger cuts than those demanded by the Commission. Indeed, he has previously quoted some of my right hon. Friends in support of his claim. However, when those calls for reductions were made, all arable

[Mr. James Paice]

crops were making reasonable, and in some cases substantial, margins. Now, no other mainstream arable crop is making a margin at all.

By how much would the Minister expect the price of a packet of biscuits or a soft drink to fall if the sugar price were cut by 20 or 30 per cent? Can he tell us? The answer is almost certainly that the price would not be reduced by a penny. Neither has he commented on whether he believes in area-based compensation for sugar price reductions, as has been provided for other arable crops.

The Minister also referred to the TB crisis in our cattle industry, which is serious and getting worse. The Krebs inquiry said that trials should be running in three months, but three years down the line, not all the trials are up and running.

Mr. Nick Brown: They are.

Mr. Paice: The Minister says that they are. They are not: proactive culling has not taken place at three of the 10 sites. If the Minister does not know what is going on in a programme for which he is responsible, he should be ashamed of himself. The husbandry panel published proposals last May, but the Minister did not respond until two weeks ago. Even then, he failed to act on some of the recommendations. Farmers know the truth—that none of these Ministers wants to make the tough decisions that may flow from the completed trials. The Minister has also failed to address the issue of cattle movement out of the hot spots and into clean areas.

We have also heard about the sum of £26 million for the pig industry restructuring scheme. The Minister said that he was trying to ensure that the amount was rolled over, and he has our support in that.

Mr. Brown: That will not help.

Mr. Paice: The Minister says that that will not help, but he forgets that he has only two or three months to secure the rollover. However, if he fails to convince the Chancellor to roll over that money, will he assure the House that he will use it to help the pig industry by advancing the amount that will be raised from the levy for the pig welfare scheme? The industry has asked him to do that, but so far he has rejected the request. If there is no rollover, that money would be available to the Minister, and it is reasonable to expect him to use it for that purpose.

Finally, what has the Minister done about the cause of the outbreak of swine fever? His own officials attribute it to illegally imported pigmeat. What has he done to control any further such imports?

Much of the debate has been about regulation and the opportunities for diversification. Of course agriculture must change, but change should not mean extinction—yet that is what faces thousands of farmers today.

We have set out on many occasions our principles for reform of the common agricultural policy. It ill behoves the Minister to accuse the Opposition of not having ideas, given that the Prime Minister went to Berlin when the Agenda 2000 proposals were being agreed, and managed to make the resolution even worse for Britain than the settlement that the Minister had achieved.

For farming to survive tomorrow, we do not need to concentrate on preaching about new directions. Farming is being priced and regulated out of existence. My right hon. Friend the Member for South–West Norfolk gave an excellent example of that from her constituency. Lord Haskins made 21 recommendations, on top of the 98 that the Minister had already accepted. What was the Minister's reaction to Lord Haskins? He created three more taskforces.

Never has long grass been so abused as by this Minister. Since he has been in office, 20 separate working groups, taskforces and reviews have been set up. Lord Haskins' report was published on 16 November. Why did the Minister not tell his civil servants the day after to get on and fulfil its recommendations at once? In the time between publication of the report and the announcement of the taskforces, another 4,000 people lost their jobs in the farming industry.

The action plan was an example of cynical manipulation of the facts. The Minister produced one budget for the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that contained swingeing cuts, and then reinstated that money in the expectation that he would be acclaimed as a hero—and he did not do that with the hill livestock allowance alone. For example, in the action plan, the Minister sought to abolish the 30-month wait limit, but who introduced the limit in the first place? Labour. He sought to hold the increase in meat hygiene charges to the level of inflation, but who wanted to raise them by more than inflation? Labour. He sought to defer the annual charge for sheep dip disposal. Who set the charge? Labour. He deferred the introduction of integrated pollution prevention and control for pig farmers. Who introduced it? Labour.

The harsh fact is that, by his actions, the Minister has betrayed consumers and conned farmers. He came into office with his bonhomie and apparent concern, yet has presided over a worsening crisis, to which his main response has been to set up working groups, taskforces and reviews. While he has dithered and delayed, farmers and farm workers have been losing their jobs and their businesses faster than ever before, at a rate of 60 a week—week in, week out—for the past two years. During his speech, at least two more jobs were lost. The sooner it is his job that is lost, the better.

6.50 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): This debate has been characterised by a number of thoughtful contributions, focusing on the present difficulties in agriculture and on ideas for securing the future of the industry. I welcome much of what has been said, although once again, the speeches of Opposition Front-Bench Members have proved the exception in what has overall been a worthwhile debate.

At least the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) began his speech by recognising the way in which my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food had listened to the concerns of farmers around the country. However, the hon. Gentleman failed to

acknowledge that my right hon. Friend has not stopped at simply listening to farmers' concerns but has taken an enormous number of measures and a great deal of action. Fortunately, that fact emerged from other contributions, including that of my right hon. Friend, during the debate.

My right hon. Friend began his speech by pointing out the inaccuracies in the Opposition's motion. He dealt effectively with the charges of failure to act and detailed the action that we had taken in the light of the measures that are necessary in the short term, as well as the medium and longer term. He spoke of the measures that had been taken domestically, within the United Kingdom, and of the work that we have put into building up alliances for common agricultural policy reform. The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) said that he would insist on CAP reform. It is a question not simply of standing up at European meetings and insisting, but of building up alliances so that concrete changes in agricultural reform are secured. That is what the Government, through their much more constructive European engagement, have done.

Many right hon. and hon. Members referred to the action plan for farming. Excellent progress is being made in the delivery of that plan. Of the 63 measures in the plan, 49 have been implemented. Recent examples, which have been referred to by some Opposition Members as well as some of my right hon. and hon. Friends, have been the ongoers and outgoers elements of the pig industry restructuring scheme and the recent announcement of aid to help to secure the future of small and medium-sized abattoirs. I commend the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) about the situation in that sector in his constituency.

My right hon. Friend also referred to the introduction of the farm business advisory service. We are very keen that there should be a good take-up of the scheme. Indeed, I was in the south-west only yesterday, encouraging farmers in that area, particularly hill farmers, to take advantage of that service. We sent details of the scheme to all farmers in the United Kingdom to encourage those in isolated and remote areas and those who were worried about the future to access and take advantage of it. We feel strongly about that.

My right hon. Friend and others also referred to the rural development programme and the welcome flexibility that it offers all sectors in agriculture, including, for example, horticulture, which does not get mainstream support from the common agricultural policy. Indeed, the rural development programme is a forward-looking measure, which recognises the differing roles that farmers fulfil—the important roles of food production and of countryside stewardship.

We have achieved a lot in CAP reform, especially through the establishment of the second rural development pillar. I believe, too, that we have made real progress in securing improvements in animal welfare. We achieved a change in the treaty to ensure that animals were recognised as sentient beings, and we are moving towards a more level playing field for directives on the welfare of laying hens and, recently, on pig welfare, about which many hon. Members are deeply concerned. Indeed, our successes in the EU have been shown by small but important measures, such as those safeguarding traditional hedgerow practices, about which hon. Members have expressed much concern in previous agriculture debates.

I should like to turn to some of the specific questions on sugar. The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) asked about recent changes proposed by the Commission. It is true that the Commission is reconsidering aspects of the everything but arms proposal, but it is also true that no formal proposal for change has yet come forward. She referred to speculation in the farming press, but until the whole college of Commissioners considers the issues, we can neither react to them, nor make a public pronouncement on them. However, my right hon. Friend the Minister will meet Commissioner Lamy to find out about his current proposals, and we shall continue to strive to ensure a balance.

The right hon. Lady said that when Conservative Ministers called for dramatic reforms in the EU sugar regime in the past, farmers were in a different financial position. Indeed, that suggestion was repeated by the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice). I accept that farmers were in a different financial position, but several Conservative Members, including some who sit on the Front Bench, have written to me putting an argument entirely different from the one that she and the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire have espoused. Several Conservative Members have told us that they want the sugar regime to be dramatically changed along the lines that she previously proposed.

Mrs. Shephard: The *Official Report* will reveal that the Minister of State has attributed remarks to me that I did not make. My point is simply that the current proposals are incompatible, and I merely sought to find out whether Agriculture Ministers in this Labour Government support the British industry—but no answer has there come today.

Ms Quin: When the right hon. Lady was a Minister, she argued strongly for price cuts that she does not support now—*[Interruption.]* She says that I attributed to her remarks that she did not make. If she had listened carefully, she would have heard that I also referred to the remarks—

6.59 pm

Mr. James Cran (Beverley and Holderness) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 145, Noes 267.

Division No. 99] **[6.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*	Baker, Norman
Allan, Richard	Baldry, Tony
Amess, David	Beggs, Roy
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James	Beith, Rt Hon A J
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*	Bercow, John

Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Randall and Mr. Peter Atkinson.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John

McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Palmer, Dr Nick
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Tony McNulty and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 267, Noes 114.

Division No. 100] **[7.13 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baker, Norman
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darvill, Keith
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary

Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Palmer, Dr Nick
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Tony McNulty and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Chope, Christopher
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Atkinson and
Mr. John Randall.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House recognises the continuing difficulties faced by the agriculture sector as a result of the low level of farm incomes; endorses the Government's long term vision for agriculture as sustainable, competitive and diverse, environmentally responsible, and an integral part of vibrant rural economies; recognises the important role of the new Rural Development Programmes in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in delivering this vision; welcomes the measures in the Action Plan for Farming and the Rural White Paper to give immediate financial relief to the hardest-hit sectors and to reduce the burden of regulation on farming; supports the Government's constructive engagement in Europe to reform further the Common Agricultural Policy; notes that the Conservative party's policies of banning foreign imports and taking unilateral action in areas of European Union competence are illegal and would lead to heavy penalties being levied on UK taxpayers as well as retaliatory action against UK exporters; notes that the Conservative Party have not indicated how much of the £16 billion they propose in public expenditure cuts would fall on British farmers; and calls on the Conservative Party instead to come forward with practical and constructive policies to help farmers through very difficult times.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE

That the draft Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 17th January, be approved.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE

That the draft Representation of the People (Scotland) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 18th January, be approved.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

COMPANIES

That the draft Companies (EU Political Expenditure) Exemption Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 17th January, be approved.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I think the Ayes have it.

Hon. Members: No.

Division deferred till Wednesday 7 February, pursuant to Order [7 November 2000].

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees),

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

That this House takes note of European Union Document Nos. 9712/00, relating to the proposed Statute for Members of the European Parliament, and 9560/00, relating to the audit of the expenditure of the European Parliament's political groups; supports the Government's efforts to secure agreement on a Statute for Members of the European Parliament; and notes the Nice European Council's agreement on a legal basis for a Statute to regulate the funding of European political parties, as recommended by the Report of the Court of Auditors.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest. *[Mr. Allen.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That, for the current Session of Parliament, Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 January],

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

PETITION

Parrots

7.25 pm

Mr. Bob Laxton (Derby, North): I wish to present a petition bearing 2,099 names on behalf of Kathy Howell, other residents of Derby, North, and Parrot Line.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of Derby North Constituency and others,

Declares that every year thousands of parrots are caught in their natural habitats, put into boxes and shipped over to the United Kingdom for sale to the general public as pets, many of them being very old and leaving their long-term monogamous mates behind, and that the only birds which should be allowed to enter the United Kingdom are those which need help in repopulating their indigenous environments.

The Petitioners therefore Request that the House of Commons urge The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to introduce measures which will prevent the unnecessary importation of parrots.

And the petitioners Remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Education SSA (Worcestershire)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

7.26 pm

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): I hope that the Minister for School Standards will not respond like a parrot to my supplication.

There is no rhyme or reason to the present method of disbursing education funds in this country, except history. In Worcestershire, a Conservative-led local education authority historically ran an efficient and tight budget. It did so especially in the 1970s and 1980s, in contrast with Labour-controlled authorities. The spending patterns of its budgets were subsequently set in stone through the workings of the rate support grant formula, even though circumstances have radically changed since.

The formula is obscure and incomprehensible. It is based not on real needs or genuine costs, but on history and the perceived view that it would be unacceptable to rock the boat by changing the existing pecking order between LEAs. The dynamics of the position are that those who receive least receive relatively even less as time goes by. Thus Worcestershire is third from the bottom in a table that lists SSA per primary school pupil in 34 counties. In other words, it received the third lowest SSA increase in last November's round. That has happened not because Worcestershire's education needs are less than those of Dorset, Cambridgeshire or even neighbouring Gloucestershire or Warwickshire, but because that is the way it has been. Moreover, unless something changes, that is the way it will continue to be.

The fig leaf that is used in an attempt to give respectability to that procedure is the concept of the area cost adjustment formula, which is meant to compensate for different costs in different areas. It is nonsense, however, for at least two reasons. First, the largest cost element in education is, overwhelmingly, teachers' salaries, which are nationally determined and are the same for all areas. Secondly, even the marginal cost differences that are built into the formula are often spurious.

I cannot find any differences in cost or needs between, say, Wiltshire and Worcestershire, yet Wiltshire is 23rd on the county league table of secondary school recipients and Worcestershire is 31st. Nor can I find great differences between near-neighbouring Oxfordshire, which is in eighth place, and Gloucestershire, its neighbour—and, indeed, Worcestershire's—in 28th place. It is a dog's breakfast, and the Government know it.

I presume that that is why, on 30 April 1997, immediately before the general election, the then Leader of the Opposition declared in an interview with the *Cambridge Evening News:*

"We will review the area cost adjustment in time for the next financial year."

Four years have passed, and all that has happened recently is the publication of a Green Paper on modernising local government finance. In that document, the Government appear to recognise the grossly distorted and unfair method of treatment that is built into the area cost adjustment formula and, therefore, into the disbursal of education expenditure. The Green Paper promises that the Government will present some concrete suggestions for remedying the position. However, they will not do that before 2003-04.

Meanwhile, even if we dismiss some of the cruder calculations of the additional amounts that schools in Worcestershire should receive when compared with the national average—the figures run into hundreds of thousands of pounds a year even for primary schools—under the current arrangements unless class sizes increase dramatically, budget shortfalls lie ahead. That is true even if they are unplanned. The capacity to raid repair and maintenance budgets, where they still exist, is running out.

The skill of government is the ability to differentiate between special pleading, which is undertaken for its own sake, and a genuine grievance. There is no doubt that the latter is true for education in Worcestershire.

All Governments have a duty to tackle such gross lack of parity in treatment. It is also sensible for them to do that. The citizens of this country will stomach an awful lot but they will never accept irrational inequality of treatment. That is shown by the hundreds of furious letters that my hon. Friends who represent Worcestershire constituencies have received on the subject in the past week or so.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): Is my hon. Friend, like me, experiencing the largest ever lobby campaign on any issue in his parliamentary career? I have received more than 1,000 letters protesting against a predicament that was bad four years ago and has got much worse.

Sir Michael Spicer: I agree and sympathise with my hon. Friend. I have received a similar number of letters. Indeed, my fax machine broke down. It has now been repaired and is spewing out more letters from unhappy constituents.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I want to put it on record that I too have received many representations. In my much shorter parliamentary career, I have never experienced anything like it. I suspect that my office has received 1,000 letters, which will of course all get a reply. That number shows the strength of feeling, of which I hope the Minister will take account.

Sir Michael Spicer: I agree with my hon. Friend. Even the masses of letters in support of foxhunting have been greatly exceeded by those on the issue that we are considering. I was trying to calculate how long it had been since I previously received such quantities of mail. I believe that it was in 1974, when there was a mass revolt against the rate rises that were introduced by the then Labour Government.

Mr. Michael J. Foster (Worcester): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the sentiment of a letter that was sent to the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Lock), from a Conservative councillor in Bewdley? Mr. Stephen Groome said:

"I am upset that both my children and yours are disadvantaged by virtue of the fact that we live in one of the poorest funded Counties."

The letter continues:

"The funding provided by the previous Government was derisory".

Sir Michael Spicer: That is a good cue for my next point. It is no good the hon. Gentleman or the Minister

saying that they inherited the problem. Labour's rhetoric, to which the hon. Gentleman was doubtless party, was partly responsible for bringing the Government to power. It suggested that they would wave a magic wand over education. However, for Worcestershire, the slogan "Education, education, education" is a sick joke.

Education services in Worcestershire are being progressively run down on the Minister's watch. The Government are going to have to do better than simply publish Green Papers that kick the problem into the long grass. That is not good enough. I hope that the Minister will not spend much of her speech saying that this problem is someone else's fault. She is in charge at the moment, and the problem has risen to a critical level during her term in office.

Of course, it is general election time, and the Government have felt the need to be seen to be doing something to remedy the problem. Instead of setting out to change the basic formula, they have this week made a larger than average one-off payment to Worcestershire of £1.35 million. That is about £1 million short of the amount needed to allow schools to run a standstill budget compared with last year. Unless the county steps in with local taxpayers' money, schools that might have ended up with a deficit budget of, say, £50,000—as was the case in one of the secondary schools in my constituency—will now be able to cut that by half.

As for the revenue support grant and the area cost adjustment formula—the source of the inequality of treatment between local education authorities—nothing has changed. As it is, the gap between the recipients of the largest amounts and the smallest will continue to grow, and dissatisfaction and disenchantment will well up. No amount of temporary bandaging will put that right.

What is required from the Minister is a clear statement that the present mumbo-jumbo, masquerading as a rational formula, will be abolished and that it will be replaced by a procedure that can be clearly understood. When costs are set nationally, allocation of funds should be on a strict per pupil basis. When there are genuine differences in costs or needs between areas, they should be properly identified. I hope that the Minister will at least say that this is her intention, and that she understands the growing urgency of the matter.

I would also like the Minister to respond to one more point. Next Wednesday, 7 February, a large delegation of governors and head teachers is coming to the House of Commons. Will she please say that she or one of her colleagues will meet a representative delegation from that group?

7.37 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) on securing this debate. I readily accept that this is what might be called the hot political issue in Worcestershire. The Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), is in Worcester tonight, so she cannot be with me on the Front Bench, although I know that she would otherwise have wished to be here.

I shall first respond to the request that the hon. Gentleman has just made about the meeting that is being held here next Wednesday. I received a letter today from a group calling itself parent governors. I had not realised that the group would consist of head teachers and governors. I told my office that I would be delighted to call in to the Grand Committee Room some time between 3.30 and 5 pm to meet them and listen to what they have to say.

Mr. Luff: I appreciate that this problem is not all the Minister's fault—it is also the fault of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Will she put pressure on one of her ministerial colleagues in that Department to meet the group, which will consist mainly of parent governors, but also of some head teachers? It would be only a small group, and it would be most helpful if the Minister could do that.

Ms Morris: I cannot commit my ministerial colleagues, and I know that the hon. Gentleman would not wish me to do so. It is sometimes difficult to secure time at such short notice. On the two days before the meeting, I shall visit schools outside London and I would not have been able to attend a meeting on those days, although I should not have intended any discourtesy. I am sure that people will have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said, and that the invitation will be extended to my colleagues at DETR. I accept that SSAs are essentially a DETR responsibility.

I shall start on a note of agreement with the hon. Member for West Worcestershire. I am not here to defend SSAs; I am not prepared to do so. In his closing remarks, he spoke of a system of financing that was fair, transparent and flexible and that would acknowledge the needs of local areas. That is what we want as well.

Under this Government, the system will be changed. We are consulting on the matter at the moment. We really tried in our first year: we got everyone together from the Local Government Association, the counties and the urban areas, including London. The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to hear that not one local authority leader—Tory, Liberal Democrat or Labour—is volunteering to say that they do well out of the present SSA structure. Therein lies the problem. London appears, on paper, to be exceptionally well funded. Representatives of London bodies come to the House and talk about the difficulties that they have with asylum seekers, and with people coming here without English as their first language. All those needs must be acknowledged.

I have said many times in Adjournment debates and outside the House that during our first year in office, when we hoped to achieve general agreement about changing the SSA system, we did not manage to achieve that agreement. We had a choice at that point: push a measure through, which we could have done with our majority and even though there was no consensus among local authorities, or wait, talk more, consider different models and try to get it right. I would sooner do the latter because getting it right is in the best interests of pupils, parents, governors and teachers. We will not be able to make a change again for a long time. The Conservative Government had experience of that. Changing the way in which education is funded year after year after year just confuses the situation.

The change to the formula will be massive and it has to be right. If making that change takes longer than we expected, I will make no apologies for that, although I am

[Ms Morris]

happy to acknowledge that I wish that we had been able to achieve agreement among local authorities in our first year in office.

When I was in opposition, I, too, received lots of letters from people in Staffordshire and Worcestershire about exactly the same problem. People have not begun to write such letters since 1997. We had big postbags before then, and the Conservatives did not make such a pledge. They did not even consider the SSA and did nothing to resolve what is essentially a difficult situation. I do not want to spend all my 15 minutes talking about that, but it is the truth.

The hon. Member for West Worcestershire is right that the formula is historic, but history did not begin in 1997. The formula has not served the people of this country well for many years, and that has affected his constituents and mine. Changing it is a tough job, but one that we are determined to do. I want to discuss general financing in Worcestershire.

Mr. Michael J. Foster: Before my right hon. Friend moves on to the current position and the future, may I take her back a step? Although there is consensus across the House about the need to change the SSA formula, is she aware that in 1991-92 Conservative-controlled Hereford and Worcester county council deliberately set a budget £5.4 million under education SSA? The consequence of that over the next 10 years was that children in Worcestershire were short-changed by some £42 million.

Ms Morris: My hon. Friend is right. He and my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Lock) have worked hard and lobbied on behalf of their constituents in the county to get the formula changed. Now we know what the hon. Member for West Worcestershire meant when he described the previous finance figures as representing a good, tight ship with tight budgeting and tight financing. That they were, but as a result spending was below SSA and children did not get the investment that they needed.

That gives me the opportunity to say that, shamefully, secondary and primary funding per pupil in Worcestershire fell during the last four years of the Tory Government. There was no year on year improvement. The hon. Gentleman did not come to the House to discuss how much extra his area had received; it received less. That is why people are so cross in Worcestershire today. I understand that and feel for them. Their children are in school while education expenditure is increasing and they want a fair share of the extra money that we are allocating. They feel that they have got a rough deal, but let us be clear about the fact that the letters that they wrote before the election of a Labour Government in 1997 were about a real cut in funding, year on year on year. Under this Government, their argument is that they are not getting as big a share of a bigger cake as they would like. I have some sympathy with them on straight SSAs.

Sir Michael Spicer: There is no example that I can recollect, certainly in my constituency, of schools saying under a Conservative Administration, "We simply cannot carry on with our present budget." Under the Minister's Administration, that is exactly what is being said. It is absolutely outrageous. Her party came to power on the slogan, "Education, education, education", and it is hypocritical to take such a line.

Ms Morris: I am not sure where the hon. Gentleman was in the years before 1997. For many of those years, I taught in schools and I remember what happened under the Conservative Government. Year after year, there were teacher redundancies because of shortfalls in the budget. I do not think that Worcestershire's schools were different from any other schools in the country in having to cope with a reduced budget. Under the Government whom the hon. Gentleman supported, the amount of money per pupil fell, but it has risen under this Government. Those are not our figures. No one contests them. The hon. Gentleman must justify the history; I do not have to do so.

Expenditure is increasing. The soreness felt by Worcestershire's schools is about their share of a bigger cake. That is why there is an urgency about changing the formula. I cannot in all honesty explain why children in Worcestershire get less money than children in Wiltshire—I think that that was the example given by the hon. Gentleman. I do not know the exact figures for those two counties, but the system is irrational. He is right about that. It is a historic system, which does not serve us well.

The hon. Gentleman is right that we were elected on a pledge of "Education, education, education". We said that we would spend more on education than did our predecessors, and we have delivered. There is more money going into the SSA. There is an increase this year of £8.82 million, or 3.71 per cent.—not a cut, as there was under the Conservative Government.

More money is going into Worcestershire's schools, and I know that the hon. Gentleman will welcome, as the head teacher of Droitwich Spa high school has welcomed publicly in a letter, the £1.3 million that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made available last Monday, in acknowledgement of the fact that Worcestershire has had a difficult settlement this year. The money will go some way towards helping with that.

Mr. Luff: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms Morris: I will, but this will be the last intervention that I take, because of shortage of time.

Mr. Luff: I have a letter from the head teacher of Droitwich Spa high school, in which she makes it clear that the extra £1.3 million is welcome. We all welcome it, but it is only a little over half the amount required to close the funding gap between what we have now and a standstill budget. Schools in Worcestershire are still facing a crisis, and the gap is growing between them and the national average for funding per pupil, as it has grown every year under the right hon. Lady's Government.

Ms Morris: The hon. Gentleman is right that the head teacher goes on to say that. I was going to deal with that. One of the things that has changed between the previous Government and the present one is that money goes into schools in many different ways. That does not happen just through the SSA, although the SSA is the major source of funding for schools.

Money is allocated through direct special grant, and Worcestershire's schools will receive £6.3 million in direct grant this year. That is worth an average of £20,000

for primary schools and £60,000 for secondary schools. It has been promised that that will be uprated by 2.7 per cent. to cover inflation for each of the next two years. The hon. Gentleman called for transparency. In fairness, we must look at the different routes for funding and the amount that Worcestershire's schools end up with, compared with what they would have received had the Tories still been in power.

I draw the House's attention to capital investment. One of the most shameful things that happened under the previous Government was the manifest under-investment in the school buildings in which our teachers teach and our pupils learn. The figures for Hereford and Worcester—the joint county before the split—show that in 1996-97, the last year for which the Conservative Government had responsibility for the budget, capital expenditure was £6.02 million. That is the figure for both counties.

In this year, in Worcestershire alone, the corresponding figure is £26.5 million—not for the two counties, but for Worcestershire alone. There is £11 million as part of the new deal for schools, in direct grant—no borrowing and no interest to be paid by taxpayers in Worcestershire. A further £1 million has gone to the county in order to achieve our class size pledge. Money directly allocated to schools in terms of capital will increase over the next few years.

I am not seeking to defend a formula that ill serves the children of Worcestershire—that would be dishonourable and dishonest. I am saying that we are trying our best, with all reasonable speed, to change that. We are the Government who have given a pledge that that will change. We are the only Government who have set in motion a consultation system under which we hope to bring about change. I would sooner achieve that through consensus among local authorities than have one local authority at another local authority's throat, as is the case at present.

Despite that, children in Worcestershire now receive more money for their education than they ever did under the Government whom the hon. Member for West Worcestershire supported. Schools and buildings in Worcestershire are in better shape and are becoming fit for education in the 21st century, because the Government have invested in education. In that way, we have more than kept our pledge.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at ten minutes to Eight o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 2 February 2001

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Orders of the Day

Outworking Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

9.33 am

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am grateful for the opportunity to present the Bill to the House and for the backing given by many hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber. The Bill has the support of the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells), my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds, North–East (Mr. Hamilton) and for Basildon (Angela Smith), the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley), my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King), the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), my hon. Friends the Members for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths) and for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber), the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy), the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney). Many other hon. Members have written and spoken to me to express their backing, and I am pleased that the Bill has cross-party support.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Where are they?

Mr. Burden: Let me inform the right hon. Gentleman that the hon. Member for Southend, West, who is one of his parliamentary colleagues, asked me to pass his apologies to the House. He wanted to be present, but he is attending the funeral of a friend.

The Bill seeks to outlaw bogus outworking schemes—or home-working schemes, as they are more commonly known. It is estimated that some 300 bogus schemes are operating in the United Kingdom at any one time. They are scams that prey on some of the most vulnerable people in society. They pretend to offer such people the chance to make money, usually by working at home, and often involve tasks such as addressing envelopes or making up kits. They require people to pay up front to get that opportunity. However, there is no real opportunity and the people who can least afford to do so end up paying for work that simply does not exist.

The scams are presented in a variety of guises. In some cases, people who have paid their money in good faith find that the promised work fails to materialise and that its proposer then disappears. Other respondents are asked to pay up front to obtain all the necessary materials for kits, but those materials turn out to be rubbish or simply do not turn up. Sometimes, the completed work is rejected for no good reason, so the hopeful worker who has paid up front never gets paid back for his or her labour.

Some proposers have the audacity to encourage participants to move on to different projects that are claimed to be more suited to their skills. Of course, an additional advance payment is then required. Some schemes turn out to be recruitment scams aimed only at getting the first victim to recruit other people to make the same mistake. In one of the more sophisticated scams, a premium rate telephone helpline was set up for participants who were experiencing difficulties with their work.

The amount that each respondent has to pay might seem relatively small to many hon. Members. All too often, however, it is taken from poor or vulnerable people to whom few other work opportunities are open. Such people often have family commitments and do not have surplus cash to lose. Those who prey on them can make a lot of money, even through small up-front charges. If large numbers of vulnerable people respond, the profits made by the scams can add up to large sums for the organiser. For example, a gain of £600,000 is considered to be appropriate for a medium-sized operation.

The Bill would make it unlawful for somebody to require advanced payment for information relating to outworking proposals. That provision will address, for example, the problem of schemes that promise information about home working in return for a fee, but whose promised directories of home-working opportunities turn out merely to be lists of other cheating schemes. Such schemes can mean that people are cheated twice—once for the cost of the directory, and then again when they respond to one of the so-called opportunities that it contains.

The Bill would also ban the promotion and advertising of bogus schemes, which currently happens in a variety of ways, including through circulars, cards in shop windows and notices on lamp posts. The schemes are even advertised on the backs of till receipts and, as I said, tend to target the unemployed and others who are restricted to working from home. For example, they target people who have caring responsibilities or are housebound. Those targeted are often on low or fixed incomes and are searching for a way of bringing in a bit more money to benefit themselves and their families in a manner that fits their domestic circumstances. They are the ones who are snared by the swindlers. They have little money in the first place, but end up even worse off.

I should like to give an example. An advertisement offered a payment of £5 for addressing 100 envelope labels. A one-off payment of £30 was required. It was claimed that the money would be refunded after 500 labels were addressed correctly. As the home workers found, the reality was different. People who replied to the advertisement first had to send £20 to receive details of the work that the firm was offering. As it turned out, the information was nothing more than a shortlist of companies providing jobs in return for another small fee. The original company was offering work at a rate of £5 per 100 labels, but only after workers had paid an additional £40. For that extra fee, they received only 100 labels, a list of companies and instructions that the

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letters on the labels must measure precisely 3 mm. Even when the workers took great care and time to ensure that the requirement was fulfilled, the completed labels were returned on the grounds that the letters were not precisely 3 mm. The workers were never paid and they never saw their advance payments again.

The case clearly shows how people can get caught out, first by paying money for details of work schemes and, secondly, when they pay extra money to join one of the schemes and take up the work on offer. The Bill would make both elements—issuing information about bogus outworking schemes for payment and taking money from people for supposed work—illegal.

Many hon. Members know of cases that have affected their constituents. Many of my hon. Friends and Conservative Members will want to talk about such cases. However, I want to give an example that applies to me. One of the schemes has the wrong list of fax and telephone numbers. After I had worked late in the House last night, preparing for today, I returned to my London flat to find a fax hanging out of the machine. It was interesting. It states:

"Eat—drink—shop! and get paid for it! Yes! It really is true, you can get paid for doing the things you enjoy!"

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): You are here.

Mr. Burden: Absolutely. The fax obviously caught my eye. It continues:

"Get paid to have a drink in a pub. Get paid to have a nice meal in a restaurant! Get paid to go shopping! Earn money for doing the things you enjoy! Full details of all the companies that will pay you to do this part time!"

[Interruption.] I am happy to offer the fax to other hon. Members. However, to get more details, one has to dial a number from the fax machine: 090 6019 1839. The fax instructs people:

"Press the start button when you hear the fax tone, and full details will appear!"

In spite of my better judgment, I dialled the number and another fax appeared.

It lists all the opportunities that are available. However, further on, it states:

"How often will I get a job? All companies agree that it is difficult to predict how often you will get work. They say that the work you may receive depends on a number of factors. These are where you live, your availability for work and most importantly, the requirements for each project."

It gives little information about payment. Surprise, surprise, it then provides a list of telephone numbers.

I have not telephoned those numbers, but I examined the small print on the first fax. It stated that simply faxing the form back meant a charge on a premium-rate telephone line. It took more than six minutes for the fax to appear. That cost me £7 simply to get the fax back. That is how such scams work. Perhaps the company responsible will realise its mistake; it probably did not expect its scam to be mentioned in the House of Commons the following day. However, people respond to such companies all too often.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): Surely the problem that the hon. Gentleman identifies is not outworking but spam faxes that trap respondents. That is a separate problem.

Mr. Burden: The hon. Gentleman is right up to a point. The problem of junk faxes and premium rate phone lines goes beyond outworking. A commission has been set up to try to tackle them. However, the problems are related. The fax that I described offers work, as defined by the Bill. It also offers a trip to Amsterdam for £1 return and a "souper" seven-day diet. Those do not constitute outworking and they need to be caught by other mechanisms. However, the middle offer,

"Eat—drink—shop! And get paid for it!",

clearly offers work. The fax directly refers to "work".

As well as the financial loss suffered by victims of home-working scams, there is another, equally important loss: self-esteem. I had not fully taken account of it when I first decided to promote the Bill, but home workers have made it clear that it is as important as financial loss. People have told me that, when they are mugged by the schemes, they feel that they have been mugs for being taken for a ride. For somebody who may be taking the first steps to get back into the labour market—I am sure that we all support that—or trying to get out of debt, that loss of confidence is crucial.

I have referred to the support, which I value, that has been expressed by colleagues. However, perhaps the most important backing that the Bill has received is from home workers and their letters and calls. I am grateful to citizens advice bureaux, the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux and the National Consumer Council for their assistance. The Department of Trade and Industry has been exceptionally helpful with the Bill, and trading standards officers throughout the country are already trying to crack down on the scams through the mechanisms that are available to them. The Bill will help them to do that.

We often complain about the press. However, on outworking, I want to thank the media, especially GMTV, *The Mirror*, BBC radio, "You and Yours", several regional radio stations—Radio WM in my area—and *The Birmingham Post* and the *Birmingham Evening Mail*. They have all done a great deal to highlight the scandal of home-working scams before the Bill was introduced and subsequently. Lastly, I should like to express my appreciation to the National Group on Homeworking, which is based in Leeds, for its work. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-East is here today. I recommend any home worker who is listening to the debate and needs advice and assistance to contact the National Group on Homeworking's helpline: 0800 174095. I hasten to add that that is not a premium-rate number.

The Bill that I am presenting today will create several new criminal offences to curb the unfair and unscrupulous practices that I have described. They are described in the Bill as outworking proposals. There has been some confusion about why I have spoken about home working when the Bill refers to outworking. We do not want the

bogus schemes to escape simply by claiming that the proposed work need not necessarily be based in the victim's home.

The Bill covers all parts of the United Kingdom. I am pleased that that has been possible because we do not want one part of the UK to become a haven for such scams when everybody else is protected from them. The extension of the Bill to Scotland received the approval of the Scottish Parliament two days ago.

The Bill creates criminal offences, and is therefore a reserved matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and it extends to Northern Ireland in accordance with the provisions of that measure. The subject matter is not devolved under the Government of Wales Act 1998 and therefore the Bill's provisions apply to Wales.

The enforcement provisions are set out in a schedule. They will be enforced by local authority trading standards officers in Great Britain and by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in Northern Ireland. The Crown Prosecution Service will also be able to prosecute those offences in England and Wales. Anyone who commits one or more of the Bill's newly created offences would be liable to a fine up to the statutory maximum, which is currently £5,000, for each offence.

I shall now describe briefly some of the key clauses of the Bill. Clause 1 defines the type of work that will be treated as an outworking proposal for the purposes of the Bill, and which will relate to the criminal offences set out in clauses 2 and 3.

For an arrangement to qualify as an outworking proposal, a person must hold out that work will be provided in return for advance payment and that the person undertaking the work will be paid for it, although not necessarily by the provider of the work. The worker is therefore required to send an advance payment, meaning that a payment must be made by the worker before he or she is paid for the work done. Examples of descriptions of advance payment given in the Bill—returnable deposits, registration fees and so on—are not intended to be exhaustive.

Certain types of arrangements that are not outworking proposals are excluded from the scope of the Bill. Employment agencies and employment businesses are already governed by legislative controls under the Employment Agencies Act 1973. A proposal made in the course of such business does not fall within the ambit of the Bill. That provision is set out in clause 1(2)(c).

Clause 1(3) ensures that legitimate business opportunities and arrangements such as franchises and direct selling are not inhibited. Clause 1(2)(b) gives the Secretary of State the power to make regulations to exempt from the provisions categories of proposals that would otherwise count as outworking proposals. That is a deregulatory provision, which I am sure will have the approval of the House. Clause 6 provides that that provision will be subject to the negative resolution procedure.

Possible categories of proposals for exemption would need to be considered on a case-by-case basis, and their exclusion would need to be justified. It is not envisaged that such cases will emerge very often. However, if a category of outworking proposal was regarded as legitimate, and would genuinely benefit workers, the exemption provisions could be used, provided that that category was distinguishable from the unscrupulous practices that the Bill makes unlawful. The power will, therefore, act as a useful safety net to ensure that legitimate business arrangements and opportunities are not inhibited.

Clauses 2 and 3 make provision for criminal offences. Clause 2(1) makes it a criminal offence to seek or receive payment in response to an outworking proposal. "Payment" bears its ordinary meaning in these clauses. The term therefore catches simple methods of payment such as cheques, as well as the more unusual forms such as moneys received in relation to premium rate telephone lines, as in the example that I gave earlier. That is an important point, given that many of these scams profit from the use of premium rate telephone services, by inviting people to call them for advice about completing work or for information about work.

The organiser of an outworking proposal commits an offence if he or she places an advertisement for outworking that contains information about an outworking proposal that makes it more likely that a person will respond by making a payment in advance. The organiser also commits an offence if he or she asks anyone else to place or distribute such an advertisement. Those measures are covered by clause 2(2) and (3).

The Bill also creates criminal offences in circumstances in which a person who is not the organiser issues, circulates or distributes an advertisement if he or she knows, or ought to know, that it is likely to cause a person to respond to an outworking proposal by making a payment, or if he or she causes someone else to do so. If there is no knowledge, and no reason why the person ought to have known, they will have committed no offence. Even if the elements of one or other of those offences are satisfied, it should be noted that, in relation to such offences, the person may be able to rely on the defence provisions contained in clause 4.

In relation to the advertising offences committed by a person other than the organiser, it should be noted that outworking proposals are advertised in a number of ways. They can appear in newspapers, on television and on the internet. They might appear on notice boards in shops, on the back of till receipts, pinned to lamp posts or on fliers that are posted through people's letter boxes, often inside reputable free newspapers or magazines.

In some cases it will be obvious to the advertiser that the advertisement is for outworking. The advertisement may expressly state that the worker is required to make a payment when responding to the advert. In cases in which it is not obvious from the advertisement, the commission of an offence will depend on whether the advertiser ought to know that the advertisement is for an outworking proposal. It is not possible to state in advance all the circumstances in which a person should know that. The degree to which someone ought to know will depend on factors such as the size of his or her enterprise and the resources available.

Clause 3 makes it a criminal offence to seek or receive money for the provision of information about home working or outworking when the information given relates to outworking proposals of the type outlined in clause 1.

Clause 4 sets out the defence of due diligence, and clause 5 gives effect to the schedule that sets out how the offences in the Bill are to be enforced. Paragraphs 2 and 3 of the schedule cover the powers that enforcement officers will have to enforce those duties. They are very

[Mr. Burden]

similar to powers in other consumer protection legislation such as the Trade Descriptions Act 1968, the Consumer Protection Act 1987 and the Property Misdescriptions Act 1991. If hon. Members want to discuss other paragraphs in the schedule during the debate, we can do so.

Clause 7 provides for any public expenditure incurred in the enforcement of the Act, and clause 8 sets out the Bill's application to Northern Ireland.

The Bill's main provisions will come into force by commencement order. That is covered in clause 9. I envisage that that will take place about 12 weeks after the Bill receives Royal Assent. I think that that will allow a long enough period for the Government to promote awareness of the Bill, with a view to reducing the number of outworking proposals in the system and alerting advertisers to the new provisions.

On compliance cost, the Bill controls outworking proposals. Legitimate businesses employing outworkers such as flexible workers should not be affected because they do not require an advance payment. There is very little compliance cost. Business groups have supported action against scams. It is not in their interests to compete against schemes that operate unfairly in the ways that I have described.

Genuine business opportunities, such as franchise arrangements, in which a payment is made in return for the right to operate the franchise, or direct selling arrangements in which the seller will often pay for catalogues and sample products, will be excluded from this legislation. If there are other legitimate business practices that are not excluded at the outset, and which have a compelling reason for requiring an advance payment, a case can be made for their exclusion under the Secretary of State's power in clause 1.

The Bill will make unlawful schemes that deceive the most vulnerable members of our society. Such schemes seem to promise those people everything that they need: good pay, instant job opportunities and the ability to work from home at hours that suit them. The schemes are offered by companies that pretend to understand the difficulties faced by those people and to offer them a way out. In reality, they deceive them, obtaining money from them in exchange for a false promise.

As well as hitting vulnerable people, such scams undermine businesses operating legal and decent home-working schemes. The Bill will ensure that such businesses can operate legally and fairly without being tarred by the brush of the swindlers. The Bill is in the interests of everybody except those operating bogus schemes, and I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will express their support for it today.

9.59 am

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am delighted to support the Bill and I wish to put it on record that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) has put huge amount of work into its preparation. Indeed, I suspect that a lot of home working has been necessary.

I think that the Minister will acknowledge that, had it been possible for the Government to introduce their consumer protection legislation in the current Session, the provisions of the Bill would have formed an integral part of it. I would also like to put it on record that I remember the shadow Leader of the House, and indeed the leader of the Conservative party, expressing great disappointment at the fact that consumer protection legislation was not going to come before the House in this Session. I look forward to hearing that the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) is prepared to give the Bill a fair wind.

Mr. Forth: Why?

Mr. Tyler: So that it can be examined properly in Committee as part of that overall objective.

Mr. Forth: No.

Mr. Tyler: I notice that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is with us this morning. In the context of private Members' legislation, I heard one of his colleagues describe him as the serial strangler. I hope that somebody will keep the right hon. Gentleman quiet so that we can make progress on this important Bill.

A significant feature of the Bill, to which the hon. Member for Northfield referred, is that it would provide greater protection for those who offer genuine schemes. An important part of our function, therefore, is to distinguish between the scam and the genuine, although those who have to deal with this murky world, particularly local authority trading standards officers, often find that impossible.

I am pleased to support the Bill because I, like you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, represent a rural constituency and I believe that the measure has particular advantages in protecting our constituents. The Conservative spokesman also represents a rural constituency, so he, too, will recognise that those who live in small, sparsely populated communities with problems such as expensive public transport, if public transport even exists, have particular difficulties getting to work. Such people are attracted to schemes of this sort.

My area of the south-west and other parts of Great Britain contain some extremely low-paid households. Indeed, Cornwall and west Wales have European Union objective 1 status precisely because the average household income is so low. There is a great deal of seasonal work in my area and in similar ones, and such work may be all that is available to certain people during the holiday season. Again, the attraction of some form of outworking is considerable.

I am also worried about the dilemma facing carers. Carers of all ages who live in isolated communities such as my constituency of North Cornwall, and particularly those who care for the elderly, the disabled and young children, find the ability to earn limited but steady income in the home attractive. Like other hon. Members, I am concerned about those who have retired early. They, too, find that ability attractive. Redundancy may have caused early retirement for some people and their retirement pension may not be sufficient to maintain their life style. *[Interruption.]* I notice that the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) anticipates Conservative Members who may lose their seats at the election having a personal interest in the matter, but I suspect that their pension arrangements are a great deal better than those of my constituents.

The detail is important and I draw the House's attention to clause 1(3), which deals with exclusions. We must be careful to ensure that we deal with them properly in Committee. Similarly, we must precisely define advance payment, which so often would have to be the trigger for action, and how it should be dealt with.

I am indebted to one of the newspapers in my constituency, the *Cornish Guardian*, for running an effective campaign a few months ago. It discovered that a company in the town of Bodmin in our own area, KMP Homeworkers, had used an accommodation address in the main street, but could not be directly contacted by anybody who took up opportunities that it appeared to offer. The company offered people £14 per 100 envelopes produced, but those who registered found that there was a £20 fee. The materials never materialised and people were out of pocket before even starting work.

The company was effectively driven out of town because of the campaign by the *Cornish Guardian*, but, significantly, Cornwall county council trading standards officers found that they were powerless under existing legislation. That is not an isolated example, and Members who think that the Bill may be unnecessary should talk to trading standards officers, who are strongly in favour of it.

The hon. Member for Northfield referred to the work of the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, whose briefing states that vulnerable people in isolated communities are often the ones who are caught. I shall give examples. In Ross-on-Wye, a mother of three paid £35 for what she later realised was a worthless opportunity. A mother with young children from Bridgnorth, which, again, is a comparatively rural area, paid £65 for work, but was never reimbursed. A woman with two children from the Salisbury area had a similar experience. Each paid an expensive introduction or registration fee for a catalogue or a set of instructions. Such people get sucked in. Two women in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) paid £70 in fees for equipment needed for home working, but were of course told that the completed work was unsatisfactory.

Precisely because the scam preys on vulnerable people in difficult circumstances, the House has a responsibility to provide protection. Furthermore, we must act because we who have drawn up the existing legislation, including the previous Conservative Government, have left trading standards officers in a vulnerable position. They devote a huge amount of time to trying to deal with these scams, but they do not have the legislative backing effectively to reduce them, let alone remove them altogether.

In any Bill that comes before the House, be it one introduced by the Government or a private Member, the devil is in the detail. We must get the Bill in Committee as soon as possible so that it can be scrutinised rigorously; and I hope that the House will give a fair wind to a measure that would meet a real need.

10.7 am

Angela Smith (Basildon): I am pleased to sponsor and support the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden). It is a tradition to congratulate a Member on drawing a high place in the ballot even though that is a matter of luck—one in which I have never succeeded. However, I sincerely congratulate him on choosing an important subject. Parliament is here to support and protect the vulnerable, so I am disappointed by some comments—perhaps they were heckles—that implied that people do not need protection. Parliament has a duty to recognise that obligation and if we fail in it, we fail in our duty as parliamentarians.

The Bill represents a shift in the balance of power at work and is part of a wider change in society. We are moving to a much fairer system in which people who want to work are paid a fair wage and are not exploited for their labour simply because they choose, for whatever reason, to work at home. The Bill acknowledges people's rights as consumers and workers, and justice is a strong theme. It could put an end to bogus scams and the activities of those who rip off the most vulnerable in society. Indeed, the nature of the work that the most vulnerable seek in itself makes them vulnerable.

Despite the misgivings expressed by some people about the nature of regulation, we should always discuss the merits of state intervention. What appears to be a nanny state to some—*[Interruption.]* I hear that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) does not support the Bill, even though it would protect people from being ripped off. What for some is a nanny-state measure is for others protection of their livelihood. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman denigrates the Bill. That is unwise, and his comments will be noted by those inside the House and outside.

I do not want to go too far down the philosophical route, but all legislation restricts personal liberty in some way. I believe, however, that there is no natural right to con and cheat people, and to engage in scams that rip others off. Parliament should try to prevent that as far as possible. I am pleased to note that the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) supports what I am saying. I hope all Members will see the merits of the Bill, and give it a fair wind.

Owing to the way in which the House operates, private Members' Bills are often small measures. This Bill represents only a small step forward, but it could have an immense impact on people who might become victims without it. It would be tremendously important to those who are or seek to be home workers. If it is not passed, I believe that there will be more complaints, and that even more people will be ripped off as my constituents have been.

Complaints about bogus home-working companies form a proportion of the 1 million or more complaints that the Office of Fair Trading estimates are made about unsatisfactory goods and services. Many people choose to work at home because of their circumstances. Often they are already on low incomes; they may be disabled or elderly, and they may be carers. They may be seeking work; they may have to care for children, or for elderly or disabled relatives. They may be tied to the house, and may need to earn extra cash. Those who have skills that are greatly needed in the economic market, and who are on higher rates of pay, are not generally caught by such scams, unlike those who can least afford it—those who do manual work at home for lower rates.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): A project carried out by Plymouth's trading standards department

[Mrs. Linda Gilroy]

revealed that numerous children respond to advertisements of this kind. They must be especially in need of the protection afforded by the Bill.

Angela Smith: I have not encountered that in my constituency, but children who want to earn some extra pocket money will obviously be at risk.

What is so sad is that those who are being ripped off are honest, good people who want to work for a living. It is disgraceful that such people should be denigrated. It is often those who are least able to shell out—children, obviously, come into that category—who are forced to do so. Relatively large sums are frequently required for start-up costs. They may not seem large to Members of Parliament, given their salaries, but they represent a considerable proportion of the disposable income of some of my constituents who reply to these advertisements. They are having to shell out for materials, directories, registration costs, fees, deposits and—always—premium-rate telephone calls, in advance.

The poorest members of society are the least able to afford the consequences of paying for bogus schemes. I feel that we in Parliament have a duty to deal with those who seek to fleece the most vulnerable people.

Those who support the Bill are not against home working. Indeed, it is because he is in favour of home working that my hon. Friend has presented the Bill. Home working is a valuable and important lifeline for many, and genuine home-working scheme operators have nothing to fear from the Bill. In fact, as my hon. Friend said, they have a great deal to gain from it, as it will raise the status of home working and encourage those who know they will not be ripped off to engage in it.

Mr. Duncan: If the Bill succeeds in its aim it will be useful, but which part of it would outlaw premium rate calls, given that that money is presumably payment for the telephone call rather than for the outworking scheme?

Angela Smith: It is a payment for services. By paying for a premium rate phone call, the person concerned is paying for a service, and the Bill covers that.

Companies that do need to fear the Bill are those such as the company that the trading standards department cited as having raised £600,000 in nine months from advance payments of £25. Although £25 may not seem much to many people, £600,000 is a great deal—and the Department of Trade and Industry described that as no more than a medium-sized operation. We are talking about a trade whose ill-gotten gains run into millions.

The Bill will catch companies such as the one in north Yorkshire that charged people for construction kits, and then rejected all the finished products as being not up to standard. Trading standards officers joined the scheme and asked professionals to assemble the kits; they were still rejected.

The Bill will protect those such as the woman from south Wales who obtained home work sticking labels on envelopes. Her work was rejected because the labels were not stuck on straight. I hope that, in the forthcoming local elections, Members will encourage their local party workers, thousands of whom will be involved in similar activities, to make sure that the labels are stuck on straight.

Improving the rights of consumers has been important to me for some years. I was the Labour spokeswoman on Essex county council's trading standards committee. Christine Wade—who is now director of that department—and her valuable team have been at the forefront of action against bogus home-working schemes. They have not been fortunate in every case, but they took a company called Hayden Marketing Services to court under the Trade Descriptions Act 1968 and the Theft Act 1968. They were quite creative in seeking out legislation that would cover that case.

The company was charging people £25 or £35 for a starter pack, which it claimed contained everything people needed to start work, and guaranteed that 43p would be paid for every envelope submitted. The pack outlined what they needed to do before they could submit any work; it did not contain the work. People were informed that they must buy two specific types of envelope, expensive A4 paper, mailing lists, sticky labels and two stamps per unit. They must have the leaflet printed, and ensure that all requirements were met, down to the stamp being in exactly the right place. They had to send the first batch of 500 by recorded delivery.

The trading standards department estimated that submitting the finished pack would cost the consumer 67p; the consumer would be paid 43p. It was not possible to comply with the information on the pack without incurring costs. The company ended up banking £3,500 from people applying for packs—and not one person submitted any completed envelopes.

In an article in *Trading Standards Review* last August Nicola Webb, principal advice officer at Essex trading standards service, said of the conviction of the person who ran that company:

> "The penalty aside, being able to get money back for consumers who could not afford to lose it made it definitely worthwhile."

On behalf of my constituents who contacted the service to complain about the company, I echo her words, but I think that the penalty was inadequate: the lady concerned merely had to do community service and pay the money back.

In that case, because of the wording of the leaflet that the company used, a conviction was possible; but it was an exception. Trading standards departments up and down the country know that many cases cannot be brought to court because no law has been broken. Hayden Marketing Services was smart enough to fleece the vulnerable, but not smart enough to avoid prosecution. I have no doubt that other companies involved in such scams have given careful consideration to why Hayden Marketing Services was convicted, and have worded their advertisements in a way that makes their prosecution under the current law impossible. Such cons are typical of the bogus schemes that are being set up.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) quoted a trading standards department that supported the Bill. Indeed, trading standards departments throughout the country are seeking legislation to protect people from these schemes. Essex county council's trading standards department has produced a leaflet on home working, advising people on what they should do to avoid scams. It is entitled "Do your homework first." It points out the pitfalls that home workers need to be aware of. People are not being sent any work after they have paid the fee. It is difficult for individuals to get their money back.

Businesses often stop trading. There are misleading schemes, with non-refundable registration fees, where the individual has to find his own customers and, when he has done so, to recruit other customers. It is impossible to meet the quality standards for the work.

Because of the prevalence of this practice in Essex, a charity has been established, Essex Homeworkers, based in Chelmsford. It works mainly with retired and disabled people to organise sales of their craft work. The charity is needed not just to organise the sales, which have become very important, but because current law cannot adequately protect its members and clients from those who are seeking to rip them off. I am sure that the charity will be the first to welcome the Bill, even if takes away part of its work. It is doing that work only because the current legislation is inadequate.

As I have said, genuine home working companies have nothing to fear from the Bill. Their reputation will be enhanced by taking cowboy firms out of the picture. For many people, home working is the only viable way of engaging in paid work. They need to have the confidence that, when they do so, they are not being ripped off and cheated and will not be in a worse financial position than before. The message must go out loud and clear from the House: advance payments must be stopped. I am particularly pleased that premium rate telephone lines are being brought within the definition of advance payments.

Far from this being a draconian measure, as has been suggested by some, I strongly believe that we have a duty to legislate. I feel strongly about my constituents being conned—there is no other word for it. I get extremely angry and upset by those who do not feel that this is an appropriate method by which to legislate on the matter.

We must stress some of the horrors associated with home working and the fact that the proposals do not attack genuine home-working jobs, which can be suitable for both reputable companies and for individuals who need, or want, to work from home. We are talking about closing the loopholes available to the unscrupulous, the uncaring and the underhand who make money from the exploitation of others. We are talking about people selling goods or services when there is no intention to pay for the finished product. Often, there is no market for the goods, or the services in a directory do not actually exist.

It is a great shame that legislation is needed, but without the creation of the new criminal offences under the Bill, the scams and unfair practices will continue. It is a sad fact that current legislation, and the threat of civil action by consumers, is not enough to deter determined rogue traders from repeatedly exploiting those working at home. The whole home working, or outworking, market is being discredited by those people.

It says a lot for the Bill that it brings together several organisations that have championed consumer rights, including the National Consumer Council and the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux. I pay tribute to citizens advice bureaux in Thurrock and Basildon, which have worked extremely hard and which, in many cases, have to pick up the pieces afterwards.

Often, when someone has been a victim of such a scam, they go to their Member of Parliament or citizens advice bureau and it is too late. Nothing can be done; the law may not have been broken; they cannot get any remedy. If we are lucky, occasionally, as in the case of Hayden Marketing Services, trading standards officers may be able to take action, but in the vast majority of cases no action can be taken and we are left with distraught constituents who have been ripped off. The Bill will be welcomed throughout the country; there is so much malpractice. I hope that today's debate will help those who are considering taking on home working. They can look at the debate and, I hope, the publicity surrounding the introduction of the legislation and then hope to be protected from the worst excesses.

I understand that the Minister has welcomed the Bill wholeheartedly. I welcome that, but there is a wider context in which we should see the Bill. The Department of Trade and Industry White Paper, "Modern Markets: Confident Consumers", made it clear that

> "Rogue traders who prey on the most vulnerable and provide unfair competition to legitimate business must be stopped."

Today, we have the chance to put those words into practice. We can take a stand against the rip-off merchants who prey on our constituents. On their behalf, we should all support the Bill.

10.25 am

Mr. Fabian Hamilton (Leeds, North–East): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden). I heard him on "The World at One" just before Christmas when he had won the lottery, which is held each year, for private Members' Bills. I was delighted that, subsequently, he chose this subject. Like my hon. Friends who have spoken and the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), I feel not only that it is a good choice of Bill, but that, in its small way, it will help a good number of people who have had money taken from them by deception by some of the more unscrupulous companies in the sector.

I support the Bill not only because my hon. Friend the Member for Northfield is one of my oldest friends—

Mr. Forth: Ah.

Mr. Hamilton: Let me get on to it. I support it also because the National Group on Homeworking is based in the city of Leeds. The group has done much good work. It is a lottery-funded project; it is independent; it campaigns, informs and educates and does a lot of research. It has a free telephone advice and information line, which I am glad to say is funded by the DTI.

We have all seen the posters and advertisements on the lamp posts, street furniture and street signs on major roads—for example, the junction of Canal road and Armley road, the major arterial route into Leeds from Bradford, which I often use when travelling into the city centre in Leeds. While waiting in the traffic, we look at those. That is how people often advertise.

During 2000, the National Group on Homeworking dealt with more than 5,000 calls to its advice and information line. The majority of those inquiries were from people looking for home-work employment. The schemes that claim to offer on-going work, which can be done at home in return for an initial fee or deposit, continue to be the subject of many calls to the advice and information line. Invariably, the callers have lost money already, or found that the claims were not justified. Even in cases where work was provided, no payment was forthcoming.

[Mr. Hamilton]

During 2000, the National Group on Homeworking received 647 reports of people losing money to bogus home-working schemes. It calculated that the sum lost was more than £25,270. The reports named 211 different companies, some of which hon. Members have already mentioned. Neath Mailing Services seemed to be top of list—it was reported 122 times. Outworkers Direct was reported 72 times. The sums paid in advance ranged from £20 to £100. IS Trading was reported 56 times to the national group, with a payment of £20 being made in advance. Procraft International was reported 41 times. In that case, the sums paid ranged from £15 to £36. The list goes on.

One of the examples that was given to me involved a constituent of mine, Natasha Harris, of 21 Allerton Grange Vale in Moortown, Leeds. She was about to send money to a local home mailing scam in Bradford costing £10 until the West Yorkshire home-working unit advised her that she should not send the money. The scam is called DPMS. It is based at PO Box 1000 Bradford BD2 1XL. It even advertises in the *Yorkshire Evening Post*. Natasha works part-time from home at the moment and is one of those who could least afford to lose that money.

I move on to the question of premium telephone lines, in which I know the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), has an interest.

The National Group on Homeworking made a number of complaints to the regulatory body, the Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services. I am pleased to say that many of the complaints were upheld and that fines were imposed. Baker Telecom, for example, operated an internet site that people could access on a premium-rate telephone line. As the company did not have permission to operate the telephone line, it was disconnected and the company was fined £500.

Eagle Promotions was fined £10,000 for breaching the ICSSTIS code, as was Select Publications. Seekers UK was fined £500, as was Westcliffe Associates. Although I have not read the details of those cases, I imagine that the penalties were imposed for the reasons outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Northfield.

As we know, the Bill proposes banning up-front deposits from consumers for work at home or fees for directories containing such schemes. I am certain that the Bill will ensure that the money paid by premium telephone lines to the companies concerned is treated as an up-front payment. The Bill also aims to give trading standards officers the power to shut down bogus home-working schemes quickly and to take action against the organisers. It also imposes a fine of up to £5,000 for each offence against a member of the public and a criminal record for those who break the law. Finally, it aims to close the loophole allowing the scams to be advertised.

At any one time, about 300 bogus operations are known to be operating across the country. Without the action that the Bill makes possible, that type of bogus activity will continue and could involve 1 million victims or more.

The National Group on Homeworking sees only the tip of the iceberg. As we have heard, there are many variations on the schemes, including envelope stuffing, typing, kit construction, teleworking, craft work and marketing. One 70 year-old man sent a £40 fee in return for work to do at home. Rather than being asked to do that work, however, he was asked to recruit other jobseekers to the scheme and to send in more money. Later, he sent £20 in reply to another advertisement but received only flyers from other companies wanting up-front money.

One woman wanted to earn some money while she was looking after her young child. She was asked to pay a £98 registration fee in exchange for internet work. She was then encouraged to take out a significant loan to buy a home computer. Nine months after she had paid for the equipment, she had still not been supplied with any work.

One company found a very imaginative scheme. It placed its postcard advertisements in post offices, but distributed a £1 coin to those who replied. The company's modest initial outlay prompted responses from more than 103,000 people who sent the company the minimum registration fee of £25. Consequently, the company netted more than £2,575,000. Those who paid the £25 fee—£24 excluding the £1 that they received—were never employed by the company and did not hear from it again. There are many other similar examples.

I hope that the Bill is enacted. It would save so many people from the rip-off merchants who steal money from those who are often the most vulnerable in society. It would go a tremendous way towards ensuring that those who want and need income from home working are far better protected from unscrupulous companies that feel they can get away with theft, which is what it is.

10.34 am

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden), who has a long track record of supporting consumer issues in the House. I particularly welcome the support that he gave to my Fireworks Bill, which was not enacted because it was much further down in the ballot. I sincerely hope that his Outworking Bill has greater success, which it should have as he has won first place in the ballot.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I encourage the hon. Lady to elaborate towards the Chair.

Mrs. Gilroy: Hon. Members have already mentioned the support given by the National Group on Homeworking, citizens advice bureaux and trading standards officers across the country, who are in the front line in trying to tackle the important issues we are discussing. As hon. Members may know, I am, I think, the first member of the former Institute of Trading Standards Administration—now known as the Trading Standards Institute—to be elected to Parliament. Before joining that institute, I undertook study leading to a diploma in consumer affairs.

I well remember one hot summer's day, travelling up on the inter-city line from the west country, doing some last-minute revision for that qualification and reading the legislation applying to the issue that we are now seeking to address. The subsequent exam contained a question on whether current legislation was sufficient to stop the type of scams we are discussing.

Legislation is available to be deployed against such scams, but, like so much legislation, it is a bit convoluted. One could attempt to apply, for example, the provisions

of the Control of Misleading Advertisements Regulations 1988 or of part III of the Fair Trading Act 1973, which deals with rogue traders. However, use of those provisions would require a great deal of work by trading standards officers to ensure the effectiveness of a crackdown.

Hon. Members often claim that current legislation is sufficient and that more is unnecessary. Sometimes, however, more can mean less. More can be less if a tighter focus on the real challenges facing enforcement agencies makes it possible to lessen the time required to bring a prosecution. That is the intent of this quite narrow, but focused Bill. More can be less also if the new law makes it possible for the precious time of public servants to be used more effectively. More is certainly less if a clarification and tightening of the law increase the chances of successful prosecutions.

Moreover, if we can successfully drive out crooked operators, we shall be able to create a virtuous circle in which less is the basis for more, but more of what is good—such as more certainty for honest businesses so that they can trade in a fair environment. Hon. Members have already addressed that issue in detail.

Honest businesses will abide by paragraph 54(4) of the British codes of advertising and sales promotion code of practice. Last year, a review by the Advertising Standards Authority found that 11 in 14 advertisements failed to comply with the code. The finding would seem to be sufficient evidence that a voluntary approach to the issue has been ineffective. I am all for voluntary approaches when they work, as they often do. However, for such approaches to work, a large proportion of the companies in the sector must subscribe to the code and belong to the relevant trade association. That is a key principle. Clearly, with outworking, the bogus operators fall well short of observing that principle.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Northfield said, these schemes cynically and cold-bloodedly target the most vulnerable members of our society: pensioners, carers, the disabled, lone parents, those with learning difficulties or poor communication skills or anyone who is not able to work outside the home, but wants to do something to raise their family's income.

Hon. Members may not understand how significant the lack of basic communication skills is for some of our constituents. In our sophisticated modern world, we need to tackle these issues. In Plymouth, Sutton, some 30 per cent. of people have greater-than-average difficulties with basic skills. A playwright from my constituency, Sue Torr, has brought her award-winning play "Shout it Out" to Westminster. I challenge any hon. Member who does not understand the issue to borrow my video of the play and to try to put themselves in the shoes of someone who has low or no basic literacy skills.

Such people, if they have employment, will almost always be in low-paid work, typically as cleaners, as Sue Torr herself was before she took to the theatre. I hope that such people are now protected from exploitation by the minimum wage. However, despite that, it is often difficult to make ends meet. Luxuries such as birthday presents, or sudden crises such as washing machines breaking down, are huge problems if debts have been run up because of previous pressures. A bit of wishful thinking in response to advertisements such as those we have heard about today, which hold out the prospect of a quick, apparently legal and easy way to earn money, is understandable.

Of 684,000 home workers—as we have said, the bona fide industry, will be protected by the Bill—65 per cent. are women. One was the Paignton woman referred to in the briefing from the CAB. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) has referred to a number of west country people who have suffered from these scams. The woman paid £40 for a kit; it was returned as unsuitable because of the work she had done on it. The second kit was also returned. When she tried to get a refund on unused kits that she had paid for, she was refused.

Plymouth's environment and consumer protection department considered a project to try to head off this attack on our vulnerable and poor constituents as part of a wider social inclusion project. Frequent press releases from the department warning of the pitfalls of such schemes seem to have had a limited effect. After seeking clearance from the legal practice, it was decided to investigate the extent of the problem. That took up the expensive time of the legal practice. Under the Bill, such test projects clearly would be legal.

The first and novel approach was to monitor how many people would respond to an advertisement for home working in the Plymouth area. With the consent of the editor of our local paper, the *Evening Herald*—a well-known campaigning newspaper, which won the regional newspaper of the year award last year—the trading standards unit placed the following fake advertisement:

"Christmas money. Earn extra money for Christmas. Local company urgently requires homeworkers. Light work. Good rates of pay. No selling involved. For registration and start-up kit send cheque for £10."

The advertisement concluded with a PO box number. If an inquiry was received at the consumer advice desk, the instruction was to give the usual advice of not sending any money. In all, about six inquiries were received at the advice desk, and 21 people sent £10. Their money was subsequently returned with a covering letter, warning them of the potential high risk of losing their money in future if they replied to other such schemes.

The second part of the social inclusion project attempted to assess for legality and value for money 10 examples of similar get-rich-quick schemes advertised in Plymouth. Sums ranging from £3 to £39.50 were sent to 10 companies advertising various schemes. After six months, no reply had been heard from eight of the 10. It must be presumed that the advertisements were bogus and that the people behind them were the only winners. This can be taken only as a serious indictment of any similar schemes asking for money up front.

Trading standards departments in the localities of the companies that advertised were given the addresses; I hope that they were able to find time to follow them up. Of course, that is partly what the Bill is about: making such schemes illegal so that trading standards do not have to go to such lengths to crack down on them.

Of the other two schemes, one company asked for a further £35 for a starter pack of leaflets, address labels and envelopes. The work advertised involved inserting the leaflets into envelopes and attaching address labels. The decision was made not to send the company any more money—quite wisely.

It was discovered that the 10th scheme involved an illegal chain letter whereby, in order to get involved, money had to be sent to people further up the chain. With

[Mrs. Gilroy]

one's name on the list, the scheme promised £50,000 income within 60 days. That is a matter for the Office of Fair Trading, which, along with the Post Office, was notified. One method of dealing with the problem would be to outlaw demands for money up front and for premium-rate telephone calls. Like other hon. Members, my understanding is that the Bill covers that. If not, we can return to the matter in Committee.

Replying to one such local premium-rate advertisement cost £4, with no work opportunity offered. Although ICSSTIS tries to tackle this matter, the current framework is insufficient to clamp down on it. The conclusions drawn from the project showed that people are desperate to obtain extra income and will spend money that they can ill afford to lose to get such work. There is huge profit in operating such unethical and already illegal schemes, but it is difficult to enforce the law. There is an urgent need for legislation. The second part of the project reinforced the fact that these are important issues. Work is continuing in Plymouth to warn citizens of the possible risks of losing their money if they get involved in such schemes. The project was drawn to the attention of the DTI and has, no doubt, informed my hon. Friend the Member for Northfield in drawing up the Bill.

When I was elected, my constituency had the poorest ward in England. We have made huge progress in tackling unemployment and, crucially, in improving literacy and the communication skills that people need to help them make informed assessments. Quite simply, however, we still have a steep hill to climb when it comes to tackling social exclusion issues. Our resources for doing so are precious.

The Bill will make the law clearer and easier to enforce. It will allow trading standards officers to do their job better, faster and more effectively. It will stop poor constituents wasting money on crooks. It will play a small but important part in addressing social exclusion and create a fair trading environment for those businesses that are honest and above board. I support my hon. Friend the Member for Northfield and wish his Bill well.

10.49 am

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): One difficulty with a Bill such as this is that it is easy to make a superficial appeal and tug the heart strings, as many right hon. and hon. Members have attempted to do. I suppose that the hon. Member for Leeds, North–East (Mr. Hamilton) is to be admired for his touching remark that he supports the Bill because the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) is his oldest friend. However, my main problem is that the Bill exemplifies what is becoming an alarming tendency in our legislative proposals with regard to risk in our society.

Time and again, well-meaning colleagues, backed by pressure groups or quangos, try to persuade us that we must create a risk-free society and that our population—our electorate—should in no circumstances be exposed to any risk. We might as well ban mountaineering, horse-riding, rugby or any other pursuits that cause much more distress, physical pain and worse.

The Bill represents another step in that direction. Time and again, right hon. and hon. Members tell us that when people in our society take a risk and it all goes wrong, we must protect them. I want to challenge that assumption. Not only is it patronising, but it carries a danger that we will stifle job creation, which we all say that we support.

Mr. Tyler: Is the right hon. Gentleman saying that the House has no right or responsibility to protect people from danger? Is he against seat belts, for example? Is he in favour of road safety?

Mr. Forth: I was against compulsory seat belts, as it happens. Unfortunately, I was not in the House at the time, but I almost certainly would have voted against the compulsory wearing of seat belts. However, I will not allow myself to be drawn excessively into that discussion.

We are talking about jobs and paid work. For hundreds of years, the capitalist, property-owning, risk-taking, shareholding society that we have developed—and from which we all benefit, to such an extent that people are desperate to come to this country to enjoy all its benefits—has been based on entrepreneurship, risk taking by shareholders, and people who work in various ways at different times and in varying places. This time yesterday, Labour Members lamented the tragic loss of a large number of traditional jobs in steel making. It is incumbent on us to ensure that we do nothing to endanger employment that is growing rapidly in society as an alternative to static, traditional, factory-based jobs, which are being lost.

Mrs. Gilroy: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is also incumbent upon us, as parliamentarians, to ensure that young people have adequate communications skills and basic literacy and numeracy? Will he apologise for the 18 years during which the previous Government did nothing effective to tackle those problems?

Mr. Forth: I am very happy to indulge in party badinage this morning. It may—who knows?—enliven, and even prolong, our proceedings. I am always happy to apologise for many of the things that happened during the 18 years of our glorious period in government. If the hon. Lady thinks that she is being politically cute by challenging me to say that not everything that we did was perfect, she will be very disappointed. I am more than happy to confess that many of the things that happened when my party was in government were regrettable. Many mistakes were made.

I am simply trying to prevent the hon. Lady's colleagues from making a similar mistake with this ridiculous Bill. Perhaps we can all join hands in our shared desire to maximise job creation and minimise the dead hand of interventionist legislation that the Bill represents. Surely the House has a duty to guarantee that we do not legislate in haste and leave our voters repenting at leisure when they find that their occupational opportunities have been reduced by our ever-increasing desire to eliminate any risk.

What the Bill calls "outworking" is also termed, in a slightly different context, "teleworking" for those who are more keen on the information technology side. My right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), may want to refer to that if he catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because he is a great expert and an aficionado of such matters, which I am not. There is a real danger that this well-meaning but

ill-directed Bill could endanger the very high-technology jobs that involve outworking or teleworking, and that would be a tragedy.

It is interesting that the excellent House of Commons Library research paper says:

"Most people working from home are not the victim of scams. Many are relatively prosperous professional teleworkers."

That is the first point that we have to meet head on. It is a familiar problem to those of us who have spent some time here. It is all too easy for well-meaning people, interest groups and Government-paid quangos to identify an area of difficulty, then demand legislation without paying proper regard to the serious damage that it might inadvertently do to the much wider sphere of legitimate, profitable and job-creating sectors in the economy. For the Library to tell us that most people working from home are not the victims of scams is stating not simply the obvious but the necessary.

Mr. Burden: I am following with care the right hon. Gentleman's argument about the need to protect legitimate businesses, one of which, I am sure that he would agree, is direct selling. I have had a letter from the Direct Selling Association, which says:

"First of all, may I say how pleased we are that you are promoting this Bill and that it has obtained strong Government support. Although home working schemes do not come within the direct selling channel that we represent, the DSA is frequently asked to intercede on behalf of those who have been taken in by these scams."

It gives an example. Admitted, the DSA wants exclusions, and that provision is in the Bill. However, a number of such businesses support the Bill—they do not oppose it.

Mr. Forth: I am very familiar with this concept. I came up against it when I was doing the Minister's job, and I shall make another passing reference to that later. The hon. Gentleman makes a familiar argument. Surprise, surprise, the people already established in the business want to make it more difficult for others to come in. There is nothing new about that; it is a perfectly respectable aspiration. However, let us not blind ourselves to it.

The previous Government—here is a confession for the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy)—were guilty of that as well. Established businesses, trade associations and so on used to say that they were very keen to have more regulation and asked us to raise the hurdle for entry to their business. Of course they were. The last thing that established businesses want is thrusting, enterprising new entrants. Any Bill, such as this, which might deliberately or inadvertently prevent new entrants to the business is, of course, supported by the trade associations.

Mrs. Gilroy: I should have thought that the right hon. Gentleman, during his time as Minister in charge of consumer affairs, would have picked up a little more about creating a fair trading ethos, under which good businesses appreciate appropriate and focused legislation that helps to keep crooks out and enables consumers to have confidence in the markets in which they operate.

Mr. Forth: The problem is—and as I develop my analysis, I hope that this point will come out—that the Bill is not focused. It takes an undiscriminating, scattergun approach to what may or may not be a relatively small problem. When I was in the post that the Minister now occupies with such distinction, I spent most of my two years fighting off bodies such as the National Consumer Council, which, in any case, the Government fund and whose members the Minister appoints. So I am not very impressed with that as a pedigree. The people at the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux are almost as bad—left-leaning, regulatory, interventionist bunch that they are. *[Interruption.]* I said that when I was in office, in case the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) is worried about it. Please let us not have any more of that sort of thing.

The House of Commons Library research paper helpfully tells us on page 18 something that we have not heard much of from the Government. It says:

"The numbers working 'mainly' at home have risen dramatically over the 1981 to 1998 period—doubling from 345,920 . . . in 1981 to 680,612 . . . in 1998.

That is a significant figure, because it illustrates what I think we all know instinctively: that this is a rapidly growing area of employment.

We must distinguish, as I did a moment ago, between the outworking sector and the tragic loss of jobs that we have heard about over the past two or three days in our traditional, heavy, factory-based industries. The occupations dealt with in the Bill—outworking, teleworking and other kinds of working from home—have become important as substitutes for the traditional jobs that, regrettably, are disappearing, not least from the constituency of the hon. Member for Northfield. Let us not lose sight of that as a first guiding principle concerning our responsibilities in the context of the Bill.

The research paper continues:

"Those working from home for at least one day a week ('partially') account for 3.5 per cent. of the employed workforce"—

that is nearly 1 million people—

"while those reporting working 'sometime' at home account for a further 22 per cent."

Working at home is something that many people want to do to enhance their household income, their experience and so on. It is that important.

If we do anything that might damage that area of employment, we shall bear a heavy responsibility. We should not take the flip attitude, "So long as we mention scams often enough, the Bill is all right," or patronise people by saying, "We've got to protect gullible people at all costs," and "We won't even assume that you can read anything properly, or that you may be prepared to take the occasional risk."

I reject all that. It is superficial, patronising and wrong-headed. I have a higher opinion of voters than Labour Members do. They seem to assume that people are completely cretinous and cannot look after their own interests or make their own decisions. I would rather err in the other direction, and regard voters as mature

[Mr. Forth]

responsible people, prepared to have a go, prepared to take a chance or even a risk, and prepared to be let down occasionally.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Does my right hon. Friend think that the Bill will promote the nanny state, or will it lead to the more flexible labour market that we would like?

Mr. Forth: I have not used the term "nanny state" until now, but I am happy to follow my hon. Friend's analysis. Yes, I think that this is a classic case of nanny statism, which I am delighted to say that my party opposes.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I am sorry to disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh), but the Library paper suggests that this is a case not so much of nanny statism as of jobs for the boys. Has my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) seen that, according to the paper, in 1999 the total amount of money that people lost in scams was £35,000. Yet when the Bill is passed it will cost £350,000 a year for trading standards officers to enforce it. We will spend £350,000 to deal with a £35,000 problem. Would it not be better to give everyone who lost money a tenner?

Mr. Forth: I hope that my right hon. Friend is not trying to pre-empt something that I intended to say later. Now that he has mentioned it, however, I shall take the point up briefly and then, depending on my reading of your mood, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I may or may not seek to return to it later.

My right hon. Friend is correct; the Library does give us those astonishing statistics.

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells) *rose—*

Mr. Forth: The Minister is going to help us.

Dr. Howells: I always try to help the right hon. Gentleman. He is, of course, making his usual pitch for a return to a more anarchic age when cheats, bullies, fixers and those who delivered short measure were regarded as a natural consequence of a thrusting economy. If the right hon. Gentleman is right, I am not sure why we need laws or police forces at all. Why not just let the bullies loose in society, and avoid threatening them in case that threatens the creation of jobs? Does he agree with the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) about the money? How much does a murder cost? Why spend money on police forces if it costs so much to solve the occasional murder? His argument is the most facile load of old garbage that I have ever heard in the House.

Mr. Forth: I am glad that we have got the Minister to his feet, and that he has given us a foretaste of the measured remarks that he will make later. If that is the extent of the Department of Trade and Industry's analysis, it has slipped a lot since I was there some years ago. If the Minister is briefed to say that transactions averaging £40 in value are equivalent to murder, we have reached a new and fascinating level of Government analysis. Perhaps we shall hear more from him later when the debate hots up a bit. It has been rather somnolent so far, and perhaps I will be able to encourage him to say more.

My right hon. Friend's intervention was helpful, and referred directly to the Library analysis of the Bill, which points out—I do not know whether my right hon. Friend made this clear—that the figures given come from the National Group on Homeworking, which presumably has some grasp of what is going on. Apparently, in 1999 there were 869 so-called scams—a word that has dominated the debate so far, but has never yet been satisfactorily defined—and that those nearly 900 transactions probably lost the people concerned nearly £35,000. If that had been £35,000 each, I might begin to be impressed, but I assume that that is the total. We are therefore talking about responding with the heavy hand of the law—I shall go into that in more detail when I consider the schedule—at, as the research paper goes on to outline, a very much greater cost to the taxpayer.

The research paper refers to the explanatory notes to the Bill. It is interesting that of the three private Members' Bills before us today, this is the only one with explanatory notes. That makes me wonder whether there is not just a hint of Government input. I believe that the Government said that they wanted to do something similar, but because they were too busy banning foxhunting, they could not find time to put such a Bill in their official programme. Up bobs the hon. Member for Northfield to produce, obligingly, a private Member's Bill. However, I shall let that pass.

The result is that we have useful explanatory notes for the Bill, drafted, no doubt, by the promoter himself—not. Those notes say that the public expenditure costs of

"additional investigations and some prosecutions"

will amount to £350,000 in the first year—10 times the estimate of what the alleged hapless victims of the transactions will have lost. What sort of cost-effectiveness is that? I hope that the Minister will answer that question later, and perhaps this time he will leave out any allusions to murder. That might be helpful.

Mr. Maclean: Is my right hon. Friend as appalled as I am that the Minister should intervene with such an intemperate outburst and offer us such a pile of pants? He said that throwing £35,000 at £350,000 somehow equated to an investigation of murder. Of course the police service should leave no stone unturned in investigating murder, whatever it costs—but to compare that with a £35,000 scam is outrageous.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. His description of what the Minister said is entirely accurate, and I subscribe to it.

However, I shall not be diverted any more at this stage, because I was giving the House the benefit of the analysis in the Library research paper as a background to my analysis of the Bill, which I shall offer in due course. Now I want to remind the House, to put the matter properly in context, what the Library tells us about the nature of this sector of employment:

"Higher occupational groups are over-represented among the mainly and sometimes working at home groups, while those lower down the occupational hierarchy are under-represented".

That is not the impression that we have been given by the speeches that we have heard so far—quite the opposite. In other words, most of the people who are involved in that rapidly growing and vital employment sector are themselves intelligent, educated people who want to take advantage of homeworking, teleworking, outworking or whatever we want to call it.

The Library document continues—this is the information technology aspect that I hope my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border will help us with later—

"Three out of five who work at home at least one day are reliant on keeping in contact with clients and colleagues via computers and telecommunications."

That is the first hint that this is an absolutely vital growth area of employment—relating directly to what is called information technology.

I cannot claim any great knowledge of those matters, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so you will be relieved to hear that I shall not spend much time on them, except to point out that it is evident, even to me, that people working at home using computers and other technology, who are distance working, teleworking, home working, outworking—all those forms overlap—will be affected by the Bill, should it, mistakenly, ever reach the statute book, although I hope it does not. We run the risk of damaging growth in that sector at the very time that we as a society are utterly reliant on its development to maintain our prosperity. The figures speak for themselves. We are talking about a sector that is not only vital now but will become even more important in the future.

Reference has been made to the support given to the Bill by bodies such as NACAB and the NCC. Interestingly, in one of the many pieces of paper that they have produced on the Bill, I picked up this rather helpful phrase:

"There is no specific law that controls how home-working schemes operate. So most are not illegal".

Thank goodness for that. The document continues:

"Misleading advertising is, though, covered by the Advertising Standards Authority, the advertising industry's watchdog, which can investigate complaints from the public."

Although I do not want to conduct an in-depth analysis at this stage, as it would be more appropriate for subsequent stages of the Bill, I refer to that point because I suspect that there is already a panoply of measures, agencies, bodies and so on—not least our excellent local trading standards officers—which could deal with a large amount of the abuse that worries Labour Members. In cases and Bills such as this, a full analysis is often missing. I can understand why the promoter of the Bill—or any of the Labour Members who profess themselves so keen on the measure—would not want to do that. However, we really need a full analysis of the alternative possibilities or routes—perhaps using a lighter touch, being more minimalist and less interventionist—that could be used to deal with the problems identified by Labour Members.

Mr. Tyler: The right hon. Gentleman says that he looks forward to further scrutiny of the Bill in its subsequent passage through the House. May I take it from that that he and his hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), the Opposition spokesman, will give it a fair wind into Committee?

Mr. Forth: No, that is a matter for Members of the House. I am making my opposition to the Bill absolutely clear. I hope that the hon. Gentleman at least concedes that. I rarely seek to conceal my position or to prevaricate on it. I regret that, in my introductory remarks thus far, I have been unable to persuade him about my position. I shall obviously have to make it much more clear cut and much better defined so that he is left in no doubt.

I do not like the Bill. It is ill-conceived. It will damage employment. It takes a scattergun rather than a focused approach. The cost-benefit analysis is adverse. The origins of the Bill are extremely dubious—being as they are NACAB, NCC and, worst of all, Her Majesty's Government in the shape of the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs with his obsession about murder. All in all, I am not impressed with the Bill's pedigree—to put it no more strongly.

Let me turn again to the briefing from NACAB and NCC—two quangos supported largely by taxpayers' money, unless things have changed since I was a Minister. It states:

"The purpose of the NCC is to make all consumers matter."

What glib nonsense. The NCC is a Government-funded body, almost the sole purpose of which is to dream up ill-conceived Bills such as this one. That simply will not do. It does not persuade me in the slightest. Unless the Minister can tell me that things have changed a lot since I was dealing with such matters, I shall continue to be unimpressed.

I shall now turn in the direction of the Bill, Mr. Deputy Speaker—I am sure that will give you some reassurance. I thought that I might deal with it slightly back to front in case I run out of time. I am anxious to deal first with the schedule.

Schedules are often ignored or overlooked parts of Bills. The wording of the Bill is sloppy; it has been poorly drafted. I suspect that the parliamentary draftsmen have been so busy on other things that they have had no chance to get their teeth into this measure. If it ever reaches Committee, which I trust it will not, it will need a great deal of remedial work; if it ever gets out of Committee and comes back to this place on Report, which I trust it will not, it will need even more remedial work. However, that is not our job today—I know that well enough, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Awful though the Bill is, I want to alert the House to the horrors of the schedule.

The schedule is headed "Enforcement" and "Enforcement authority". It was interesting to hear the promoter of the Bill and other Labour Members roll those words around their mouths; they positively enjoy the idea of criminal prosecutions. That is what Labour Members really like about the political world. The fact that the Bill would produce more criminal prosecutions seems extremely attractive to them. It is not the sort of world that I particularly want to live in. The measure gives a flavour of what the Government and their supporters are up to.

Reading the schedule gives us enough of a clue. It starts slightly blandly and, one might think, a bit encouragingly by stating:

"For the purposes of this Act . . . every local weights and measures authority in Great Britain is the enforcement authority for its area."

That may be okay as far as it goes. We all like local weights and measures authorities, except when—as in the ghastly little statutory instrument that the Minister is

[Mr. Forth]

trying to smuggle through the House at present—they are going to impose metrication on us, but not until 2009—*[Interruption.]* The Government Whip, the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Mr. Pope)—to do him a favour, I shall get him into *Hansard*, so that his constituents know that he was in the Chamber today—says from a sedentary position that my colleagues and I voted for that measure. I can tell him—he can ask the Minister—that I voted against it yesterday. However, I shall not digress, Mr. Deputy Speaker; I am talking about the schedule and local weights and measures authorities.

Notwithstanding the bland and reassuring words at the beginning of the schedule, we then come to

"Powers of officers of enforcement authority".

Now we are getting to the nitty gritty. That is the kind of provision that Labour Members and the Government feel obliged to include in almost every Bill in order to up the rate of the criminal prosecutions that they seek so avidly in every aspect of life. The schedule states:

"If a duly authorised officer of an enforcement authority has reasonable grounds for suspecting that an offence under section 2 or 3 has been committed, he may act".

How may he act? He may enter the premises and then he may do all sorts of other things that I shall come to in a moment.

If I read the schedule correctly—although I am open to correction—we are moving, unusually, from powers that are normally given to police officers or Customs and Excise officers and, in this measure, importing a power of entry to premises for trading standards officers. That is the only way in which I can read the Bill. The authority is the local weights and measures authority, and I assume that the duly authorised officer is an officer of that authority—unless I am about to be told that it is a police officer.

This is either sloppy drafting—I hope that it is, in a funny sort of way—or something that will create a whole new group of officers who can enter premises. If we are really saying that the nature of the problem is so severe that we need such a provision in the Bill, I regret that. It is another example of the disproportionate cost as against the risk that has been exposed. I regret that that tendency is coming more and more into Bills.

The schedule goes on to talk about seizing and detaining documents. I mention this only in passing, because it has always intrigued me, but if we want to take seriously the powers of entry, enforcement and seizure, why does the schedule limit those powers in paragraph 2(8)? It says:

"The powers of an officer under this paragraph may be exercised by him only at a reasonable hour and on production (if required) of his credentials."

Well, we must have that, must we not? Why the reasonable hour? I take the view—I am not quite arguing against myself, but getting close to it—that if we are to have serious powers of enforcement, entry, seizure and detaining, we should not limit them to a reasonable hour. If I wanted my authorities to be effective in all this, I would want them to exercise their powers at an unreasonable hour so that they could find real evidence. We shall need to return to that issue as the Bill meanders its way through its further stages.

Another aspect of the Bill that disturbs me has echoes of the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Bill, which we dealt with recently. I rather hoped that my party would oppose that Bill, but so far it has not. The schedule refers to something called "test responses". That bothers me. We have argued before that a policeman can deliberately send an under-aged person into a shop, get them to buy something illegally and then feel the collar of the shopkeeper. Here we have a similar sort of thing and I am instinctively unhappy about it. I do not want to say that I am completely against it, but I am uneasy about the direction in which the schedule seems to take us. Time and again, we say that something is illegal, but we want to use authorities to persuade someone to commit an illegal act so that we can entrap them. I believe that what are blandly called "test responses" could amount to entrapment and I want to draw the attention of my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) and many others to it.

I was intrigued to see a nice little reference in the schedule to impersonation of officers. It is terribly Mr. Plod, but I suppose that the drafters had to put it in somewhere, for reasons that I cannot begin to imagine. Paragraph 7 of the schedule says:

"A person commits an offence if he is not a duly authorised officer of an enforcement authority but he purports to act as such under this Schedule.

A person guilty of such an offence is liable"—

here we go, more prosecutions—

"(a) on summary conviction, to a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum;

(b) on conviction on indictment, to a fine."

I cannot quite imagine who will go around impersonating trading standards officers. The promoter of the Bill, or whoever wrote the Bill, obviously can. We shall need to explore that rather more fully.

I did not want to spend a lot of time on the detail of the Bill, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because you and I know that that is appropriate at subsequent stages, but a glance at the Bill tells me that the wording is extremely unsatisfactory. It is full of loopholes and it will require a considerable amount of attention. I shall leave it to others to look at different aspects of it.

Labour Members, who, I hope, are still anxious to have their word about the Bill—I will not detain them much further—may have a mild criticism of my remarks, and I want to pre-empt it. They may say that what I have said has all been terribly negative. They may ask me, since I do not think that all these things should happen, what should be happening to protect the poor, innocent, ill-informed, ignorant people who walk into traps over and over again and get taken for 40 quid. One of my answers—here, there may be an area of agreement between me and perhaps, who knows, my Front-Bench spokesman and possibly the Government—is that we should inform people of the risks involved.

I am all for giving people information. I do not dissent from warnings on cigarette packets or other things that say, "The Government think that this is bad for you; the Government believe that this could damage your health; the Government this or the Government that". I have no problem with warnings from experts, authorities and well-meaning people. More could be done to warn people that they should be a little bit careful, and perhaps talk to friends or think about it before they send their money off

to someone whom they do not know and have never heard of. One might have thought that most people would be careful about sending off their money. One would not imagine that they would do it serially. Labour Members have given us examples of people who have been caught out not just once but several times. I suspect that such people are beyond saving, even by the Bill.

Let me suggest another measure. I do so only reluctantly and I hope that my hon. Friends are not really listening because they will pull my leg about it endlessly. I suggest it in a spirit of helpfulness and reaching out to Labour Members.

Mr. Maclean: Reaching out?

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend queries that. He knows that I am a reaching-out sort of person. Here we are on a private Member's Bill Friday in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere discussing a Bill. Having said that I am against the Bill and will oppose it if I get the opportunity to do so, I want to make helpful suggestions. Why do we not provide a helpline? The Department of Trade and Industry is awfully keen on helplines for all sorts of other things. People are supposed to call the DTI about almost every aspect of their lives these days. Why not say to people, "If you are considering responding to a seductive advertisement that says that you can work at home and get well paid, why don't you call us and we will try to talk you out of it?"—or something of the kind? It would not be worded in quite that way, but it would be along those lines.

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. Friend is clearly having some mild aberrations this morning. Has he considered setting up a self-help group to deal with the problem? Perhaps if he continues in this vein, he will become the chairman of a self-help group and other touchy-feely things that may help people who spend £40 on a scam.

Mr. Forth: That is possible. I am surprised that there is not a provision in the Bill for counselling victims. I have just had an idea for an amendment or new clause. It strikes me that the lack of counselling is a lacuna that we might seek to remedy. However, I shall not be deterred from my little bit of positivism at the end of my remarks.

I have suggested giving proper information and a helpline. My right hon. Friend has suggested support groups. Labour Members or the Minister may want to take up the idea of counselling. The Minister may want to do it personally. I cannot imagine anything more comforting for someone who has been a victim of a scam than to have a session with the Minister, if he can keep away from murder for a moment. There is then the role of trading standards officers—people whom we all hold in the highest regard, and who are very professional. I should have thought that they could make a much better contribution to all this.

I make no secret of the fact that I think that the Bill is ill-conceived. There might be a real problem out there, but the Bill is not a proportionate response to its incidence and extent or the amounts of money involved. It is time that we did not reach for legislation every time that groups of people got into difficulty. We should expect people in a mature, educated, civilised society to take more responsibility. We can inform them, but we must expect them to make their own decisions. For all those reasons, I shall oppose the Bill on Second Reading.

11.29 am

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): I congratulate my colleague and fellow midlands Member, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden), on introducing this much-needed Bill, which—despite some of the comments by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)—would be immensely valuable were it to hit the statute book. In a slight parody of JFK, I declare my interest: ich bin ein outworker—or at least, I was until May 1997. As a freelance accountant, I dealt with the financial affairs of many outworkers in the area where I live.

As hon. Members have said, many people who are outworkers or home workers are not vulnerable or in badly paid occupations. They are at the core of our economy, and increasingly so, as teleworking develops. The Bill makes it clear that such activities and the firms involved with such work are not threatened; the scams are the Bill's prime target. We acknowledge that the great majority of firms are legitimate and many outworkers are reasonably paid. None of them would be caught by the Bill.

What is the extent of the problem? The National Group on Homeworking produced some useful and valuable statistics. Its analysis, which is a little different from the Library report's, states that about 80 per cent. of outworkers are female. We need to understand why they seek home work or outwork to find out which groups would benefit in society. The prime reason given by those surveyed was child care, unsurprisingly. The second of four reasons was low income. The third reason was lack of other work opportunities, and the fourth was long-term illness or disability. Those are the groups of people who would benefit from the elimination or reduction of the scams that are endemic in certain parts of the country.

There are four main categories of scheme, and I am pleased that that is recognised in the Bill. First, there are those in which the client receives nothing in return for the fee, and any further attempt to contact the company fails. That is particularly frustrating, so I hope that it will be much less common if the Bill reaches the statute book. Secondly, clients are asked to recruit more people by placing advertisements similar to the one that they responded to—a relatively unsubtle pyramid home-working scam. Again, I hope that such scams will disappear under the legislation. Thirdly, the client is sent work to complete. The work is often bogus, with artificial standards that can never be met by even the most perfect of workers. Fourthly, the client receives a directory of home-working opportunities—another problem tackled in the Bill.

Hon. Members have referred to the links to premium rate telephone numbers. I shall not develop that further, but I was pleased to hear the promoter's reassurance that the costs associated with the problem are included in the definitions.

Why do we need the Bill? The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said that it represents the nanny state at its worst, that people should be more alert to their own interests and that it should be necessary only to provide them with more information. However, I assume that the few Members here who oppose the thrust of the Bill broadly support the work of the Advertising Standards Authority. In its assessment, the most common reasons for such complaints is that, first, the adverts in

[Mr. David Taylor]

question did not necessarily stipulate that an initial outlay or investment was required. Secondly, they did not stipulate the level of outlay required. Thirdly, the claims of earning potential in the adverts could not be substantiated by the company. Fourthly, claims of possible earnings were not accurate. That is why we need to develop such legislation.

The people at whom the scams are targeted are vulnerable in all sorts of ways. The type of information that they request of the National Group on Homeworking illustrates the picture nicely. Their top need is information on employment rights. They feel especially vulnerable about low pay and about the availability of redundancy and lay-off pay.

The National Group on Homeworking should be commended, not criticised as it was by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst. He was also dismissive of NACAB's support for the Bill. It is a mark of the Bill's strength that NACAB is so strongly in its support. It frequently receives complaints about the loss of money to clients who are least able to afford it. We have heard about the categories of people who are often the victims of such scams. NACAB often reports nationally and locally on the failure of legislative provision to deal with the problem. That is precisely why we are debating the Bill today. However, many people fail to complain at all, so we are looking only at the tip of the scam iceberg.

The existing legislation, which one or two right hon. Members have suggested is adequate to protect vulnerable people, is absolutely deficient because individual complaints are unlikely to be investigated by the police, given the small sums involved, although the amounts can be substantial for those concerned. I was pleased to hear the supportive comments about trading standards officers that have been made from both sides of the House. Those in that profession must wait until members of the public have lost money and made a complaint before they investigate. The Bill would improve the process.

Mr. Duncan: If what the hon. Gentleman says is true, why has someone in Sunderland been prosecuted for selling bananas by the pound?

Mr. Taylor: I am not sure that metrication of sales of vegetables or greengrocery is covered by the Bill. I thank the hon. Gentleman for that helpful comment, but I shall press on.

Trading standards officers' involvement is restricted to the activities covered by the bogus home working addressed in the Bill. There seems to be no suggestion of anyone being targeted who wraps bogus bananas and sells them illegally in imperial quantities. We are not talking about such activities.

Another indicator showing that the legislative framework is inadequate is that the fines imposed by courts do not reflect the sums being made by such businesses. I dispute the figures given by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, who suggested that the Bill deserved to fail because the predicted costs of implementing it were greater than the overall cost to those defrauded recently. In fact, in four years, one firm is estimated to have defrauded the British public of between £2.5 million and £6 million—considerably more than the Bill's likely cost.

Existing legislation also fails because the types of business involved in such disreputable activities are usually very difficult to track down. They operate using mobile phone numbers or post office box numbers and are almost impossible to identify with any certainty. Consumers have no practical means of redress.

I shall illustrate the difficulties by citing some examples provided by my own citizens advice bureau in north-west Leicestershire. They show the nature of the scams and of the people behind them. People are asked to provide money up front for an envelope template that is badly cut and useless and could never make a reasonable envelope. Of course, they cannot make the envelopes and the money is lost. That is the kind of activity that the Bill is aimed at tackling.

Sometimes, national insurance payments are stopped from home workers' pay but not passed on to the Inland Revenue. That is not covered in the Bill, but it is a matter that I have taken some interest in and one that the Inland Revenue and the Department of Social Security should consider.

Some companies that had employed home workers legitimately have suddenly ceased sending them work and then avoided paying redundancy. That, too, should be tackled.

My area has traditionally had a substantial economy in the clothing, textiles and footwear sector, which has had a very difficult time. Outworking is common in the sector, and much of it is legitimate and welcome, and not at risk from anything in the Bill. I am pleased to see a fellow Leicestershire Member on the Opposition Front Bench, no doubt waiting to leap to his feet and endorse everything in the Bill.

When scams are reported in our county, the same firms' names crop up time and again. Let us hope that they will not resurface when the Bill is enacted. The names include Capital Publishing, Creative Solutions, Sterling UK, Formula One International and Unicorn Direct. The names have a certain resonance of quality and high technology that completely belies what they are about. If the service that they provided was commensurate with the effort put into concocting their names, the Bill would not be needed.

The Leicester outwork campaign, now the Homeworking Campaign for Change, has long pressed for legislation such as this. Manjeet Tara said:

"Getting these crooks into a court would be an achievement in itself."

That is true. We must look ahead to see how the legislation might be evaded through technology. The IT activities to which other hon. Members have referred could be another means allowing bogus companies to defraud hundreds of thousands of people in this country.

We have come to a time, in relation to the development of the economy and the assessment of social difficulties, when action is needed. My hon. Friend the Minister will have been involved with the White Paper "Modern Markets: Confident Consumers", in which, in July 1999, the Government said:

"There are many schemes claiming that those who take part can make a quick and effortless income. This is impossible for most participants to achieve."

That document made a commitment to Government action. I hope that, 18 months on, the Government will give the Bill a fair wind.

Unscrupulous and immoral firms that trade on the desperation of the poor and the gullibility of the naive and exploit the isolated housebound should have no further part to play in the economy of the United Kingdom.

11.45 am

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): This has been an interesting debate. The House is full of good intentions on this topic, even though the conclusions reached on either side are very different. I do not in any way impugn the good intentions of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden). He has identified a problem and attempted to solve it. It is not a massive problem, but it is a nasty one that comes up repeatedly and, as the hon. Member for North–West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) said, especially hits the vulnerable, the poor, the disabled and those who are scrabbling to get every penny that they can in order to subsist.

We all want to eliminate the scams, in the cause of social justice, but we need to try to marry good intentions with good law, and there is a danger that the Bill could get us into a bit of a mess. Conservative Members share the desire of the hon. Member for Northfield and his supporters to tackle the problem, but it is always difficult to legislate simply for good intentions. Equally, it is difficult to outlaw gullibility.

The Bill would empower trading standards officers, under the weights and measures structure, to intervene and apply the law to stop scams. We, too, want to tackle the deceit and corruption. It is a poor reflection on some people that they still fall for such scams. Local newspapers have run excellent campaigns to expose those scams, and it is sad that people can still be taken for suckers—but we must treat the world as it is, and if we, as parliamentarians, feel that a law is needed, we must make that law and frame it well.

We are determined to try to find a way of giving people the power to banish these swindles from our society. There are a lot of scams, sometimes dressed up with new ways of advertising and describing what is essentially a system of saying, "I'll give you a penny, and you give me a pound." At the heart of all the scams is a little bit of enticement leading to the participants parting with more money than they get back, to the benefit of someone who knew at the outset that that was exactly what would happen. Scams have included bogus recruitment, envelope addressing and basic manufacturing in somebody's living room, as well as directories, kits and so on.

Many home-working schemes are, however, legitimate. Some people—especially those who are caring for children or who are housebound—participate legitimately and profitably in home-working schemes and are satisfied with their involvement. The danger of the Bill is that faulty drafting might cause the good to be caught up with the bad. I want to address that issue, about which my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is especially concerned. He pointed out that there are far more good schemes than bad. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) said, it appears that the proposed financial gain from the Bill could be up to 10 times greater than the current loss. I have no doubt that the Minister will want to explain that loss.

The key point about getting the Bill right is for us all to be satisfied that the good will not get caught up with the bad or suffer in well-intentioned attempts to tackle the problems that exist. I should like to set out some background in that respect, as Opposition Members have some regrets about the origin of the current situation. The measures contained in the Bill should have been part of the Government's much-promised and long-awaited consumer Bill. They failed to introduce such a Bill in the Queen's Speech, which is why we are considering the add-on, stand-alone Bill that is before us.

The Government have been promising that wider consumer measure for a long time. In their consumer White Paper, which was entitled "Modern Markets: Confident Consumers", they said that they would publish a consultation paper and introduce a Bill. They have published a consultation paper that does not deal with many issues, certainly not in respect of the Bill that is before us; they have merely conducted an informal consultation with a few privately selected consumer groups. That process goes against the grain of what they always promise in the consultation that they pretend to offer in the spirit of so-called open government. All that has happened is that a few quangos have told the Minister or his Department what they want. The Bill is certainly not the product of wider consultation.

I am especially concerned that the many legitimate companies that provide a livelihood for people who are working from their homes have not been adequately consulted and may not yet be aware of the effect on them of the dangers that lurk in the Bill. I doubt whether the internet industry has been consulted. Many of the Bill's provisions could be circumvented by advertisements on the net. One could sit in Calais and advertise through an internet service provider a home-working scheme on what appears to be a UK-based website. People with credit cards could then subscribe to that scheme. I acknowledge that many of the people involved in home working will not have credit cards, but they would somehow find a means of remitting money if they thought that such a scheme was the way to their fortune and reward. The money would then go outside the United Kingdom.

Internet advertising could, therefore, result in the transmission of money through a Visa card or a MasterCard to pay for the sort of scam that the Bill is designed to address, but the Bill would have no power over those involved. The internet can, therefore, allow easy, modern and inexpensive circumvention of the very problem that the Bill is trying, but failing, to address.

I have a greater concern. I cannot quite match with the detail of the Bill the claims that hon. Members—I refer mainly to Labour Members—make about its contents. As the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) rightly said, the devil is in the detail. Indeed, I was going to use that phrase anyway, but he said it first. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said, the House has become increasingly prone to introducing legislation on the basis of good intent, favourable headlines and campaigns. We have begun to lose detailed scrutiny and a proper understanding of how every dot, comma and word that we are enshrining in a Bill will be enforced in practical terms when that Bill is enacted.

Mr. Forth: It is perfectly legitimate for focused single-interest groups to lobby Members of Parliament and to seek to persuade them to introduce laws. However, does my hon. Friend agree that it is our wider responsibility to balance those representations with the more general good and to make our judgment on that

[Mr. Forth]

basis? It can never be good enough merely for us to say that we must legislate simply because an organisation or body says that a proposal is good. Our duty runs much wider and deeper.

Mr. Duncan: I agree with my right hon. Friend. The Government have sought to buy off pressure groups by representing them, and probably them alone, in some of their legislation, even if not in the Bill that is before us, yet hon. Members must represent all their constituents and the country when they pass laws that are universally applicable. We must therefore consider the detail.

Mr. Tyler: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for missing the first minute of his speech. Unlike the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), does the hon. Gentleman support the Bill? Does he want it to go into Committee so that the detail to which he refers can be properly scrutinised in the right forum? I accept his point about internet circumvention of the measure. Does he wish to amend the Bill in Committee to tackle that problem?

Mr. Duncan: We are considering a private Member's Bill, and the structure of a Committee that considered it would be slightly different from that of a normal Standing Committee. We support the Bill's intentions, but it would be better if it was completely redrafted. Amendment in Committee would remove so much of it that it would require such redrafting. As I develop my argument, the hon. Member for North Cornwall will understand my position. We want to get rid of the scams through good law. We accept in principle the Bill's intention and would support a well-drafted measure on home working. However, we are duty bound to consider the detail.

As with every measure that I have examined in detail, the style of drafting terrifies me. Why cannot Bills use simpler English? There is no obstacle to our insisting on updating our legislative language. Many of the "wherefores", dots, commas, cross-references, letters and numbers are unnecessary. I try to read legislation and I find it difficult, so heaven knows how people cope when they pick up a Bill simply to ascertain whether they fall foul of the law.

I found the comments of the hon. Member for Northfield on premium-rate telephone lines difficult to reconcile with the wording of the Bill. I should welcome it if he could identify the clause that applies to those premium lines. Whether a company that sends a fax and asks for replies through a premium-rate fax line—the hon. Gentleman believes that he used such a line this morning—falls foul of the Bill will be a matter for the courts. The Bill lacks the necessary clarity, although the hon. Gentleman believes that it is clear.

The main problem is the breadth of the category that the Bill automatically chooses to criminalise in clauses 2 and 3. Clause 2 makes it a criminal offence to seek or receive

"payment from another person in response to an outworking proposal."

Clause 3 makes it a criminal offence to receive money for providing information about outworking proposals. That may appear innocuous and so simple and obvious that hon. Members believe that it properly tackles the corruption and theft that are the basis of the problem. That may be true in some cases, but it may also catch the good with the bad.

All the speeches that I have heard this morning imply that the main problem is the anonymity of the scam monger and the difficulty of tracing such a person. We have heard that such people use PO box numbers, and that they provide only mobile phone numbers. They can chuck a mobile phone in the river or disconnect at will. It is therefore difficult to track those people.

The best method of tackling the scams and finding the people who are behind them is to require in law that anyone who trades in outworking registers makes available a proper name, address and contact details, and that PO box numbers and mobile phone numbers are not acceptable. No one has presented an argument to show why such a provision, and perhaps a little extra, would not suffice to tackle the problem.

Instead of that simple provision, which would go a long way towards tackling the problem, the Bill criminalises anyone who asks for a little deposit—I shall give possible examples shortly—or makes a charge or even advertises some sort of home working.

I can envisage an idea—touched on by hon. Members on both sides of the House—that one might call a home secretary scheme. By that, I mean a scheme whereby secretaries work at home using modern technology. Many people have a laptop computer in their house. A wife, perhaps looking after a young child, could do a few hours' work a day transcribing, typing or even proofreading a book.

A company, perhaps a publisher, might say to a secretary, "I am going to employ you to proofread documents." They could be instruction manuals for new products, perhaps, or books. The person could then sit at home, receive the documents through the ether on to her computer, do the work and send them back. It would be only fair for the company to say that, for that to work sensibly, the person should have some kind of compatible software. She might have to buy that. Alternatively, she might be required to provide some evidence of training. She might then have to pay to go on a course, for example. Such practices would be outlawed by the Bill. I see the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) shaking her head; perhaps she would like to tell me why. I also seek assurances from the Minister—I am sure that, if they exist, he will be well briefed enough to provide them.

There are possible problems that have not yet been envisaged. Decent schemes that are perfectly legitimate and above board, and that would benefit home workers, might require the transfer of money to get them started—to prime them, in some way. Such schemes might find themselves trapped and outlawed by the Bill. That would be a pity because that would be worse, in some ways, than getting rid of the problem that the Bill is trying to address.

If we were to find that the unintended consequences of this Bill were to reduce and, in some cases, forbid the kind of work that suits the way in which people in the modern world want to work—and the kind of work that we want to encourage—we should have done a bad thing. I cannot see sufficient exclusions and exemptions in the Bill to address that concern. We might find that, rather

than having a Bill that outlawed home-working scams, we had a Bill that outlawed home working. That would be a disgrace to the procedures of the House.

We cannot envisage every eventuality. I can, however, think of one example. Hon. Members might think it is absurd, but at least it is close to home. Let us imagine an advertisement that states: "There is a life out there in which you can earn up to £50,000 a year. You will be very important in life in the future. All you have to do is send £1,000 deposit to the returning officer." There could be an exclusion in the Bill that will ensure that trading standards officers will not stop the next general election. However, that is an example of someone applying for a job—it could be called outworking--who has to submit money in advance. There are probably much better examples.

Mr. Forth: Does my hon. Friend believe that the 650 or so other Members who are not here today are doing some kind of outworking instead of being here at Westminster where they should be?

Mr. Duncan: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It could be said that this is where we should be doing most of our work, and that our constituency work could be described as outworking.

Given that the Bill has so much Government support—indeed, it has been drafted by the Government—and that it has, quite reasonably, been taken off the shelf by the hon. Member for Northfield, it has attracted only a handful of Labour Members to the debate. However, numbers count in this House.

I was drawing a parallel between working at home as a secretary and standing for election. My point was that we cannot see so clearly into the future that we can predict who might get caught by the Bill. That is always the danger of legislation.

Mr. Maclean: Clause 1(2)(b) describes the exemptions. However, they are merely those

"of a description specified by the Secretary of State by order".

That is all that we know at the moment. The explanatory notes to the Bill state that the Secretary of State will exempt cases if he thinks that they are legitimate and might genuinely benefit workers. All we have from the Government is a suggestion that those categories of home workers that might be included or excluded are ones that the Secretary of State or his civil servants might think it beneficial to include or exclude. That is not good enough for legislation.

Mr. Duncan: My right hon. Friend hits on an important point. If the exclusions are to come before the House only by order, will the Minister say whether they will be descriptions of particular categories or ad hominem exclusions—that is to say, by named company? Will not that effectively amount to an approval process whereby a company seeking an exclusion will have to wait for the Secretary of State to put before the House an order stating that its proposed method of working is legitimate, even though it may be clear that everything it wants to do is legitimate?

Anyone who believes that he will work within the law can set up a company, employ people, trade and make a profit. However, under new Labour, we may suddenly create a category of commerce for which permission and a statutory instrument are required before concerns can go about their lawful commercial business. That amounts to a pre-approval process unparalleled in any other area of commercial activity. Perhaps the Minister will tell the House what exclusions he envisages and how regularly he will have to amend and adapt such exclusions to keep up with an ever-changing world.

All that gives rise to a fundamental concern about the Bill and returns us to the point about social justice that both sides of the argument have tried to address. Unlike most legislation—unlike all legislation, I would like to think—the Bill contains a presumption of guilt. It assumes that anyone who might seek prepayment is guilty and that anyone who might advertise is guilty of wanting to set up a scam. That is upside down legislation.

If people do not conform to certain criteria and are proved to be administering a scam, we should get 'em and get 'em hard. However, the Bill suggests that there is a certain method of doing business that, in all cases, would be deemed to be criminal even though the Government and many Labour Members accept that much of what is going on is not criminal, deceitful or corrupt. We may criminalise the good—arguably, criminalise the majority—to catch the bad.

The Bill would be better legislation that properly tried to address a problem that we all want solved if it took a different approach. It should define what is bad about the effects of such scams on individuals sufficiently to provide that those who overstep the boundaries would fall foul of the law and that there would be powers to stop them. However, it would criminalise people who could be doing something perfectly proper, decent and beneficial. It is a pity that a lot of the good could be caught up in the bad.

Assumption of guilt is questionable as a principle of legislation. The methodology is questionable, but the purpose laudable. Conservative Members support the purpose, but there are severe questions about the legislative detail. Ideally, a proper consumer Bill containing trading standards measures to address the issue properly, honestly and fairly would be introduced, although I accept that we will not get that from the new Labour Government, who have failed to deliver a lot of what they promised.

12.9 pm

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): I, too, am pleased to sponsor the Bill. When I asked my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) what subject he might choose, I was surprised when he suggested home working and outworking, as no constituency cases have been brought to my attention. I know two people who are involved in home working. One is a woman who used to live in the flat below mine and did sewing work at home. I knew that that work had come from a factory owner, who was not really exploiting her. He may not have been paying her very well, but no scam was involved. The other employer was someone I know who produces a great many embroidery kits. Embroidery is a popular activity, and many people work for him at home; he, too, pays his workers well. Those cases would not be caught by the Bill, because in neither case has there been a demand for money in advance, followed by a rejection of the work on spurious grounds.

[Judy Mallaber]

As I had encountered no bad cases myself, I wondered what the Bill was about. However, once I had talked to trading standards officers in my area, Derbyshire, I realised why no cases had been referred to me. The fact is that the scams often require relatively small sums from a large number of individuals. The operators feel that they can rely on complaints not being made, and on the loss being written off to a bad experience. As my hon. Friend the Member for Northfield said, many people just see themselves as mugs and feel that they were stupid to be taken in. John Logan, who was caught by one of the many scams of Simon Stepsys of Win-Star Direct in Cheshire—who, having been caught out by the Office of Fair Trading, had to make a "voluntary" statement that he would not continue his scams—produced a cogent account of his experience. He said:

"After a protracted delay, I received the material and eagerly opened the envelope. My hopes were high. After all, I wasn't looking to get rich, just earn a few extra quid. It took about all of thirty seconds to realise that I was just another mug!"

John Logan did not make a complaint. He just felt stupid, tore up the material and chucked it in the bin. It is because many people react in the same way that cases are not referred to us, and stronger legislation is needed.

Derbyshire's trading standards department tells me that, although the complaints it has received represent only the tip of the iceberg because most people feel too stupid to say anything and the sums involved are often small—though they add up to a huge amount—it received 38 complaints in the last financial year alone. I want to mention three of those scams, because I think that the more variety we see, the easier it will be for us to identify the problem with which we must deal.

The first example involves a Derbyshire resident who replied to an advertisement for extras in films and television. I do not think that such advertisements have been mentioned so far. Such work sounds rather glamorous, and people would not necessarily be considered gullible for taking up the offer—not in Derbyshire, anyway. Nearly everyone in my area knows someone who has been an extra in "Peak Practice", my local TV soap. Alastair, my constituency party chair's son, gave a brilliant performance in a recent episode of "Peak Practice". We also have Chatsworth house, which is always seeking extras for the various films made there. The scam was therefore quite plausible, but, having paid a £10 registration fee, the consumer received no offers of work as an extra at Chatsworth or in "Peak Practice". He did not receive the regular newsletter; indeed, he did not receive anything. Eventually, he was told that the trader had moved, and a new telephone number was given. The number, of course, did not exist, and the trader had disappeared.

Sometimes people are found out. My second example involves an advertisement for work printing envelopes, which is quite common. Consumers had to pay a £35 fee, and a £110 fee for every 250 envelopes mailed was promised; but the consumer had to supply her own materials, including stamps. The materials cost about £135. Although the printed result was of good quality, payment was refused on the ground that the quality was not of the standard required. In that case intervention by a consumer adviser worked and the consumer received a full refund, but it is the exception rather than the rule.

Another Derbyshire resident saw an advertisement for a home worker scheme involving making pottery cottages, and sent off £36 for the kit. He thought that he would receive four moulds and enough plaster and paint to make 40 cottages. On opening the kit he found that the materials were of very poor quality, and that the quantity was only enough to make about 10 cottages. He felt that he had been misled and asked for a full refund. He is still waiting for that, but he knows that the person involved in the scam could be caught by such legislation.

There are many examples; others have been quoted. Once we start to think about it, we will all remember seeing the amazing headlines, including on the internet. There is a good list of examples on the Office of Fair Trading website. It points out the things that people should look out for when they see a scam on the internet or in an advertisement: capital letters that shout at them; words such as "The secrets of guaranteed success"; vague references and so on. It warns against advertisements that say, "This is not a scam." It probably is. Promises are made of instant wealth and easy money. We have all seen such advertisements.

I have heard no hon. Member say that he or she approves of the scams; obviously, no one does. Indeed, Conservative Members, although querying how the legislation is framed, have made it clear they do not support the scams, so why do they not support the Bill? The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) said that he wanted to deal with those cases and supported the purpose of the Bill, and other Conservative Members have opposed the scams. They have made a number of detailed points, which should be considered in Committee. I appeal to them to put their votes where their mouth is and to support the principle of the Bill.

That is the whole point of a Second Reading debate: to gain support for the principle of a Bill, and then the details of the legislation can be argued about in Committee. I urge Conservative Members to support the Bill.

The scams prey on the vulnerable. People are not necessarily gullible or taken in. The scams are often plausible. We should give the Bill a Second Reading so that it can then go into Committee, where the detail can be looked at. I hope that hon. Members will support it today.

12.17 pm

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): I am pleased to be here to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) on introducing the Bill. It has been an interesting and welcome debate on an important and, often, distressing issue. I am pleased to confirm that the Government support the Bill.

Hon. Members will know that we have been considering the need for action on bogus home working schemes for some time. We raised the matter in the White Paper entitled "Modern Markets: Confident Consumers", from which a number of right hon. and hon. Members have quoted. In the DTI, we have discussed the matter with the agencies involved, including the National Group on Homeworking, which does an excellent job, providing advice on home working and guiding people against such scams—I am sure that it would be only too pleased to have the support of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)—the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, representatives of consumers,

business interests, including small employers, and associations with members in the franchising and direct-selling sectors.

We know that there is widespread disgust about the scams. We have heard that from all quarters this morning. It is a positive step that we have this opportunity to legislate against the scams and to make life a lot tougher for the rogues behind them.

I am pleased that the Bill will extend to the whole of the United Kingdom. I know that Ministers in the devolved Administrations have expressed support for taking action. It is a good thing that those measures will be able to be enforced throughout the UK from the same day. It is good to see the devolution arrangements working. I am pleased to say that the Scottish Parliament has voted that the measure be extended to Scotland.

In supporting the Bill, the Government are mindful of the human rights implications. I am sure that the House will want to note that I have taken advice and consider the Bill to be compatible with the European convention on human rights.

The Bill provides an opportunity to close down some of the most scurrilous scams that prey on vulnerable people, whether they are consumers or prospective employees. The stories that we have heard, both today and in our own constituencies, about outworking proposals are often quite despicable and chilling. I am sure that it would chill even the hard heart of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, who espouses the virtues of the free market and the anarchic society, to hear of the cynical way in which the organisers of those scams exploit people. They set out deliberately to woo the low-paid and the vulnerable and raise their expectations by promising work that they can do easily and in their own time and for which they can expect a decent income.

There is not the faintest chance that the home worker will benefit from the scams that we have heard about today. Initially, the home worker stands to lose perhaps £20 or £50. If the scam is convincing and workers believe that it is their own fault that their work has been rejected, they may part with further payments in an attempt to make good the defective goods or to secure different work. The exploitation by those rogues not only of people's pockets, but of their vulnerability and, in some cases, low self-esteem, calls for action by those of us with responsibility to protect the vulnerable in our society.

I am cheered to hear the House's commitment on the issue and support for the Bill. I was also glad to hear the constructive remarks of the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), who said that he is determined to do something to stamp out the scams. I am sure that he will be interested to know that we have received many letters from other Opposition Members about the scams.

Mr. Forth: Where are they?

Dr. Howells: I just happen to have a few examples.

Mr. Forth: Where are my colleagues?

Dr. Howells: I cannot say why the right hon. Gentleman's colleagues are not in the Chamber. I am here; he is here; that should be enough, I suppose. We have, however, received letters from the hon. Members for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley), for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page), for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth), for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser), for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) and from other hon. Members. Hon. Members on both sides of the House are concerned about the issue.

Let me address some of the issues raised in the debate. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) made a very thoughtful and very good speech. He highlighted the way in which the scams affect some of the poorest and most vulnerable of our citizens. He specifically dealt with carers and those who retire early. That is an important aspect of the issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) highlighted the valuable part that home working can play in the lives of those who want to work for a living but may not have the confidence to step outside their front doors to find it. Many people are in that position and it is an important aspect of the issue. She also dealt with the way in which gangsters—which is what they are—target those who may have those problems. She gave us some vivid examples of scams for which the law currently provides inadequate remedies, making it difficult to prosecute the perpetrators as easily and effectively as they should be prosecuted.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-East (Mr. Hamilton) described internet sites that use premium telephone lines without permission. He also gave examples of the variety of possible scams and described how the Bill might help to close them down more quickly by improving detection and enforcement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy), who is a member of the Trading Standards Institute, gave us the benefit of her expertise. She highlighted the cynical way in which crooks target people with perhaps low levels of literacy and with low self-esteem. She made the point that the scams increase people's exclusion from society.

I always enjoy speeches by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst and I have always admired his stand for liberty. I also share his anarchic views. I believe that we have far too much government and far too many laws that, as the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton said, are incomprehensible to most people. I quite agree with that.

Mr. Forth: But.

Dr. Howells: There is no but. *[Laughter.]* I refuse to use the word.

Mr. Tyler: Try "however."

Dr. Howells: Certainly not.

The refrain of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst about standing up against the gradual decline of society into a nanny state should be measured against the protection that is afforded by the Bill. He would not agree that these gangsters and rogues should be allowed to continue to perpetrate their crimes. We should not rationalise their behaviour as the good work of job creators. That is precisely what they are not; they cast a stain across good employers and good companies. We are concerned about that, as is the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton.

[Dr. Howells]

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor), who gave us the benefit of his experience as an outworker and stressed how important it is to differentiate between the honest companies, which provide a valuable service to those who want to work, and the crooks, who give the whole sector a bad name.

Mr. Maclean: How will the Government differentiate between them in clause 1(2)(b)?

Dr. Howells: I will answer that when I come to the points raised by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton, whose resolve to co-operate in reducing the opportunities available to crooks to practise their deceit and corruption I welcome.

The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton asked how we could ensure that good companies do not get captured unnecessarily by the Bill. First, genuine home working providers do not ask for advance pay-outs. Franchise agreements or direct-selling arrangements are excluded from the Bill. The Bill provides for exclusion powers by the Secretary of State if any other legitimate arrangements develop. As the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton said, markets and delivery systems are changing, and almost before the ink is dry on the page, someone is operating a different scam. That is why we need flexibility.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the Minister for what I think were his kind comments about some of what I said. However, he has just said that genuine home-working businesses cannot, would not or could not ask for an advance payment. Can the Minister envisage no circumstances in which someone with a genuinely good new idea might not legitimately ask those who want to participate to share in the risk and contribute upfront? Can the Minister not even contemplate that?

Dr. Howells: The Minister certainly can contemplate that, which is why I stressed the exclusions in the Bill. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton asked whether the exclusions would be by company or by sector; they would be by sector.

The Bill provides that certain types of arrangements are not outworking proposals, and such arrangements are excluded from the Bill. Employment agencies and businesses are already governed by legislative controls under the Employment Agencies Act 1973. A proposal made in the course of such business does not come within the ambit of the Bill.

Genuine business opportunities are excluded from the Bill under clause 1(3). I repeat that that exclusion will be by category. These include franchise arrangements, when a deposit or upfront fee is required to protect the business when a new participant joins, and direct selling, when a deposit may be required to secure catalogues or sample kits to demonstrate the goods to be sold.

The need for this express exclusion stems from the definition of an outworking proposal in clause 1. The relevant part of the definition relates to a holding out that work will be provided in return for advance payment and that the person undertaking the work will be paid for it. The person paying for the work does not have to be the provider of the work. The provider of the work will not always be the proposer, of course. If the definition of an outworking proposal was any narrower than it is in clause 1, it might not catch some outworking scams. However, it is not the intention of the Bill to catch legitimate business arrangements that provide the participant with the opportunity to earn an income by generating work for himself. In such a case, the worker expects to make money as a result of his efforts from payments for goods or services by his customers and not the suppliers of the goods or the franchises.

In this case, the customer who is paying for the goods or service provided could be another person under clause 1. That would mean that an opportunity provided through direct selling or under a franchise agreement could be caught by the Bill. To ensure that that does not happen, we have excluded such activities under clause 1(3). If there are other genuine business practices that are not excluded from the outset, a case can be made for their exclusion under the Secretary of State's power in clause 1.

My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber) dealt clearly with the impact on individuals who have been conned by crooks into parting with their money. She pointed out something that I thought very interesting, which was repeated by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst. She said that most people just feel like a mug when they realise that they have been conned. They have lost their money, and that is it. I would like to use that to illustrate my next point.

We had a little flurry in the debate about the cost-effectiveness of this type of legislation. Very often, crimes are small in terms of value. However, I am sure that everyone agrees that even when crimes are just a nuisance—a small window is smashed or the wing mirror is ripped off a car—we nevertheless believe that the police or the enforcement authorities have a role to play in ensuring that the public are protected from such activities.

Mr. Tyler: As the Minister is referring to cost-effectiveness, will he underline the statement in the explanatory notes produced by his Department that some 103,000 people seem to have been conned in this way out of a sum that could be as much as £6.5 million? Is that not the figure that we should be holding on to, rather than the misleading figures given by right hon. and hon. Members?

Dr. Howells: Absolutely. The Bill will provide for the scams to be closed down. It is true that we can expect more investigations and that that will be an added cost. Once the scams are under control—in the first year, I hope—the cost to the public sector will start to reduce. Indeed, we expect there to be savings in the long run, compared with the time and effort involved in carrying through prosecutions under the current legislation. That is an important matter; trading standards departments always complain about the expense under the existing law.

In a recent trading standards case in Wolverhampton, a scam had to be monitored for nine months so that a case could be brought under the Trade Descriptions Act 1968. The £35,000 referred to earlier was simply an illustration of how much money was lost by the 800 people who complained to the National Group on Homeworking. There are many more complaints.

Investigations by trading standards officers into scams reveal that any one scam can profit by anything from £500,000 to £1 million. In a recent case under

investigation, what we could call a medium-sized scam has netted £600,000 in six months. That is a lot of money, and with 300 or more scams operating at any one time, consumer detriment could be substantial.

We have had a long and useful debate, and we have started to examine the material in some detail. The Bill is important and worthwhile; I recommend it to hon. Members and invite them to support it.

12.35 pm

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): This has been an interesting Bill and we have had a wide-ranging discussion on it. No Member on either side of the House approves of criminality. I take the Minister's point that even if a car aerial is snapped off—especially if it is our own car aerial—we would want the police to investigate and call out the full fingerprinting squad, take DNA samples and so on. I would feel so outraged that I would want the whole works.

In reality, however, the police response to such an incident will not be quite so dramatic as it would be to murder and other serious crimes, for which they rightly pull out all the stops, at enormous cost.

We need to put into perspective both the losses that have been mentioned in the context of the Bill and the costs of enforcing it. However, costs should not be the be all and end all. The mere fact that it may cost £350,000 to enforce the Bill in the first year does not in itself justify not passing it. It may have merits, although to me the enforcement costs seem prohibitive by comparison with any gain.

We must also consider whether the Bill is tackling the right target, and whether, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) said from the Front Bench, the good may be swept up with the bad. Labour Members and the Department of Trade and Industry received complaints about scams and other crooked activity, and decided that something had to be done. Rather than trying to tighten existing law, they decided to create a whole new separate offence that would be easier to use, with more draconian penalties, to catch everyone advertising such businesses.

Then people realised that that would tend to sweep up the good with the bad, and had to build into the Bill, in clause 1(2), some exemptions. Exemptions may fall within subsection (3), or they may be

"made in the course of the business of an employment agency or employment business."

I am content with those, but one of my main concerns, and one of the reasons why I think that the Bill is drafted from the wrong end of the spectrum, is that exemptions may also be activities

"of a description specified by the Secretary of State by order".

The Minister has just said that there are sectors that the Government would wish to exempt. As I understand it, that would cover operations such as the Kay's catalogue business. A person—possibly a woman—will respond to an advertisement in a women's magazine and send £25 in advance for a thick, glossy catalogue full of clothes, shoes and household goods. Then she will get commission for the goods that she sells on to her friends.

That seems a perfectly legitimate type of business. One may think that 25 quid for the catalogue is expensive, but it may not be, if that is a route into doing legitimate business with the catalogue company. I presume that there will be an order to exempt such businesses, because the Government have spotted them, and are ready to exempt them as the legislation comes into force.

The difficulty for the Government and the House is that, fortunately, we live in a society in which—aided by the internet these days—highly innovative people come up with radical business proposals every day of the week. Luckily, as the background notes and the Library paper point out, most of those business proposals—the new methods of shopping or selling—are perfectly legitimate and honest. However, of course, on the back of them will come the fly boys and the crooks who see an opportunity to do something bent.

Mr. Forth: I am sure that my right hon. Friend will come to my point, but in case he does not, would he admit of the following fact? If someone with a bright idea set up a new business, having asked for proper financial participation, but the business then failed quite quickly and that legitimate entrepreneur was unable to make the payments that he had hoped to make, he too would be trapped by the measure.

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was about to make that point.

It is all very well in the case of activities that the Government have already spotted; for the sake of simplicity, let us call them the Kay's-catalogue-type businesses. The DTI knows that they already exist, so the Government can exempt that sector. However, I bet that, at this very moment, legitimate business men and women are coming up with new ideas and inventions to get money from the public for a legitimate business activity. They may want that money as a deposit or as some form of payment in advance—partly to show the good intent of the person who wants to participate and partly to pay the costs of the new catalogue or business venture.

The trouble with the Bill is that such payments could be illegal if the business does not fall within one of the Government's clearly defined sectors—those sectors that they have anticipated. How on earth can the Government anticipate business opportunities? That would be to go back to the dear old Wedgwood Benn days at the Ministry of Technology—spotting all those wonderful ideas and backing them with millions of pounds. Legislation introduced under this measure would have to anticipate the ideas that business men and women will come up with so as to exempt them in advance.

A simple illustration of that point is that, if I came up with a business idea that I wanted to sell on to people, and then distributed brochures, took out advertising and invited payment, I should have committed an offence. The only solution that the Minister can offer is to say, "Ah, but if you then go to the Secretary of State and he is satisfied, the Government can make that one of the exempted sectors". However, the trouble is that the offence has already been committed.

At present, there is a perfect example of that in Sunderland, where we can see how reasonable trading standards officers are. I am sure that trading standards departments would not prosecute people who explained that their venture was a new, legitimate business activity for which they were sure the Secretary of State would grant them an exemption. We face the real possibility that

[Mr. Maclean]

genuine, innocent people, who are not crooked at all, will have committed an offence. Technically, they will be guilty, because they will not have been exempted by the Secretary of State.

Mr. Forth: Is the matter not worse than my right hon. Friend suggests? Are they not the same Labour Government who say that they support new business and small business and encourage new, small enterprises? I suspect that the DTI has hundreds, if not thousands, of civil servants whose whole life is dedicated to those purposes. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is odd that, at the very least, the Bill is likely to snuff out, suffocate, or prevent legitimate new businesses arising in the very sectors on which we are relying for future employment?

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. Friend is, as usual, right. I suggest that it is even worse than that. It is not that the measure will suffocate and snuff out businesses—although it certainly will do that—but that it will criminalise some people who have a wonderful business idea. I am not talking about the crooks; they have always been entrepreneurs, one step ahead, no matter which Government Department—the Home Office or others—is trying to crack down on criminal activity. With today's resources—computers and the internet—crooks will always be one step ahead.

The business men and women who come up with new ideas are not going to wait a few months to check out the rules and regulations—they have their idea; the brochures are printed and they are out there trying to sell the concept. When they do that, they will find that a trading standards officer comes to them and says, "Look, you are advertising. That is a straightforward offence under the legislation, and it is not in one of the exempted categories. You are not producing the Forth home shopping catalogue"—a rival to Kay's, Mr. Deputy Speaker—"and it is an activity which has not been exempted by the Secretary of State. So, irrespective of the fact that you have just retired from the police service after many years of distinguished service as a superintendent and you are as honest as the day is long, it is an activity that you ignorantly did not know was not exempted. You are therefore guilty of an offence."

I am not sure that the DTI has checked with the Home Office on dealing with this problem. I know that before the Bill will have gone to the "leg." committee, it will have been passed around other Government Departments. I suspect that the Home Office will have concerned itself merely with the level of the fine. It may have said that level 5 on the standard scale is too high, and that it should be level 4, or it may have said that it can live with it because it is within the normal parameters. The Home Office being the guardians of the sacred cow of the criminal law, it will have checked.

The DTI should have told the Home Office that it had a problem with criminality and wished to tackle the crooks who were defrauding the system and advertising deliberately to con people into sending off money for a non-existent service. The Theft Act 1968 makes it an offence to make off without paying for goods, to go into a restaurant and make off without paying, or to obtain goods and services by deception. The activities that we are discussing amount to obtaining goods and services by deception.

I suspect that Home Office lawyers would have tackled that by drafting legislation to deal with the fraud. It would have made anyone who fraudulently or knowingly advertised a service that had no legitimate value or benefit guilty of an offence. The legislation would have tackled the crooks committing the fraud or deception. I suspect that that would have been the standard, legal, Home Office way of going about it.

Unfortunately, the DTI has taken the trading standards mentality route. It wanted to catch the 5 per cent. of the people involved in home working or goods and services who were crooks. It believed that the easiest way was to impose a blanket ban on all advertising of home-working services. So no one in the country will be allowed to advertise any home-working service for which people have to put payment up front. The DTI decided that that would catch everyone, and believed that it would get the crooks, and that it would then build in exceptions. The Secretary of State would say that anyone who advertised for money up front for services would be guilty under the law—except the ones that the Government had anticipated, for whom the Secretary of State would build in an exemption.

Mr. Forth: While my right hon. Friend is on the subject of the Home Office, and can give us the benefit of his vast experience of it, will he think—perhaps not now, but as he develops his remarks—about whether simpler, civil remedies might be available to people who feel that they have been sufficiently exploited in the way that Labour Members suggest? Perhaps they could take the person who has committed the offences to court. Perhaps there is a way to assist them using existing legal redress rather than introducing a ghastly Bill such as this.

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. Friend could be on to a good point there. I do not want to go too far down that route. I suggest that the Government have looked down the wrong end of the telescope. This Bill and other Bills could improve access to civil remedies. That could be a better solution than new criminal penalties. We could make it easier for the so-called little people of the world to get access to court to get their money back, or to take collective action against the crooks.

Where people are engaged in criminal activity, there has to be a criminal sanction. I have no problem with that. If people are fraudulently advertising goods and services that do not exist, as they seem to be, and are ripping people off, they should be prosecuted somehow or other and suffer penalties, whether it is £5,000 or some other amount. I shall wish to move an amendment on Report to make such scams an indictable offence if we are dealing with a more serious crime.

If one chap's scam took in £600,000, it is a pretty big scam and level 5 on the standard scale could apply. Admittedly, the fine could be imposed for every offence, so if 1,000 people gave money and there are 1,000 charges against the person involved and he is fined £5,000 for each charge, that could be a substantial sum. I presume that the magistrates court would have the authority to pass the case to the Crown court for sentence. We will wish to explore that matter on Report.

Provision should be made for an indictable offence in cases involving such a high level of criminality. I shall not go into detail about that today. It would be inappropriate to do so, but I can envisage amendments and possibly a new clause being tabled on Report. Trading standards officers might have confiscation powers. After all, their warehouses might be full of all the hamburger carts that they have confiscated in the metropolitan parks during the past year, but they should have space for some of the documentation, as well as the other goods, that they might confiscate from the scammers.

There is another weakness in the Bill—at least, I assume it is a weakness in the Bill, but it does not say much about the matter. Again, the weakness relates to clause 1(2)(b), which refers to

"a description specified by the Secretary of State".

The weakness is in the explanatory notes that the Government have published. They state:

"Possible categories of proposals for exemption would need to be considered on a case by case basis and their exclusion would need to be justified."

Mr. Forth: More bureaucracy.

Mr. Maclean: It is not just bureaucracy. I make the point for the last time: if people have set up a little business and issued leaflets, saying "Send me 10 quid"—perhaps for a new idea, a new internet guide to home shopping, or whatever—they have already committed the offence, so it is difficult to say that the Department will consider that on a case-by-case basis. Those involved will already be guilty.

Mr. Forth: I hate to disagree with my right hon. Friend, but surely people will be advised not to set up such a business until they have got clearance from the bureaucracy, and the entrepreneurs will take the risk if they do not get it. That is why I want to make it clear to my right hon. Friend that that will stifle business. Following his own logic, surely those who want to set up a new business will have to go through some ghastly DTI bureaucracy and their proposals may even need to receive the signature of the Secretary of State, or the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs, before they dare set up their little businesses.

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. Friend is right for those who know about such matters—those who ask business links, the latest name of such things, or any of the other county-based industrial start-up schemes how they can get help or funding from the board or the various Government agencies. Those organisations will say, "Hang on, this is an outworking idea and it's not within the parameters that the Secretary of State has described." In that case, the people will have to apply to the Secretary of State, describing and justifying their ideas. The explanatory notes state that, if the Secretary of State thinks the proposal

"legitimate and would genuinely benefit workers",

he may grant permission for it and introduce an order, and, one day, the House may find time to pass the order and the little chap can then set up his business.

My right hon. Friend is right to say that those entrepreneurs who know that such things are prohibited by law will have to go through the bureaucracy to ask a Government advisory quango and to get permission. However, the House should be concerned about the individual with an honest, legitimate business who does not know about that and ends up with a criminal record for no good reason, simply because a catch-all measure has been included to wipe out some crooks.

I am concerned that the Bill puts the onus on the Government and the Secretary of State to decide what is lawful and what is legitimate. I am suggesting, inadequately, that the Bill should be drafted differently so that the courts determine such matters. The Bill should set out an offence of fraud or deception, so that anyone who advertises with the intention of deceiving people into sending money is guilty of that offence. Then the trading standards officers can round up anyone they like and let the court decide whether the activity is crooked or legitimate.

We should not substitute the Government's judgment for that of the courts or magistrates. The Government will make the judgment—in advance, we hope, but often post event—not on an individual who is tried, but on whether a business is legitimate and would "genuinely benefit workers". How is the Department to decide that?

If the election goes badly for me and I find myself seeking other activity—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear"]—I know that I would have hon. Members' support in finding honest employment. If I answer an advertisement in the Labour party paper asking me to send in £25 for a pack that one day may lead to my being selected as a candidate, I may conclude that that would genuinely benefit me, but the Bill says that the Government should decide what is of genuine benefit to home workers.

Of course, we must protect people from criminality, but there may be a wide range of views on what is of benefit. Some people would not work at home for less than £10 an hour, but others would be willing to work for £5, £4, £2 or even 50p an hour. We might all agree that working for so little is scandalous and wrong, but the individual has the right to decide. Why should the Government decide what is best for people who choose to work in their own homes?

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend has talked almost exclusively in terms of rates per hour. Does he not agree that piecework is more common? In passing, does he think that the minimum wage will ever bite on that? More importantly, does he agree that some of the information technology applications may move way beyond anything as mundane as a rate per hour, or even piecework, and into a new sphere and era altogether?

Mr. Maclean: Indeed. For some of the work that is done on computers, it would be nonsense to pay a rate per hour. There will be a new, sophisticated method of piecework, calculating, for example, the number of letters processed or addresses entered, although with mailmerge systems—with which I am sure my right hon. Friend is entirely familiar—I am not sure what rate may be payable. Neither I nor anyone in the Government knows what the correct payment system is. We can all say that rates are too low or that somebody is a mug for agreeing a certain term of contract, but if the individual is content to work in that way, it is not right that the Government should intervene.

I am concerned about the phrase "genuinely benefits workers" in the explanatory notes, and about the fact that the activities to be excluded are to be

"specified by the Secretary of State by order".

[Mr. Maclean]

There is a huge grey area.

I want to register my disapproval of the way in which the Bill is drafted. I have no problems whatever with tackling crooks or with hitting and punishing them hard. I have made that point time and again. I took the same view when I was a Minister of State at the Home Office and the then Conservative Government had to force through legislation against the wishes of the Labour Opposition, who objected when we introduced tougher sentences and said "three strikes and you're out", and so on.

I am, therefore, a great believer in tough penalties, but I also believe in not inflicting them on people who are genuinely innocent. That is the danger of the Bill; but it is not merely a matter of considering the detail in Committee. As long as the Bill omits offences on knowingly deceiving and fraud, I do not think that it can be improved in Committee. All that hon. Members can do when it goes upstairs is to try to force the Secretary of State to spell out more of the exempted categories and sectors. Perhaps we could suggest the use of advertising to prevent innocent individuals from being caught unawares, but it is clear that the Bill tackles the problems from the wrong end of the spectrum.

My only other point concerns the schedule, on which my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) commented. He correctly said that it was one of the most important aspects of the Bill, but he skipped over paragraph 1(2), which states:

"An enforcement authority must enforce this Act within its area."

I think that I know what the Government mean by that, as they ensured in paragraph 1(1) that

"every local weights and measures authority in Great Britain is the enforcement authority for its area",

and that

"the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Northern Ireland is the enforcement authority for Northern Ireland."

What they are trying to say, therefore, is that the enforcement authority will be responsible for enforcement in its relevant area. Instead, however, the Bill states that an enforcement authority "must enforce this Act".

I do not think that I have ever encountered legislation that imposes a "must" instead of a "may" obligation on an authority in respect of enforcement. Of course, authorities will want to enforce the Bill, but they may decide in some circumstances that it is not legitimate to take action. The Bill seems to remove that discretionary power. If an authority thinks that a case that has been reported to it is not legitimate or not worth the candle, does the requirement that it "must enforce this Act" mean that it must none the less enforce the legislation in respect of that case?

That terminology is slightly odd and should be explored in more detail. For example, what about the Nigerian letters that we all receive from people who claim to be former politicians or to have run Nigerian oil companies? An hon. Member—or, indeed, any member of the public—could report the scam to a trading standards authority in the belief that it is one of the worst matters and should be tackled. The writers of such letters claim to have salted away £30 million and tell us that they would kindly deposit a few million pounds in our bank accounts if only they could have the details. All hon. Members have received such letters, but none of us, to my knowledge, has yet responded; we have not been mugs, nor have we been caught out. However, some people are caught out. Indeed, I hear sometimes from constituents who have responded to the letters, which are a scam. I hope that nobody is stupid enough to give bank account details or to pay out any money.

Somebody, however, might report the scam to a trading standards authority in the belief that it should be caught by the Bill. After all, it involves the sending out of a letter in advance and a request for the payment of money up front in return for a benefit—in this case, a share of £30 million stolen from a Nigerian oil company. The trading standards authority may rightly say, "We do not think that that's included; it's not worth the candle to chase it, as we'll never catch these people." That may apply even if the senders are based in London and are officially registered in this country.

According to the Bill, however, an enforcement authority

"must enforce this Act within its area."

Does that mean that an authority that receives such a request will have lost the discretion to refuse it and will have to take action in every case? That point should be further explored.

Mr. Forth: Another possibility occurs to me as my right hon. Friend develops his interesting argument. The measure may drive the people to whom he refers off shore. If its jurisdiction is in the United Kingdom, those responsible for the undesirable activities may be tempted to go to the Republic of Ireland or across the channel to France to ensure that they are beyond the reach of our excellent trading standards officers. They would still be able to persuade people to part with their money.

Mr. Maclean: Perhaps we could table a new clause to deal with that on Report or explore it in Committee.

My right hon. Friend skipped over some of the enforcement powers. He believed that some were draconian and others were not strong enough. However, we will need to spend some time considering the definition of premises in Committee if the Bill gets there. I propose to vote against it today because I do not believe that it can be improved in Committee. It will inevitably reach a Committee because of the Government's majority, and we must therefore consider premises.

The schedule states:

"'premises' includes any place (including any vehicle, ship or aircraft) but does not include premises used only as a dwelling."

Once a case gets to court, it can be ascertained whether a place is "only a dwelling" or a business. Some places have a mixed purpose. How will enforcement officers know that in advance? Many of the individuals with whom we are dealing will not have an office suite; they will conduct their business from home. All Members of Parliament are, in some ways, running businesses from home. We may have constituency offices, but I bet that most of us have computers. Even if we do not, we have a telephone, an index, some books and paperwork at home to deal with some our business as Members of Parliament.

Most of the people we are considering, except some big scams runners and crooks who have set up an office or a PO box address, use their homes. They may have a few

forms, a little paperwork and a computer. Such premises would not be "only a dwelling." Those buildings, which are 99 per cent. domestic, can be invaded by trading standards officers on the basis that people keep some paperwork there and that they must, therefore, be commercial premises.

What will turn domestic premises into non-domestic premises under the Bill? If the building contains an office, it is probably not domestic premises. Does the presence of a telephone for dealing with business move the premises into another category? If a person has a few books, and a couple of receipt books, or keeps a box of advertising notices under a bed, does the building become joint business and domestic premises? We need to know.

We also need to know how trading standards officers will make a judgment in advance before they start knocking on the doors of private individuals, saying, "Aha, you've got a telephone and you're using it for business. You're therefore caught by the Act. Your house is not purely a domestic dwelling." I am surprised that my right hon. Friend, with his learned, meticulous and perspicacious manner of dealing with such Bills, did not spot that point about the schedule.

I have outlined some of my anxieties. I want to make it crystal clear that I have no intention of defending people who are involved in crooked activity. I hate and despise it, and I like such people to be slapped down and put away for a long time, not tagged and released too soon. I do not expect a further response from the Minister; others want to speak about the measure. I simply flag up my concern that the Bill's approach is wrong. We can ensure that we do not catch the innocent only by drafting a different Bill that concentrates on rooting out deception and fraud rather than catching everyone, honest or not, who publishes an advert. I shall vote against the Bill if I have an opportunity of doing that.

1.9 pm

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): It is always a great pleasure to follow the right hon. and erudite Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean). He is very nervous about losing his seat. When he loses it, perhaps he could send a cheque to the Andrew Miller beer and benevolent fund. I am sure that something useful could be done for him if it is not illegal.

I want to make several points to show that the unofficial Opposition have presented some interesting arguments, but that they have argued against themselves. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) referred to the importance of changing technology and the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border elaborated on that. However, that is the very reason it would be impossible to put a specific Bill before the House. An umbrella-type Bill is needed because of the changing technology with which the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border and the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) are familiar.

I have been advising people in this country and abroad about teleworking schemes for many years. If Opposition Members want to read some of the interesting contributions I have made to the international dimension of that subject, I will gladly provide them.

Opposition Members have missed some important points about the Bill. This sector of the work force is potentially massive. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst illustrated the vagueness of the statistics, but there is evidence that up to 22 per cent. of the work force is involved in part-time home working, and the numbers are growing. There is clear evidence of people in this sector being scared off for fear of being caught by the scams operating not only in this country but elsewhere in the world, as the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border pointed out.

From an employer's point of view, productivity gains of between 10 and 60 per cent. have been identified as a result of putting good, well-structured home-working schemes into operation. Those schemes have been supported by a wide range of organisations in the private and public sectors, and have been incredibly successful. For example, if one calls the AA to deal with an emergency breakdown, one is calling an individual worker operating from their own home as part of a call centre network. Important changes in technology allow that to happen. I cannot, even with the best crystal ball available, predict where such technology will take us. We must, therefore, go along the route recommended by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden).

This is a common-sense Bill that will work alongside voluntary arrangements operating in the organised sectors of the economy, such as the teleworking agreements that exist between employers and the Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union. Such partnerships are extremely important. Small employers developing within the teleworking sector should take advice from the Telework, Telecottage and Telecentre Association, which has made a valuable contribution to the wider debate on these issues. We are in a very strong position, and we just need to keep at bay the scams that could deter more people from joining this important sector.

1.13 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I shall not detain the House for long, but I wish to support my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden). I have read the information from the TUC and from my own trade union, the GMB, and listened to the debate today.

I want to draw the House's attention to a case that convinced me of the value of the Bill. It concerns my constituents, Mr. and Mrs. Roffman, who are serial victims of the scams that we have been discussing. They were first conned by Outworkers Direct Ltd. They sent £45 to the company to obtain button-packaging work, and were told that they would get the money back if they applied within 14 days. They applied, but did not get the money back. They came to me and I managed to get them 30 quid back. I thought that that would be the last I would hear of Mr. and Mrs. Roffman.

Unfortunately, they were conned again, this time by a company called Leading Edge Inc., of County Durham. They sent their money off, but did not get the work. The company kept their £35. The couple also had to buy stamps in connection with the job. They then referred me to Select Publications of 377 Edgware road, London W2. They were, however, put on notice by the fact that "Edgware" had been spelt wrongly—with three Es rather than two—and that the telephone number given was nowhere near our local telephone numbers. They brought that to my attention, asking how this could possibly be a legitimate business if it had a Southend phone number and an Edgware road address, and if it could not even spell "Edgware" right.

[Mr. Andrew Dismore]

Seekers UK promised to pay huge amounts for stuffing envelopes. Again, my constituents sent off £25, thinking that the company was genuine because it had an address. However, when they called the number it turned out to be—guess what?—unobtainable. By then, Mr. and Mrs. Roffman were starting to get wise. They wrote to me about Capital Publishing of Leytonstone E11 and asked me to check it out before

"I send £35 which I would willingly do if this was a genuine offer—if not they should be stopped immediately".

I am pleased to say that Mr. and Mrs. Roffman finally accepted my advice to stop sending money to such companies.

Those examples of people being continually conned show how convincing such advertisements can be. My two pensioner constituents sought to eke out their pensions by doing a bit of home work, but, time and again, were conned out of money that they could ill afford to part with. Mr. and Mrs. Roffman wrote to me to say that I should promote a Bill to outlaw such activity, so I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Northfield has the opportunity to do so. I am also pleased to back him wholeheartedly.

1.17 pm

Mr. Burden: With the leave of the House, I shall make a couple of points.

I thank hon. Members on both sides of the House for participating, especially those who support the Bill. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) said that Conservative Front Benchers agree with its purposes, but have reservations about the detail. The detail can be examined; that is the point of considering the Bill in Committee. However, before being debated in Committee, it must be given a Second Reading. Therefore, there is a challenge for Opposition Front Benchers: if they want the issue tackled as they say, the Bill must be given a Second Reading so they are obliged to vote for that.

Other Opposition Members have more principled opposition, and I understand their view. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) said that people who felt that they had been sufficiently exploited should be able to seek civil redress. I do not know his definition of being sufficiently exploited, but £25, £30 or £40 is a lot of money for people on fixed or low incomes, and those who have been stung look to us to help them. We have a choice about whether to do so or not. By voting for Second Reading, we would begin to help them and I invite all hon. Members to join me in the Aye Lobby.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 34, Noes 0.

Division No. 101] **[1.17 pm**

AYES

Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Austin, John
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Chidgey, David
Clwyd, Ann
Cooper, Yvette
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Dowd, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Harris, Dr Evan
Howells, Dr Kim
Jamieson, David
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Mallaber, Judy
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tyler, Paul

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Andrew Miller and Angela Smith.

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and Mr. David Maclean.

It appearing on the report of the Division that 40 Members were not present, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *declared that the Question was not decided, and the business under consideration stood over until the next Sitting of the House.*

Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

1.28 pm

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill allows the production, supply, possession and use of cannabis resin for medicinal purposes. I feel almost apologetic that I am introducing a genuine Back-Bench Bill during the meagre time given to Back-Bench Bills, which successive Governments have treated as their own domain for some years.

The reason for introducing the Bill is that, in 1999, two men were jailed in separate courts in Wales for using cannabis for medicinal purposes. Their motive was not questioned, but that was the law. In 1999, in a similar case, a jury came back to the judge and asked for discretion. The jury said that it did not want to convict a wheelchair-bound, seriously ill man. The judge said:

"You have no choice. Parliament lay down the law. It is up to you to implement the law."

In that case, the jury did not do its historical job of reflecting the common sense of the British people, but convicted.

In the long time since that conviction, no other jury has convicted in a similar prosecution, including one in which a man was accused of supplying cannabis to a co-operative of 40 people. Technically, he had broken the law. The jury, however, acted like most people with common sense would do by refusing to convict him. He was carried from the court on the shoulders of a cheering crowd. The current law on cannabis is an ass.

The Bill in its precise terms has the support of the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee, the Police Foundation—which conducted a study on the matter—a great majority of doctors, the Townswomen's Guild and 105 hon. Members. It also reflects the precise recommendations made in various reports to allow cannabis in its natural state to be prescribed by a limited number of doctors in an unlicensed form to named patients, just as heroin and cocaine are legally prescribed now.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the House was told that the Outworking Bill had the support of 105 hon. Members because they had signed an early-day motion, but that only 34 hon. Members bothered to turn up to support it today? Does he expect that the 105 hon. Members who signed his early-day motion will attend today to support his Bill? What support does he think he has?

Mr. Flynn: I am aware of the realities of the House and the effects of the legislative assassins who infest this place on Friday mornings. Bearing in mind the true situation, I did not put pressure on those hon. Members to attend today. However, I assure the House that they are enthusiastically committed to the Bill.

Mr. Forth: The support is zero.

Mr. Flynn: It is not. Let us take some time to investigate the issue and explore the support.

There may be a quibble about using an unlicensed medicine, but I hope that the Minister will not raise that issue. If she does, I would remind her that 25 per cent. of medicines currently being prescribed to children in hospitals are unlicensed. I am proposing a return to the entirely sensible arrangement that existed before 1973. We are asking for the re-legalisation of cannabis for medicinal purposes.

After publication of the Lords Select Committee report, the Government acted uniquely by rejecting my private Member's Bill within nanoseconds of its introduction. I have promoted essentially the same Bill in three Parliaments. In each debate, however, after leaving the Dispatch Box, Ministers left a lingering scent of hypocrisy, callousness, indifference and political cowardice. I hope that the Government's response today will not be the same. I urge the Minister to throw away her prepared brief, to act as the sympathetic, intelligent human being that she is and to give us a very different response.

Why is the legislation necessary? What is the problem? Cannabis is the most ancient medicine in the world. We shall probably be told that it has to be trialled. Cannabis trials, however, have been conducted for 5,000 years by billions of people on every continent. It is the world's most ancient medicine. It was used to treat eye problems by those who built the pyramids, and Queen Victoria used it to treat menstrual cramps. Indeed, many people have used it in the past century. I commend to hon. Members "The Emperors of Dreams", which is an excellent book on drug use in the past century.

A century ago, most of the drugs that are illegal now were being used—indeed, they were the only drugs that worked. The current Government will say that they are sympathetic to my proposals, but insist that they must have trials and a pharmaceutically acceptable form of cannabis.

In 1894, a similar argument was used about opium, which was widely used. It was decided that what was needed was a refined form of opium; not the raw, natural opium, but something from a laboratory. Chemists produced a refined form that could be packaged and put in a little pill. They wondered how they could market it so that opium would lose its bad reputation. It was used by low-life types; by immigrants, would you believe. They decided to market this wonderfully pure form of drug as the medicine for heroes. In order to associate it with heroes, they came up with a word that is very much like "heroism" in German and English; heroin. We have seen the results of that.

Speaking as a chemist, I believe that going down the course chosen by the Government will produce a monster. I urge people to allow the use of natural cannabis because of the long centuries in which it has been trialled. If there were major problems or serious side-effects, these would have occurred during that period and would have been well known to us, as has been the case with all natural drugs that are used. Nothing has appeared in that time.

The drug is less toxic than aspirin and has never knowingly killed anyone. Large numbers of people are killed by, for example, anti-inflammatory drugs, which kill 3,000 people a year; by Paracetamol, which kills 600 a year; and by anti-depressants, which kill nearly 600

[Mr. Flynn]

a year. All those are approved by the Government because they come in neat, white packages and have the blessing of the chemical industry.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way to a layman. Would it be fair to describe cannabis as an organic product, like those we are urged to buy in supermarkets?

Mr. Flynn: Organic and natural are entirely accurate words to use for cannabis. Every drug with which we have had problems—eraldin, thalidomide and opren—have been chemical abstracts that have come out of a laboratory, never having been ingested by human beings before. After a period in the laboratory, the Government might produce some cannabinoids and find that, of the 400 compounds in cannabis, compound No. 6 neutralises compound No. 384. We need those to be in balance. The chemistry is highly complex. We could well find something that works in a beneficial way on animals but which, after a period of use on human beings—where the only real experiments take place—has dreadful side-effects. The safest thing is to allow people to use natural, organic cannabis in its present form.

We know that people in their thousands are using cannabis in this country. These people, according to the Government, are the master criminals. I wish to refer to a couple of real cases of what cannabis is used for now. One of the main uses is for the nausea caused by the effects of chemotherapy. Nausea is trivial, but not when it is as a result of chemotherapy. It is not just a feeling of sickness; it is all-pervading and goes on for 24 hours a day, destroying the will to fight the cancer. One drug used for it has the effect of mimicking a secondary cancer. We know the effect that that has on a patient. There is an alternative available, which is widely used: cannabis.

In another case, a woman had a 28-year-old daughter who was dying from a rare form of cancer. The girl, in her final months, was using another drug to deal with the effects of chemotherapy. It turned her into a zombie. She could not communicate lucidly with her mother, who went on the streets of Poole, obtained cannabis and gave it to her daughter, who knew that she was dying. She could then communicate clearly, and give her mother the precious messages that she wanted to give in her final days.

We are saying that that woman is a criminal, who should be sentenced to 14 years in prison, and we criminalise others in a similar position. One lady who has become famous, Clare Hodges, has visited the House on a number of occasions. She recently visited Belgium. Partly as a result of her visit to Belgium, the Belgian Government have decriminalised cannabis not just for medicinal uses but for all uses.

Clare Hodges told the Senate in Belgium:

"I discovered that I had Multiple Sclerosis 18 years ago when I was 25 years old. For several years I was only mildly affected, I carried on working, married and had two children. But slowly my condition became worse, so that now I am constantly uncomfortable and tired, I am visually impaired and cannot sleep, eat or move very well."

She discovered MS to be a very cruel disease. She said:

"You develop it when you're young and healthy, and slowly but surely, you lose all your faculties, abilities and functions. Nowadays, you can expect to live your full life span often until you're completely dependent."

That is a very depressing prospect. We can imagine the gloom of knowing that increasing debility will affect our life. She tried cannabis. The "criminal" said:

"the physical relief was almost immediate. The tension in my spine and bladder was eased, and I slept well. I was comfortable with my body for the first time in years. But, just as important, I felt happy that there was something, after all, that could help me. It was as if a huge weight had been lifted from me.

I have been using cannabis now for nine years. There is no doubt that my condition has improved in different ways. I do not have to take as many prescribed medicines. I now eat better, sleep better, and I feel more positive and motivated. As my health is more stable, I find I can now do simple things that I hadn't been able to do, like go to the shops or cook my children's dinner after school."

Clare Hodges is one of many people who is in that position. How does she get cannabis? She grows it at home. She says that the worst thing is that seriously ill people are regularly taken to court for growing cannabis by this Parliament—it is our decision—and are regularly acquitted by juries. She says that the trials simply bring the law into disrepute. She is absolutely right. The law is in disrepute—the law is a joke.

Quite rightly, the trials taking place have no chance of success because of the common sense of the juries. The Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill will never get through the House while that situation exists. It is quite right that those who oppose the Bill, including myself, will go to any lengths necessary to make sure that the powers of juries are not truncated as the Government intend. The juries speak for the common sense and compassion of the country in this regard. We need those juries, not an unfeeling Government.

Unless the Minister changes her mind about this Bill, we shall hear that the Government are compassionate. We shall hear the words again—I have heard them in three Parliaments. They say, "Oh, we are very sympathetic towards these poor people with cancer and glaucoma destroying the will to live. We care about them so much." When we ask the Government what they will do about it, they say, "We shall make sure that the pills are available." When? Someone suffering from MS wants a night's sleep tonight; they want relief from the spasms tonight. They want to get rid of their nausea; they want a clear head. They do not want to be tormented by pain throughout the day.

When will the Government help them? In five years, 10 years, some time, never? That is what the Government are saying and have said repeatedly. Should we not say that they are hypocrites, callous, cruel and stupid, because of their attitude to this and previous Bills?

There is no reason why the Bill should not go through. The whole weight of the medical profession is behind it. It would make a simple change that would affect a small number of desperately ill people who are looking to this place to lift from them the anxiety of using an illegal drug.

There is nothing trivial or minor about this. This is not a game; it is not a matter of playing politics. It affects thousands of human beings who are suffering unnecessary pain and living daily with the anxiety of the knowledge that they are disobeying the law and that they could be dragged into the courts at any time because of our stupidity and political cowardice.

That is not just something that could happen; it happened six months ago. That was the last time a desperately ill MS sufferer was dragged into court.

Strangely, that happened on the day that a chief constable announced that he would not arrest anyone whom he saw using cannabis recreationally at a party.

It is nonsense that, although cannabis is used by 60 per cent. of young people recreationally, to get a kick, and although that kind of use is out of control and the police are not arresting them, people seeking relief from serious pain can be, and have been, thrown into prison.

I do not say that cannabis is a safe drug. As a chemist, and also as someone who has a great interest in such matters, I believe that all drugs, including medicinal and legal drugs, fall into two categories: 50 per cent. of them have dangerous side effects, and the other 50 per cent. have dangerous side effects that we have yet to discover. There is a long history of the discovery of the dangers of drugs.

However, of all the drugs that we have, cannabis is in the lowest risk category. Some reports were published yesterday, all of which are helpful to the Bill—although in contradiction of many other reports, one of those suggested that cannabis could lead to bouts of mental ill health. The Select Committee on Science and Technology has examined that part of the report and decided that there is no such risk, but I would not want to minimise the risks.

Even if there are risks, especially for those who smoke their cannabis, people are less likely to be exposed to the dangers if the Bill is passed, because it will then be up to doctors to take serious decisions about people who are ill.

Mr. Forth: Would the hon. Gentleman care to comment, even if only in passing—although I would prefer him to expand on the subject a little—on why we as a society tolerate substances such as tobacco and alcohol, which are legal, widely available and consumed, although they have both psychological and physiological side effects, yet the product that we are talking about, which also has those effects, is illegal? Has the hon. Gentleman any thoughts on that subject?

Mr. Flynn: A great many. Alcohol was once prohibited, with disastrous effects. Prohibition led to the build-up of an empire of criminals, and many people were poisoned by bad alcohol.

I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for bringing me to my next point, which is to ask what is being sold to people now, and what their choice is.

Kate Bradley is an ex-policewoman, who during her years in the force went out on the streets to bring in people who were dealing drugs. She is now a 58-year-old woman with MS; she is in serious trouble, and has given a statement to a Member of Parliament. Her role now is to go out on to the same streets and become a customer of the people whom she once arrested. That is Britain 2001. That is the effect of a law that we created and support, but which we could change today.

The World Health Organisation, in an authoritative work, has examined the dangers of all drugs, and categorised them. It says clearly that cannabis is less dangerous than alcohol and tobacco, even if it is used in the same way. I know little about such things, because I have never used an illegal drug in my life and I never will, but I understand that nobody uses cannabis in the same way as tobacco, because if someone smoked 40 joints a day they would be floating on the ceiling.

We now have the worst of all worlds. Those who have to go on to the streets to get their cannabis have no idea of the quality or strength of what they are using. The Bill would liberate the medical profession to produce cannabis that could be taken in ways other than smoking. The most dangerous aspect of using cannabis in joints is that it is mixed with that deadly, addictive, poisonous killer drug—tobacco.

I am aware that some research is taking place, but if there could be freer research, we could find out how to use cannabis in other ways—as a drink, in food, as a spray, and so on. Those methods will then be freely available. It is not open to someone who grows cannabis in their back garden to use the drug in that way. Those forms of use will come; they should be available now. If the Bill is passed, the research could be carried out immediately.

I promised that I would not speak for too long, as there are other Bills to be debated. The Bill is necessary; it has the support of every free-thinking and conscientious person. It will make a great difference to the lives of tens of thousands of people. We cannot say, hand on heart, that we do not support the Bill. I challenge anyone in the House to say that, if one of their loved ones asked them for relief from a terrible pain or ailment, they would reply, "No, you can't have it, I'm not going to get cannabis for you because it's against the law". Every one of us would go and get cannabis from the street to relieve the pain of a loved one. Many people are in that position at present.

If we are not prepared to obey that law, how dare we suggest that it should remain the law of the land? It is indefensible, cruel and foolish. The law is certainly an ass in this instance. If anyone suggests that there is no strong feeling about this matter, I shall be happy to reintroduce the Bill if it is killed today. I will then bring to the House many people in wheelchairs and people who are in pain or dying. They will give witness to the House.

I plead with the Minister to take a fair view of the Bill. We can act today to ensure that at least the Bill receives a Second Reading. Those adults who suffer so much and have taken their own decision to use a medicine of their choice should not be treated as criminals.

1.52 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I congratulate the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on so eloquently and movingly introducing the Bill. During my remarks, which, I emphasise, are made in a personal, lay capacity, I hope to respond to the challenge that he so dramatically puts to the House.

We are considering the use, production and supply of cannabis not for recreational, but for medicinal and therapeutic purposes. I recognise that there can be therapeutic benefits, but the House must ask whether the benefits of amending the original legislation to allow such therapeutic use outweigh the possible disbenefits or even dangers of doing so.

If we accepted the Bill, I am concerned that we should give the wrong message to those people who want to legalise cannabis for recreational purposes. That matter should be explored. I listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman's speech. He did not seem to put much emphasis on the comments of the police on that point.

I have a particular anxiety about the safety and storage of dangerous drugs. The hon. Gentleman himself referred to the history of the use of heroin—perhaps more

[Miss Anne McIntosh]

commonly known as morphine—for medicinal and therapeutic purposes. We are considering cannabis and cannabinoids.

I declare a family interest: I am related to several doctors and a long line of—I believe—distinguished chemists. Indeed, my grandfather had the distinction of being awarded a royal warrant to serve as chemist when the then king was in residence in Holyrood, in Edinburgh. I have taken a great interest in those family matters for some time. In my student days in Edinburgh a number of years ago, my flat mate and I had the good fortune to occupy the flat next to one of the chemist's premises run by my uncle down Dublin street in Edinburgh. Fortifications and security measures were increasingly required because so many burglaries were undertaken by persistent users of heroin who wished to enter the premises run by my uncle and owned by my family purely to get into the dangerous drugs cabinet.

It might be a small point to the hon. Gentleman, but it should be considered that family doctors such as my brother, who is a GP in North Yorkshire, and chemists such as my grandfather and two uncles who worked as chemists in Edinburgh, will be put at substantial risk of burglaries by carrying small amounts of cannabis and, more appropriately, cannabinoids on their persons, in their vehicles and in their dispensaries. I urge the House to consider what special measures may be taken to protect them.

Mr. Flynn: Both the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee and the Police Foundation, which supports the Bill, have said that the number of doctors prescribing cannabis should be strictly limited. There will be no general rule that means that all will have to prescribe.

Miss McIntosh: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for clarifying that point. It is helpful, but he will understand why it is a source of concern to me and my family.

The timing of the Bill is curious. It reaches the House this afternoon, as we are informed that clinical trials are just about to start. The hon. Gentleman has referred to the 1998 report of the Science and Technology Committee of the House of Lords. The Committee took evidence on the medicinal effects of cannabis and recommended that it be made legally available for therapeutic purposes. The Government rejected any immediate changes in legislation at that time. I am delighted to see the Minister in her place this afternoon. I hope that she will confirm that clinical trials have not only been ordered but are about to start. I hope that she will tell the House when the results of those trials will be available for the House to consider so that at least we can judge the safety and efficacy of the medicinal form of cannabis.

I urge the hon. Member for Newport, West to be a little patient. I admire the fact that he speaks with certain knowledge as a chemist, but he must be aware that we and our constituents need to be reassured that the dangers as well as the potential health benefits will be taken into account.

Mr. Flynn: The hon. Lady is not telling me to be patient. She is telling tens of thousands of desperately ill people to wait for five years until they can take their medicine legally.

Miss McIntosh: The hon. Gentleman eloquently made that point, and I accept it, but alternatives are being pursued.

I should like to go through some of the medical effects that we know about from research into the potentially damaging effects on individuals. The possible short-term effects on the cardiovascular system include an increase in the heart rate and a decrease in blood pressure, possibly even invoking angina or other cardiovascular disease. There can be short-term memory impairment, poor body co-ordination, severe psychological distress and confusion and—perhaps something not uncommon to Members of this House on certain occasions—less extreme feelings of anxiety, panic and suspicion.

Mr. Forth: Could that not be an accurate description of people who have had a couple of drinks too many?

Miss McIntosh: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We must appreciate that, as the hon. Member for Newport, West would probably accept, the short-term effects are more likely be experienced by those who take cannabis or cannabinoids for recreational purposes. We have to consider that, if the patients whom the hon. Gentleman hopes to help become hooked on the drug, it could lead to tolerance. They may wish to take more to produce the same effect, and medical practitioners accept that that symptom can develop. There can be a physical dependence, meaning that the withdrawal of the drug produces physical symptoms. There are also damaging psychological dependence effects, although they are probably less common.

I am greatly concerned about the fact that drug abuse can increase the incidence of driving accidents. The Library's excellent research paper on cannabis lays heavy emphasis on possible driving impairment. I accept that that is probably more common when cannabis is used for recreational rather than therapeutic purposes. However, the hon. Gentleman must consider the risk, especially to MS sufferers such as the lady in her mid-50s to whom he referred.

Mr. Flynn: A few weeks ago, the Transport Research Laboratory published a report—it costs £50—in which it stated that it cannot come to any decision on whether cannabis use has any effect on road accidents. In fact, perversely, reports from other parts of the world suggest that the evidence shows that there is less danger. That is a strange conclusion, but the effect of cannabis is to make people more cautious, so they drive either more carefully, or not at all. The effect of alcohol is to convince people that they are better drivers, and they drive more recklessly. I urge the hon. Lady to read the TRL report, from which no one can reach any conclusion at all.

Miss McIntosh: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that most illuminating intervention. Perhaps after the debate, he will give me the full reference to the report so I can read it for myself.

The long-term effects on respiratory disorders, including coughs, bronchitis and asthma, are again probably more relevant to recreational use, but we should consider them none the less.

I turn to the therapeutic purposes, especially as examined in the British Medical Association's report, "Therapeutic uses of cannabis", published in November 1997. The BMA concluded that certain additional cannabinoids, not cannabis itself, should be legalised for wider medicinal use, but alarm bells were rung. The report states:

"The information is meagre but nevertheless it can be concluded that although cannabis itself is unsuitable for medical use, individual cannabinoids have a therapeutic potential in a number of medical conditions in which present drugs or other treatments are not fully adequate."

That raises the concern, which I hope the Minister will address in winding up the debate, that the Government are aware of the flimsy, inconclusive evidence that exists in the medical profession, the chemists' profession and others.

I accept that there are compelling reasons, but the weight of evidence is inconclusive. I would prefer to make a reasoned judgment against the background of the results of clinical trials. I hope that we shall hear this afternoon that the trials are about begin and when they might be concluded.

2.4 pm

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I want to speak briefly. I apologise for missing the first part of the speech made by the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), because of the previous Division, which I mistimed.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing the Bill. I know of the passion with which he has pursued this cause. As a member of the all-party disablement group, I am very much aware of the unnecessary suffering of countless thousands of people who could be helped, some of whom take advantage of cannabis, although illegally at present.

I have great respect for the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh), but I was surprised that she should accept that people will be acting outside the law in taking cannabis, as they undoubtedly will be unless legislation along the lines of the Bill is passed.

Miss McIntosh: I did not say that I accepted that. I strongly urge people not to act outside the law.

Mr. Wigley: That means urging them not to take the assistance that is available and which makes such a very great difference to many people.

The evidence that has come to the all-party disablement group, from many directions, over an extended period, leaves me in no doubt that cannabis can be beneficial. The Bill is restricted in scope. It does not open the floodgates to the consequences foreseen by the hon. Lady. That is a matter for future legislation or perhaps a royal commission. This is a matter of urgency, and one that cannot wait for another four or five years for the tests to be concluded, evaluated and acted on.

We have the opportunity to show that we understand the suffering of people with MS and other conditions, and it is up to us to stand shoulder to shoulder with them and ensure that there is a legislative change that will bring their assistance through such drugs within the law. I hope that the Bill will be given a Second Reading.

2.6 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): Though brief, this has been a very good debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) spoke with great conviction. I cannot respond to him as he would like, but I say with all sincerity that I recognise the seriousness, commitment and passion that he brings to the issue. Nobody could fail to be moved by his accounts of people suffering from very debilitating illnesses.

The Government believe that it would be premature to amend the misuse of drugs legislation to allow the prescribing of cannabis before the quality, safety and efficacy of a medicinal form of the drug has been scientifically established—that was the point made by the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh)—and a marketing authorisation has been issued by the Medicines Control Agency. All prospective new medicines have to go through that procedure.

The Government have the support of the British Medical Association and the Royal Society in the view that raw cannabis should not be available for medicinal purposes, but we welcome, and have encouraged, research into the possible medicinal uses of cannabis. If current trials are successful and lead to a medical cannabis preparation that is approved by the Medicines Control Agency, we have made it clear that we would be willing to amend the regulations to allow it to be prescribed.

We have to take into account the fact that cannabis is a harmful drug. A 1997 World Health Organisation report confirmed that it has both acute and chronic health effects. Work was published this week by Professor Heather Ashton of the university of Newcastle on the effect that it can have in exacerbating schizophrenia. We have to be mindful of the context in which we are operating.

The Home Office has licensed a number of laboratory and medical research projects over the past few years, including two current projects involving or leading to clinical trials. Dr. Geoffrey Guy of GW Pharmaceuticals is conducting a large-scale research project aimed at developing non-smoked medicines derived from cannabis. The research involves patients with multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injury, rheumatoid arthritis, cancer pain and other serious conditions. Clinical trial studies are now being conducted. There are four main phases, involving pre-clinical and clinical research. Phase one is the cultivation of suitable plants; phase two is designing a method of administration; phase three is the start of the clinical trials; and phase four is the licensing application for a medicinal product.

That research has now been under way for two years, and the first two stages have been accomplished. The Home Office drugs inspectorate and the Medicines Control Agency have overseen them. I hope that that helps to reassure the House that the work is being done—a fact that it is important for me to point out. GW Pharmaceuticals hopes to have completed the phase three trials by mid-2002 and to be in a position to submit a dossier to the MCA in application for marketing authorisation in autumn 2002.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West that the Government cannot support the Bill, because of its implications. Without a marketing authorisation for a

[Mrs. Barbara Roche]

medicinal form of the drug, cannabis could be prescribed for any ailment that the doctor chooses. One can imagine the pressure on doctors in such circumstances.

As I said at the start of my speech, the Bill is well intentioned, but it would have far-reaching and unacceptable consequences. For those reasons, the Government are unable to support it.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 8, Noes 4.

Division No. 102] **[2.11 pm**

AYES

Austin, John	Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Burden, Richard	Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Flynn, Paul	
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*	**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Harris, Dr Evan	**Ann Clwyd and**
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*	**Mr. Dafydd Wigley.**

NOES

Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*	**Tellers for the Noes:**
Leigh, Edward	**Mr. Andrew Dismore and**
McIntosh, Miss Anne	**Mr. Gareth R. Thomas.**
Maclean, Rt Hon David	

It appearing on the report of the Division that 40 Members were not present, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *declared that the Question was not decided, and the business under consideration stood over until the next sitting of the House.*

Divorce (Religious Marriages) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

2.24 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I was given leave to introduce the Bill two days ago, and I do not wish to repeat the arguments that I put forward then and which I am sure hon. Members will dutifully have read in *Hansard.*

The purpose of the Bill is to remedy a disadvantage suffered by Jewish men and women who are prevented from remarrying by the refusal of their partners to grant or accept a religious divorce. The Bill will allow the civil courts to defer granting a civil divorce until a religious divorce is given, thus providing a remedy to women known as the agunah—the chained women—who are, effectively, blackmailed by their husbands into agreeing to settlements to which they might not otherwise agree, to enable them to obtain a divorce. That has resulted in severe hardship. For example, women have been subjected to domestic violence, or their children have been abused.

I shall not speak at length as I know that time is short and that the Bill has overwhelming support from all quarters of the House. I urge hon. Members—particularly one or two on the other side of the House who may have blocked a similar Bill in the past—at least to allow some good to come from today's proceedings by permitting the Bill a Second Reading.

2.25 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) on vigorously pursuing the matter. The Government consider that the Jewish community has made a convincing case for the need for a remedy for Jewish women seeking a religious divorce. We therefore support the Bill, which we hope will aid Jewish women who are disadvantaged in such a way. It gives me great pleasure to say that on behalf of the Government.

2.25 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The Bill raises controversial and profound questions that obviously require full and proper consideration by the House. I hope that nobody, least of all the Minister, is suggesting that we make law—particularly in such a sensitive and difficult area—without the most proper and full consideration by both Houses of Parliament at every stage. I trust that there is no disagreement among us over that.

The hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) seems to be desirous of getting the Bill through the House without proper discussion. For reasons that I understand, but deplore, he did not give the House a proper account of the measure and referred us to his speech of 31 January, which I have read and considered. I have a copy with me and it could provide the basis for a full and proper debate.

The hon. Gentleman's remarks raised very important questions and I refer to the first:

"The basic Jewish laws relating to marriage and divorce are biblical and, therefore, cannot be changed."

I do not challenge that as a statement of fact, but I am concerned about the relationship between the laws of religious faiths and Churches and the civil law as well as the extent to which it is proper for the civil law to intervene—in this case, to be invited in—as a participant in matters of deeply held faith and long-standing religious practice. That will be the burden of my analysis as it develops.

The hon. Gentleman continued:

"Jewish women who wish to conduct their family relationships within the framework of their religious beliefs have virtually no power to compel a reluctant husband to grant them a get."

I understand that "get" is a technical Jewish term for a form of divorce or separation. That, too, raises the most profound questions, not least of which is whether those who are of a belief, a faith, a Church or a religion of their own free will accept the advantages and, if there are any, the disadvantages of that belief.

The hon. Gentleman has also raised the issue of whether such people, having taken their belief on, should reach out to the civil law outside their faith to remedy a matter arising as a result of that faith. As these laws are biblical, is it legitimate to argue that they can be changed? I do not know enough about rabbinical law or the rabbinical process to judge whether they can. That is another part of the debate that we obviously need to have to consider the Bill properly.

The hon. Gentleman tried to be helpful and his previous speech referred to some of the questions that I have raised. He said:

"That is why the Jewish community has now sought the assistance of civil law, in the form of a provision that a judge should have the discretionary power to withhold the grant of a civil divorce until a Jewish divorce has been given.—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2001; Vol. 362, c. 321-22.]

That raises the most profound questions about the proper relationship between the laws of a faith or a Church and those of a secular society. I believe that such a Bill must be dealt with most carefully, sensitively and comprehensively if it is to reach the statute book.

It being half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 9 February.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That, for the current Session of Parliament, Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 January],

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

LANGUAGE OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCEEDINGS

Motion made,

That—

(1) this House approves the First Report from the Procedure Committee, Session 2000–01 (HC 47); and

(2) the Resolution of 5th June 1996 on the Language of Parliamentary Proceedings be amended accordingly by inserting, after the word 'Wales,', the words 'and at Westminster in respect of Select Committees'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Parkinson's Disease

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

2.30 pm

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): Parkinson's disease is a progressive neurological condition caused when 80 per cent. of dopamine-producing cells die in the brain. Dopamine is a chemical transmitter that plays an important role in sending signals in the brain regarding movement. The three basic symptoms of Parkinson's are tremor, stiffness or rigidity and slowness or poverty of movement.

A recent study has shown that over the past 30 years, despite decreasing mortality rates for the under-75s, the prevalence of Parkinson's disease is probably about 200 per 100,000 of the population. Parkinson's affects all aspects of daily living for the individual and the family who must live with the condition. The condition fluctuates, within the day and from day to day, and it affects no two people, exactly the same.

Parkinson's has a devastating impact on all aspects of life. It can, for example, affect a wide range of movements, including facial expressions. People speak of the "Parkinsonian mask": a person with the condition may have a still facial expression, and not smile as easily and readily as he or she used to. The person's tone of voice may change, and he or she may speak more softly or even in a monotone. When that is linked with a loss of facial expression, it can be more readily appreciated how close family relationships can be weakened by the impact of just those two symptoms.

Fatigue can also be a real problem, while at the same time there can be difficulties with sleeping and with turning over in bed. Pain can be a constant problem for many people. I am told by the excellent Parkinson's Disease Society that some 40 per cent. of people living with Parkinson's experience depression, and that that is not simply a reaction to the condition but a feature of the disease itself.

Writing in the society's magazine, Emma Bennion described the impact of the condition on her. She said:

"My family and I have had the misfortune of suffering from Parkinson's disease for over ten years now. I use the word 'suffer' very deliberately because, as a patient or carer or family member, I believe that all of us suffer, in varying degrees, from this debilitating disease. As time moves on and the disease progresses I believe it is a fine balance as to who suffers most."

Parkinson's is a long-term degenerative condition. As the loss of dopamine-producing cells in the brain continues, the symptoms become more severe and the person becomes increasingly disabled. There is no cure at present, and although we know that the loss of dopamine-producing cells causes the onset of the condition, we do not yet know exactly what causes those cells to die.

We do know that for many people drug treatments can be effective in the short term, but longer-term complications are associated with drug therapies. They may include loss of taste—the enjoyment of food may be lost. Owing to that, as well as other aspects of the condition, a person with Parkinson's may become very reluctant to go out for a meal, or enjoy having friends to dinner at home. Many people suffer from hallucinations as a side-effect of the drugs, which can be extremely frightening and alarming for patient and family. In many instances, involuntary movements known as dyskinesias can be a disabling side-effect of long-term drug therapies.

A number of surgical interventions can offer some relief from symptoms in a relatively small number of cases, but risks are involved in surgery. In any event, the disease continues to progress even after the intervention.

About 120,000 people in the United Kingdom are living with Parkinson's disease themselves, but we should bear in mind the fact that their partners, families and children are also affected by the impact of the condition. Some 1 million people in the UK are estimated to be living with Parkinson's in one way or another.

The incidence of the condition increases with age. However, we know that about one in seven people with Parkinson's is diagnosed before the age of 50. The Canadian actor Michael J. Fox is a classic case of someone diagnosed with Parkinson's at a relatively young age: in his case, around 30.

Given the increase in the incidence of Parkinson's with age, we need to bear it in mind that demographic changes already in train will lead to a huge increase in the population of people aged over 60. The Department of Trade and Industry foresight programme predicted that the number of people in the United Kingdom over 60 would increase by some 53 per cent. by 2030. Its forecast is that the current number of 12.2 million people aged over 60 will rise to 18.7 million by 2030. That means that an increasing number of people will be affected by Parkinson's and by other neurological conditions unless we can intervene to develop effective treatments and, indeed, a cure by that time.

Given the current absence of a cure, I welcome the Government's and now Parliament's decision to allow the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority to license strictly controlled individual research projects involving embryonic stem cells for the development of tissue for transplantation. I recognise the difficulties that that poses for some people, but I strongly believe that the decision was morally right, given that expert medical opinion states that there are likely to be limitations to the type of tissue that can be derived from adult stem cells, and that research could accelerate the search and, indeed, could turn out to be the only route to a cure for that terrible disease.

Scientists believe that they will be able to develop dopamine-producing cells from embryonic stem cells, which would be implanted into the brain. Those cells should be able to replenish the supply of dopamine and therefore eliminate the symptoms. Scientists have effectively cured Parkinson's in animal trials. The change in the law means that they can proceed with research for people. According to *The Independent* on 23 January, scientists believe that they could be in a position to have clinical trials in as little as three years.

I strongly support the proposal before the Medical Research Council for surgical trials for deep-brain stimulation to examine its impact on improving the quality of life for Parkinson's disease patients. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to give that a push.

There is frequently a significant gap between the onset of symptoms and the diagnosis of Parkinson's. There are essentially two reasons for that. The first is that there is no

clinical test for Parkinson's. Diagnosis is based on clinical observation by a doctor, medical history and positive reactions to anti-Parkinsonian drugs. The second is that a number of related conditions can be confused with Parkinson's. The major ones are multiple systems atrophy and progressive supranuclear palsy. Although in their initial stages those conditions bear a strong resemblance to Parkinson's, the drug regimes differ remarkably.

It is common to attribute rigidity, one of the symptoms of Parkinson's, to arthritis and to attribute a tremor, another symptom, to stress. Research by David Burn at Newcastle upon Tyne university has shown that there is a mis-diagnosis rate—both positive and negative—of between 25 and 30 per cent. At the moment, it can be confirmed only post-mortem, although the use of a new diagnostic tool—DAT scanners—should lead to an improvement in the mis-diagnosis rate.

Parkinson's is uncommon enough to be outside the range of the expertise of most general practitioners; there are only an average of four patients with Parkinson's per GP practice. Some GPs do diagnose Parkinson's, but most will refer suspected patients to neurologists for confirmation. Clearly, it is imperative that a patient who is suspected of having Parkinson's be referred to a specialist before any drug treatment begins and be regularly monitored for his response to those drugs. There is, however, a serious shortfall of neurologists and other specialists, which can mean a long wait for consultation.

I understand that the Association of British Neurologists recommends one neurologist per 100,000 people. At the moment, Britain has just 350 neurologists and only 60 have specific expertise in Parkinson's disease. We therefore need to work towards doubling the number of neurologists in Britain. At just six per 1 million people, our number of neurologists compares particularly poorly with Denmark, which has 100 neurologists per 1 million of its population; Italy, which has 71 per 1 million; or even the United States, which has 40 per million.

I recognise that the Government are addressing the issue of the shortage of doctors in the national health service, but I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to explain further the specific plan to respond to the particular need for neurologists. Access to a specialist can make an enormous difference to how an individual copes with diagnosis, especially as the specialist can explain the progression of the condition and the available treatment options.

Responses to a Parkinson's Disease Society survey showed that only 44 per cent. of Parkinson's sufferers thought that they had received a clear explanation of the condition and the available treatment when they were diagnosed. Those who did not receive an adequate explanation were left feeling confused, pessimistic about their future and unsure about where to turn for help and support.

The Parkinson's Disease Society has called for a national service framework for neurological conditions that would set national standards on access to neurologists and on services such as speech therapy, physiotherapy and occupational therapy. Although the Government's intention to introduce a national service framework for older people is welcome, such a framework would be inappropriate for the significant number of people under 65 who are diagnosed with Parkinson's.

Why should we not also have a national education programme, first in primary care, in which at least one general practitioner in each primary care group or trust undertakes the role of specialist in Parkinson's? Hospital and care home staff, too, require education in aspects of care for people with Parkinson's. Each patient, for example, has a different and very individual medication timetable, and a delay of even a few minutes can make an enormous difference to them. In fact, 75 per cent. of patients who responded to a Parkinson's Disease Society survey thought that otherwise excellent hospital staff did not understand that point and therefore provided medication only when making a drug round.

Once someone has been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, it is crucial that support mechanisms are developed and implemented to ease the problems that they and their carers will have to face. With appropriate support, independence can be maintained for far longer than in the past. Access to specialist advice, however, is particularly important.

Given the currently limited number of neurologists, Parkinson's disease nurse specialists provide a vital service to patients and their family and friends. They are also instrumental in ensuring that patients are informed and are therefore made partners in managing their own disease. Nurse specialists make a major improvement to the quality of care and information available, and they achieve savings in local health and social services expenditure. They are also an important link between people with Parkinson's and other health and social care professionals, providing information on drugs, monitoring therapies, providing education and training and offering essential emotional support.

The Parkinson's Disease Society has been campaigning to extend the numbers of nurse specialists and has even been pump-priming the first wave of such nurse specialists. I understand that 81 nurse specialists are currently in post, but there needs to be at least 240 if the current Parkinsonian population is to be adequately served. In my constituency, people with Parkinson's do not have access to such a specialist nurse. However, thanks to the campaigning of Mr. Lorden Trickey and the Harrow Parkinson's Disease Society, there is a real possibility that such a service will be provided.

I also understand that Brent and Harrow health authority has recognised the need to reorganise and improve its response to a variety of people with chronic diseases, including Parkinson's, with one-stop-shop-style access to physiotherapy, speech therapy and occupational therapy that is located in the same place as self-support groups and, crucially, a specialist nurse. Additional funding from the considerable extra investment for the national health service set aside by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer for improving support to patients with chronic diseases will clearly be necessary and welcome to facilitate that type of change and improvement in services. Meanwhile, my constituents with Parkinson's, anxious for support, have to travel to the Colindale day unit, in the London borough of Barnet, where the particular interest and skill of Dr. Mathew has ensured that that is the nearest service to one focusing specifically on the needs of Parkinsonian patients. Why should there not also be a specialist nurse based at that excellent unit?

[Mr. Gareth R. Thomas]

For long-term conditions such as Parkinson's, respite care is extremely important. I welcome the Government's allocation of carers' grants to local authorities to expand respite care provision. The excellent Harrow carer centre, based in Pinner Green in my constituency, has done a superb job in supporting carers in Harrow. The Carers National Association reports that some 40 per cent. of carers have no help with caring at all and that that has had an adverse impact on their own health.

The provision of high-quality respite care services can make an enormous difference to the quality of life of both patient and carer; in particular, provision of emergency respite care—where a crisis affecting the carer occurs—should be available so that patients are not forced into a residential setting which often becomes permanent.

Respite support is crucial to help maintain independence but, as the disease progresses, it may become necessary where more specialist support can be provided. The Government's decision fully to fund nursing care in England is extremely welcome, but people with Parkinson's will often need personal care in the later stages, including help with feeding and bathing. This care is crucial to their survival. Some patients feel that they are being penalised for having a chronic condition rather than an acute one, which would be funded by the public purse.

I recognise that difficult choices have had to be made in response to the Sutherland commission. I hope that Ministers will keep under careful review the financial issues for patients with Parkinson's who need personal care.

Twenty years ago, to be diagnosed with Parkinson's was to be given a lingering life sentence: no parole, no time off for good behaviour and no commuting of the sentence. Now there is real hope of being able to halt the progression of the disease; perhaps, in time, even of a cure. In the meantime, I look forward to Ministers encouraging the further improvement of services to those with Parkinson's.

2.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) on securing the debate and on his work to raise awareness of this progressive and disabling condition. I commend him also for his work to enable improvements in research and care into Parkinson's disease.

I pay tribute to the Parkinson's Disease Society, which does an immense amount of work across the board to support those suffering from the disease, as well as their families. The House will have become aware of the society's work though the debate on stem cell research, which, according to scientists, has immense potential to provide benefits or cures for Parkinson's disease in particular.

The tireless lobbying of the society brought home to many Members of this House and the other place the real human stories behind the scientific and medical research that we discussed not long ago. The matter was decided on a free vote, but I am glad that the research will go ahead with proper regulations and restrictions, given its potential to relieve suffering from a disabling disease. I pay tribute to Mary Baker, who has done a huge amount of work for the society and is due to retire later this year.

Parkinson's disease is a progressive neurological disorder affecting voluntary movements such as walking, talking and writing. The risk of developing it increases with age. It is a tragic fact that more than 120,000 people suffer from Parkinson's disease in the United Kingdom today, and it is common in all parts of the world.

Parkinson's is thought to result from loss of the chemical messenger, dopamine. It is treated mainly with drug therapy, using levadopa. Because no two people experience Parkinson's in exactly the same way, treatment is tailored to meet the needs of individual patients. Drugs are not, however, the only way to treat Parkinson's; management of the condition can also involve nursing, physiotherapy, speech therapy and occupational therapy. It is vital that those suffering from the disease should receive the right support, diagnosis and treatment.

My hon. Friend referred to the number of neurologists. He is right that the Government are committed to expanding the number of doctors and specialists across the board. I shall certainly take back to my Department the points that he raised about consultant and neurologist numbers. The specialist work force advisory group has been reviewing the numbers of consultants in neurosurgery annually and taking account of the views of the Royal College of Surgeons, postgraduate medical deans, NHS management and internal policy colleagues. Their view is that sufficient higher specialist training places exist for enough candidates to come through.

The first specialist Parkinson's disease nurse was appointed to the NHS in 1989. The nurses' aim has been to work from hospitals and in the community, utilising existing resources and the expertise of health care teams to improve the quality of life for sufferers and their families. The nurses not only co-ordinate the care of people with Parkinson's, but provide a reliable source of information and support to families as well as to those suffering. The Parkinson's Disease Society is keen to standardise the education of nurse specialists. Bursaries are available for nurses who wish to further their skills working with people with Parkinson's disease.

The Department of Health is interested in the development of neurological nursing, of which Parkinson's disease nurses are a successful example. We are keen to develop the concept of the specialist nurses and to break down traditional professional barriers that have existed for a long time. There is huge scope to use specialist nurses to provide better care. I was very interested in my hon. Friend's points.

On 5 February, my Department will host a neurological nursing symposium to take stock of developments in nursing roles and care models that support people. I hope that the subject will be discussed in detail on that occasion, because neurological nurses and the Parkinson's Disease Society will be represented.

The main Government agency for research into the causes of, and treatments for, disease is the Medical Research Council, which receives its funding through the Department of Trade and Industry. It is a long-standing

and important principle of successive Governments not to prescribe the detail of how individual research councils should distribute resources between competing priorities. That is best decided by researchers and research users. However, the Medical Research Council takes all those factors into account when it makes decisions on research projects, such as those into Parkinson's Disease.

In 1999-2000, the MRC provided more than £3 million for research into movement disorders, including Parkinson's disease. A major research project into the disease is also under way. The MRC has provided Professor Richard Gray with £940,000 to fund a study into the effectiveness of new and old drugs for Parkinson's disease. The Government want improving and successful research into Parkinson's disease, and I hope that progress in stem cell research will provide new opportunities to advance that work and achieve a breakthrough in treatment and support for those with Parkinson's disease.

My hon. Friend mentioned the role played by carers and the importance of caring support for those with Parkinson's disease. There are some 5.7 million carers in Great Britain. The national carers strategy was drawn up to improve carers' access to breaks, respite care, information and support. The carers' special grant, which my hon. Friend mentioned, has already begun to change the way in which local councils think about support for carers. It was launched in 1999 and will run for an extra two years until 2004.

The grant is designed to help local authorities to make a strategic shift towards developing the kind of breaks and respite care and the range and diversity of services required to give carers the flexibility and accessibility that they need. As my hon. Friend said, no individual's experience of the disease is the same as another's, and no treatment regime can be the same. Equally, no pattern of carers' needs can be the same. Services therefore need to be sufficiently diverse and supportive. The Government will continue to support work for carers. We will increase the money put aside to support carers in England, and we expect funding to rise from £50 million this year to £100 million by 2003-04.

My hon. Friend asked about responding to the royal commission, and about nursing care and personal care. We are keen to use the growing resources at our disposal to invest in new health and social care services for older people. The funding will amount to an extra £1.4 billion by 2003-04.

New intermediate care services, including personal care, will be free at the point of use, and will help many older people to live independently at home for longer. However, the Government's view was that providing universal free personal care, as recommended by the royal commission, would not have improved front-line services. Nor would it have benefited the least well-off, as seven out of 10 people in residential care already have some or all their personal costs paid.

With the resources available to us, we believe that the choices that we have made are correct, and will mean that fewer older people have to go into long-term residential care. The proposals on free nursing care will benefit up to 35,000 people, and save them about £5,000 a year on their care. That will support not only those with Parkinson's disease and their families, but everyone else in need of long-term residential care.

Finally, my hon. Friend talked about improving standards of treatment, referral protocols and early diagnosis. He will be aware that the Government are keen to see new national standards rolling out in every area, and to tackle the postcode lottery and improve standards of care across the board, not only for Parkinson's disease, but for other conditions. He will also be aware that rolling out those national standards and assessments for every condition and every area will take us some time. We are certainly well aware of the importance of neurological conditions such as Parkinson's disease. We are considering the subject in great detail and are keen to extend work on national standards and improve treatment and care across the board.

I hope that my hon. Friend will agree that the Government are sympathetic to the needs of patients with Parkinson's disease. A lot of work has already been done, but there is much left to do on research, treatment and care. We believe that over time, our extra investment in the NHS will make a considerable difference to patients suffering from Parkinson's disease, their families and others.

I pay tribute again to my hon. Friend's work in raising awareness of the condition, and in campaigning for improvements in treatment and care. I hope that he will agree that working together, and with the Parkinson's Disease Society, we can continue to bring about improvements for those who suffer from that disease.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes to Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 5 February 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Laboratory Employees (Intimidation)

1. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): What measures he is taking to protect the employees of laboratories conducting medical research involving animals from intimidation by militant animal rights activists. [147087]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): As I told the House last week during the Second Reading of the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, we intend to give the police additional powers to ensure that businesses and individuals can go about their lawful business without fear of violence or intimidation. The measures will allow the police to take action to prevent extremists from protesting outside people's homes and will strengthen the law against the sending of malicious communications.

In addition, we are consulting closely with the police service, the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts to achieve an effective and consistent approach to the enforcement of the law in this area.

Dr. Iddon: The Government have already done a great deal to cut out unnecessary animal testing, but is my right hon. Friend aware that if the current harassment of workers continues, animal testing will be driven abroad, where regulations are not as stringent as those in this country? That will not only damage a world-class pharmaceutical industry and defeat one of the prime objectives of the campaigners but will result in a loss of jobs.

Mr. Straw: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. So-called animal rights protesters are at best misguided, and, frankly, many of them are evil, both in their intention and their actions. We need to recognise that many medical advances are based on necessary animal testing.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Is the Home Secretary aware that there is a farm in Hall Cross in my constituency which breeds guinea pigs and other animals for testing, specifically to find cures for diseases and to create vaccines and so forth, and that its staff and owners have been intimidated? Does the right hon. Gentleman not think that such animal fascism practised by human beings is totally wrong? The irony is that British pharmaceutical companies will simply import guinea pigs and mice from abroad, where there are not regular inspections of the kind that the Home Office conducts here.

Mr. Straw: I do not know that particular farm, but I have great personal knowledge of a similar farm in west Oxfordshire, where I know the farmer and his wife. That farmer was subject to the most appalling intimidation by so-called animal rights protesters. In the end, he decided to close his cattery, with exactly the consequence, I imagine, that the hon. Gentleman has described; I entirely agree with what the hon. Gentleman said.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I concur entirely with my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) about the importance of the work. One of the difficulties is the lack of public understanding of some of the important issues surrounding the processes used by pharmaceutical companies in developing drugs that are essential to our lives. Will my right hon. Friend consider liaising, through the Department of Health, with the chief medical officer to try to introduce into the public domain a simple guide explaining why animal testing is essential? Some of the activists are winning the argument unnecessarily, and I am sure it is possible to persuade the public otherwise.

Mr. Straw: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I shall certainly take the matter up with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health; but British pharmaceutical companies could do more together, through their association, to publicise all the drugs and changes in medical and surgical procedures which have been dependent on animal experimentation, and I urge them to do so.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): I endorse the Home Secretary's approach. Does he agree, however, that one of the underlying problems that allows such terrorism to take place is the public availability of the home addresses of directors and ordinary shareholders of public companies? I invite him to take the lead in trying to achieve joined-up government on this matter because I was advised by one of his ministerial colleagues at the Department of Trade and Industry on 8 January that that Department is unlikely to consider introducing legislation to change the requirements to disclose home addresses until late in 2002 at the earliest. Does the Home Secretary agree that the terrorism and intimidation occurring at people's homes at the moment is utterly intolerable in a liberal or civilised society? I urge him to contact his ministerial colleagues to see whether other Departments can follow the lead that he is taking in Whitehall.

Mr. Straw: I agree that this problem is also faced by the directors and shareholders of the companies. My colleague at the Department of Trade and Industry, Lord Sainsbury of Turville, was right to say that the DTI is unlikely to introduce legislation until 2002. However, I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are actively considering whether there is a vehicle in this Parliament which would allow us to take powers to do exactly what he, and I believe the whole House, wishes to be done.

Crime Statistics (Northamptonshire)

2. **Mr. Phil Hope** (Corby): If he will make a statement on the levels of crime in Northamptonshire. [147088]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): In the 12 months to September 2000, recorded crime in Northamptonshire fell by 9.5 per cent. compared with the previous 12 months. Domestic burglary was down by 14 per cent. and vehicle crime by 15 per cent. Only two forces in England and Wales had a larger overall decrease than Northamptonshire.

Mr. Hope: The falling crime rate and extra police officers in Corby and east Northamptonshire are welcome news to people in urban and rural areas. The Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), visited the Kingswood estate in my constituency a few days ago and saw at first hand not only our problems but the way in which the police and the community are working together in partnership, and with the extra Government money, to reduce burglary.

Problems remain, however: cars continue to be vandalised and homes broken into. The effect on the victims is devastating. People's perceptions of whether the estate is a safe place to live are also affected. Will my hon. Friend assure me that he will consider seriously—and I hope respond positively to—the Kingswood estate's bid for CCTV cameras to help reduce the fear of crime?

Mr. O'Brien: We will certainly consider the bid seriously. Of course, I cannot guarantee the outcome. The Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South, who visited Kingswood recently says that he saw the partnerships between the police, local authorities and, indeed, my hon. Friend, who has contributed enormously to building those relationships. My right hon. Friend also said that those partnerships were dynamic and were seriously addressing the problems of crime in Corby. I congratulate my hon. Friend on that. We shall do all that we can to maintain the position that, under Labour, crime is falling and police numbers are increasing.

Asylum Support

3. **Mr. John Randall** (Uxbridge): What discussions he has had with local authorities regarding the dispersal of asylum seekers. [147089]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): I regularly meet local authority representatives to discuss issues that arise from the introduction of the national asylum support service. I visited Newcastle recently to meet representatives of the north-east regional consortium for asylum support.

Mr. Randall: The Department's dispersal strategy does not cover unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. My local authority, the London borough of Hillingdon, is currently suffering a funding gap of £3 million in providing services for those children. Now that the Department has responsibilities for such funding, can the Minister assure my constituents that adequate funding will be available to my local authority?

Mrs. Roche: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has raised the important matter of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Last year, Hillingdon received £500 per week for each unaccompanied minor aged up to and including 15, and £300 per week for each asylum seeker aged 16 or 17.

We will consider the responses to the consultation document. The Department is in active contact with local authorities. The subject is important, which is why I have taken a close personal interest in it.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): My hon. Friend knows that unaccompanied minors become the responsibility of the NASS when they are 18. Unlike other children who are in local authority care, they are not subject to the provisions of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, under which we expect local authorities to follow children up when they become 18. Dispersal causes problems for children who have been in care and who are subsequently moved, thus losing the support of the area in which they lived. Will my hon. Friend discuss the matter again with local authorities to ascertain whether we can devise a better system for those children?

Mrs. Roche: My hon. Friend makes an important point based on his knowledge as chairman of the all-party group on refugees. My officials are in contact with other officials on the matter. We are considering whether children can be catered for when they go on to the NASS. I assure my hon. Friend that we take account of people's location for the purposes of examinations and the educational cycle.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): Does the Minister believe that it is humane, as part of the dispersal technique, to require a young Rwandan refugee who lives in Beckenham to attend an interview in Liverpool at 9 am? That means that she has to catch a train that leaves London at 3 am. She speaks only French, and is traumatised by her brother's death in front of her in Rwanda. Is the Government's policy truly humane?

Mrs. Roche: We must ensure that people are interviewed as quickly as possible. I understand the hon. Lady's interest in the matter, but nothing is more detrimental to those seeking asylum than facing years of delay. That is why we have made resources for hearing cases available in other parts of the country. We certainly consider people's travel arrangements.

I have had correspondence with the hon. Lady on a number of other matters. She has now brought this issue to my attention, and I shall certainly consider it and get back to her. The key issue is that we must ensure that people have an early resolution of their cases. We have expanded the operation to Liverpool and Leeds in the interest of clearing the backlog which, sadly, the hon. Lady's Government left us.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I thank the Minister for attending a meeting with me and Slough borough council about support for asylum seekers. Will she assure me that

she will consider carefully our case for additional resources, so that the local residents of Slough will not be expected to pay for asylum seekers out of their council tax?

Mrs. Roche: My hon. Friend will know that we have made increased sums of money available. She will also know that Slough has benefited from special increases such as those that we gave to London. Slough was the only other place to receive them, because of the particular nature of its circumstances. We shall consider carefully what the Audit Commission has to say about the variations in grant.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Will the Minister tell us what percentage of those who have not only failed to make a case for genuine asylum but have failed even to make a case for exceptional leave to remain on compassionate grounds have been returned?

Mrs. Roche: As I have frequently said to the right hon. Lady, we need to increase the rate of return. Last year, we returned more than 8,000 people, which is much more than her Government were able to do. The way to affect the return rate is to have more detention space at the other end of the process. I am therefore disappointed that the Conservatives oppose the increase in detention space. I am afraid that when it is in their own back yards, they simply will not have it.

Miss Widdecombe: Perhaps the hon. Lady has missed the point. We are proposing that all new applicants for asylum should be detained in secure reception centres. She could not give us the facts, so let me give her some. Last year, there were 76,850 refusals and only 7,610 removals. Is it not true that the Home Secretary and his friends do not know where those who have been refused are; have not a clue how to find out where they are; have no plan to work out a way of finding out; and therefore could not remove them even if they had the will to do so, which patently they do not?

Mrs. Roche: Let me assist the right hon. Lady. I am anxious that she should be in possession of the full facts, although I realise that they will not alter her view. In 1996, 3,190 people were removed. In 1999, more than 7,600 were removed. In 2000—*[Interruption.]* These are provisional figures. *[Laughter.]* Opposition Members laugh, but the thing about provisional figures is that they can go up. In 2000, 8,971 people were removed. That is far more than before. We have doubled the figure and we are reducing the backlog.

I shall deal with the right hon. Lady's point. It would cost billions of pounds to activate her proposals. Not only that, but she has backed away from them and now talks about applying them only to the white-list countries first. There has been a 47 per cent. reduction in that area, and we now have to deal with the difficult countries. The right hon. Lady proposes to detain people for years, which is not only expensive but inhumane and wrong.

Home Detention Curfew Scheme

4. **Mr. Stephen Day** (Cheadle): How many violent offenders have been released from prison early on the home detention curfew scheme; and if he will make a statement. [147090]

5. **Mr. Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough): What categories of offences have been committed by prisoners released under the home detention curfew scheme while they were on the scheme; and if he will make a statement. [147091]

14. **Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (Cotswold): How many prisoners, in what categories, have been released on the Government's early release scheme to date. [147100]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): As of 31 December 2000, 30,409 prisoners had been released on home detention curfew since the scheme began in January 1999. Of those, 5,573 had been convicted of an offence of violence. A table showing the breakdown of the original offences committed has been placed in the Library. A total of 533 prisoners have been reported to the Prison Service as having been convicted, charged or pending prosecution for an offence allegedly committed while on curfew. A table showing a breakdown of the offences by category has been placed in the Library. The most common offence types are motoring offences and theft.

Mr. Day: The Minister will be aware that the latest figures show an increase of 21 per cent. in the number of robberies. Does he believe that there is perhaps a connection between that and the fact that the Government have released more than 1,200 robbers back on to our streets before they have served even half of their sentence?

Mr. Boateng: No, I do not. The hon. Gentleman really ought to bear in mind his Government's record on the issue. The Criminal Justice Act 1991 introduced measures that provide for early release before completion of sentence for every prisoner, including robbers. What we are about is better management of the transition from prison to custody. The strategy is working, because there is a 94 per cent. success rate, which is better than that for any criminal justice measure that the Conservatives were ever able to introduce.

Mr. Leigh: Will the Minister confirm that 1,035 further offences were committed by criminals while subject to the scheme—including: threats to kill, three; actual bodily harm, 22; woundings, six; assaults, 35; rapes, two; indecent assaults, one; burglaries, 46; robberies, 17; and drug offences, 111? What does the right hon. Gentleman have to say to the 1,000 people who were robbed, burgled, indecently assaulted, raped, assaulted or wounded because of his scheme?

Mr. Boateng: I know that the hon. Gentleman gives these matters more serious consideration than his question reveals. He knows that the home detention curfew scheme was supported by the all-party Home Affairs Committee. He knows that his colleagues the hon. Members for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) and for Woking (Mr. Malins) all supported the scheme, and did so because it has a failure rate of only 1.8 per cent. That is minuscule compared with the failure rate of schemes introduced by the Conservative party. The scheme is about

protecting the public better and it ought to be welcomed by the all-party consensus that originally appreciated its benefits.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Whatever gloss the Minister may put on the scheme, he will know that those who are subject to it include 4,671 drug dealers who have been sentenced to 22 months or more but let out having served less than half their sentence. The drugs problem is particularly serious in Gloucestershire—there has been a huge increase in the number of registered drug addicts since the election—so surely it cannot be right to let people out before they have served their full sentence. It is insidious. Will the right hon. Gentleman consider revoking this half-baked scheme?

Mr. Boateng: What I do know, as the hon. Gentleman knows, is that the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 is making a real contribution in his county to the multi-agency approach to crime reduction—a fact which he ought to celebrate. The home detention curfew scheme contributes to the controlled and measured rehabilitation and release back to the community that underpins the measure. It is sensible, it is making a difference and it is contributing to crime reduction. That is why the hon. Members for Woking, for Surrey Heath and for Aldershot supported it and why the overwhelming majority of hon. Members support it. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will come to support it and will abandon the mischievous and misguided campaign against it.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Does the Minister accept that, despite the home detention curfew scheme—and as Lord Woolf said in his lecture last week—the public are given no greater protection when we keep in prison for short sentences a significant number of people who pose little danger to society?

Does the Minister agree with us and with Lord Woolf that people who receive a short sentence with no rehabilitation work at all are actually getting what Lord Woolf called a "soft option"—and an ineffective option—and that community sentences would be far more effective? Will he review the sentencing policy that sends many people to prison for short periods with no work done on them that prevents reoffending? Will he also ensure that people who are ill or addicted are treated either in hospital or in the community, where they can be far more effectively rehabilitated and are less likely to offend again?

Mr. Boateng: Each type of person to whom the hon. Gentleman referred will have been sentenced by the courts. It is the Prison Service's duty to implement and carry out sentences imposed by the courts, which take all matters, including the home detention curfew scheme and other factors, into account when passing sentence. The court determines that it is necessary that those people be in prison, and the Government must make sure that prisoners are held in safe, decent and humane conditions while we address the causes of their offending. That is what we are doing. We are investing record amounts in that, and we shall continue to do so.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is the Minister proud that the figure of 31,000 includes those guilty of manslaughter, of attempted murder, of actual and grievous bodily harm, of drug dealing, of cruelty to children, of sex offences, of burglary, of robbery, of violent disorder and, indeed, of affray? How does he justify the release, after serving only six weeks, or less than one third of their sentences, of no fewer than 218 people convicted of assaulting policemen? Why does he not understand that that decision on its own makes a mockery of his claim to support the police and is yet further proof of his Department's institutionalised wimpishness?

Mr. Boateng: The hon. Gentleman does himself no justice at all by that inane and absurd comment. He knows that our first duty is to protect the public. He also knows that the Criminal Justice Act 1991, as amended by the legislative provisions for the home detention curfew scheme, does that by controlling the release of those convicted and sentenced by the courts. It is the courts that determine the length of sentence. They impose a sentence knowing that in cases where individuals are eligible for it, the home detention curfew scheme will be the basis on which prisoners are released.

If the hon. Gentleman would like to join me in visiting his local prison and meeting the governor there, he will find out that the risk assessment carried out by the governor has contributed to the overwhelming success of the scheme. Ninety-four per cent. is a record for which Conservative Members would have given their right arm when they were in office.

Police Recruitment and Housing Costs

6. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): If he plans to meet chief constables to discuss recruitment and housing costs. [147092]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): Ministers meet chief constables frequently. The crime fighting fund will enable police forces to recruit 9,000 police officers over and above the number previously planned in the three years 2000–01 to 2002–03, with the aim of bringing numbers overall to record levels. Following the increase of £3,300 in the London allowance, which I agreed last year, an offer has been made of £2,000 for those working in the home counties forces within a 30-mile radius of central London, and £1,000 for those within a radius of 30 to 40 miles. The Police Negotiating Board is meeting on 8 February and I very much hope that an agreement will be reached without delay.

Mr. Swayne: The Secretary of State will be aware that the crime fighting fund has granted Hampshire an additional 82 officers in the current financial year, but that because of our inability to recruit them, we are having to ask that 62 of those be deferred to next year. That leaves us having to recruit 300 fantasy officers next year. The right hon. Gentleman's arrangements for London and the radius around it will make our position worse. What does he propose to do to address the economic realities facing recruits in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman fantasises about a variety of things, and we are all aware of the phantoms in his life. I am pleased to reassure him that the increase in recruitment is real. In January 2001, there was an increase

in the number of recruits entering training college of two and a half times—to 820—over the figures for January 12 months ago. The hon. Gentleman should bear in mind the fact that other home counties forces such as Sussex, Surrey and Kent do not have the recruitment difficulties that Hampshire is experiencing.

The hon. Gentleman asked me what we are doing about the problem in Hampshire. We have made an offer to the Police Negotiating Board. I hope that that offer or something very similar to it is quickly accepted. The sooner it is accepted, the sooner the genuine recruitment problems, which I recognise exist, will be sorted out. I am pleased to tell the hon. Gentleman that the chief constable of Hampshire, Mr. Kernaghan, wrote to me only last week to say that he was pleased to learn that the Home Office was addressing the needs of home counties forces.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): When my right hon. Friend next meets the chief constable of West Yorkshire, will he discuss with him the plans to reorganise the divisional command structures in the Bradford district? There are extremely welcome plans to rationalise and reduce the amount spent on administration and bureaucracy, but we need to ensure that those resources can be redirected to increasing the number of front-line police officers even further.

Mr. Straw: I am happy to receive representations from my hon. Friend about the reorganisation of the Bradford district. That is a matter for the chief constable and the police authority. Many other chief constables and police authorities have reorganised their command structure, and as a result have assured the release of hundreds of additional officers for front-line duties.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): On 16 February last year, the Prime Minister said:

"every single promise that we made—on getting waiting lists down, getting class sizes down and increasing police numbers—will be met by the next general election".—[*Official Report*, 16 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 948.]

The Government are failing to get real waiting lists down, and they are failing to decrease the number of large secondary classes. Can the Home Secretary guarantee that there will be at least as many police officers at the time of the next general election as there were at the time of the last?

Mr. Straw: I am happy to be judged by the promises that we made, which included reducing class sizes in infant schools—not in secondary schools. That promise has already been met, and waiting lists have already been reduced. The Conservative party made mendacious promises about police numbers, promising an extra 5,000 police officers when funding was to decrease. We did no such thing. The promises that we have made about increasing the number of police officers year by year will be met, and by 2003–04 police numbers will be at record levels—no thanks to the Conservative party.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): When I discussed the issue of police recruitment in my constituency recently, I was told that one of the worst decisions affecting recruitment in the south-east in the past 10 years had been the abolition of the housing allowance by the previous Government in 1994. The £1,000 and £2,000 allowances are an effective response to the problem, but they have been on the table for some while now. Will my right hon. Friend press the Police Negotiating Board and the Police Federation to reach a speedy conclusion, because that will lead to higher recruitment in my constituency?

Mr. Bercow: Robert Halfon for Harlow!

Mr. Straw: I do not know who he is, but he certainly will not be for Harlow.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) is entirely right. I share his frustration with the proceedings of the Police Negotiating Board. I am afraid to say that, as a result of the difficulties that preceded my offer of a £3,500 increase for Metropolitan police officers, the process was unnecessarily delayed for months and months. I hope that local police federations representing the forces, especially in the home counties, will put pressure on their colleagues in the national federation to accept that this is the best offer that could be made; that the problems go back directly to the previous Government, who abolished the housing allowance altogether; and that our proposal will make a big difference to recruitment, not least in my home county area of Harlow.

Dangerous Driving (Deaths)

7. **Mr. Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): What recent representations he has received regarding the penalties available in cases of causing death by dangerous driving. [147093]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): The Government published a consultation paper on road traffic penalties on 19 December last year. Both before then and subsequently, we have received a large number of representations from members of the public, Members of Parliament—including the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton), whom I met to discuss the matter—and a wide range of organisations. We shall take all those representations into account before reaching final views based on the consultation paper.

Mr. Loughton: As he said, the Minister is aware of my concern about the inadequacy of penalties for causing death by dangerous driving following the tragic killing of PC Jeff Tooley in my constituency. Yet in the year of his death, only 13 of 152 people convicted of causing death by dangerous driving were given sentences of five years or more.

Why, in the document to which he referred, has the Minister ducked living up to his own tough words about making life sentences available for the worst cases of causing death by dangerous driving, rather than the current woefully inadequate 10-year maximum? What message does that send to the families of victims, and to perpetrators, when 190 killer drivers have been let out on the Government's early release scheme having served, on average, 42 per cent. of their time?

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman's point about the penalties available is important. Since the beginning of 2000, we have received representations from 29 Members

of Parliament about the deaths of constituents during that period as a result of dangerous driving. In our consultation paper, we included a set of proposals which I believe took the situation significantly forward, not least by sending courts the message that we expect them to impose penalties that are appropriate to the crimes rather than being laughably less than that, as is too often the case.

The hon. Gentleman's general point about life sentences is legitimate. No doubt he and others will continue to advance that argument as we decide what action to take, on the basis of responses to our consultation paper.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I implore my hon. Friend to have regard for the fact that the Crown Prosecution Service has a large part to play in sentencing. The offences of dangerous driving and careless driving must be divorced, as they carry different sentences. Will my hon. Friend assure us that magistrates who hear evidence about such offences will be backed up? They listen to all the evidence before making decisions, and it would be wrong to undermine their work.

Mr. Clarke: I can give my hon. Friend the assurances that he seeks. I can also tell him that the average sentence for the causing of death by dangerous driving, for instance, has been rising rather than falling; but the Government feel that that is not enough, which is why we published the consultation paper and why we intend to take action once we know what responses have been received.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am extremely concerned about the number of accidents caused by drivers who have taken illegal substances. Would the Minister consider organising an education programme involving leaflets for those who apply for driving licences or to renew their tax discs? It should be explained to people that certain drugs stay in the bloodstream far longer than alcohol, and that, while they should not take such drugs in the first place, they certainly should not drive if they have been taking them.

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman is entirely correct in all that he says. We already have a substantial education programme on drug and alcohol abuse and driving, but I shall be happy to consider his specific proposals. This is a serious problem, and it needs to be addressed seriously.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): My hon. Friend will know that the best way in which to murder anyone in this country is to kill them with a motor car. The problem has been with us not for a short time, but for a very long time. Will my hon. Friend please give us an undertaking that decisions will be made as a matter of urgency? The agony of families who lose someone in this way is almost unbearable, and it is terribly important for us to show them that we take the matter seriously.

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is entirely right in every respect. The consultation paper was a major step forward. It is one of which I am personally proud and it advances significantly the argument on penalties. In my role as a Home Office Minister, I have met many hon. Members, including the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, and families who have been bereaved as a result of dangerous driving. Significant support can be given to the families of victims of road crime and we have increased the resources for major educational programmes on drinking and driving, but there is no doubt that the most effective cure is to prevent the accidents from happening in the first place. That is why higher penalties are necessary and why the legislation to reduce speeding through the use of speed cameras, which has just gone out of the House of Commons and is being considered by the other place, is important.

Police Administration

8. **Ms Ruth Kelly** (Bolton, West): What measures he has taken to reduce and remove unnecessary administrative burdens on the police service and to ensure that police officers spend more time on operational duties. [147094]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): We are implementing proposals from the recent report entitled "Making a Difference: Reducing Police Paperwork" and, last November, we issued police forces in England and Wales with a revised manual of guidance for the preparation, processing and submission of files. That will reduce considerably the number of forms that officers have to complete when they pass cases to the Crown Prosecution Service. We are also investing in a wide range of new communications technology to minimise the paperwork that officers are required to process.

Ms Kelly: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Will he assure me that he will continue to move resources from bureaucracy to front-line officers? My constituents in Bolton, West, whose communities are being scarred by a very small minority of young hooligans, feel strongly that more bobbies on the beat are needed to crack down on yobbish behaviour.

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is entirely right. May I take this opportunity to congratulate the *Bolton Evening News* and Labour Members for Bolton, who have campaigned energetically on precisely the points that she has raised?

A series of factors contributes to more bobbies on the beat. One is the number of police themselves; the second is operational levels; the third is the proper use of technology; the fourth is a more effective criminal justice system than the current one to ensure that police officers are not constantly obstructed in a wasteful way; and the fifth is effective partnerships between the police and other social institutions such as local authorities. The measures that we have already put in place and which we are introducing in current legislation will make an impact on the issues that my hon. Friend, her constituents and local newspaper have forcefully raised.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): Does the Minister realise that front-line officers in my constituency welcome the reopening of the East Molesey police station, soon to be followed by Cobham police station, by volunteers? Last week, in a written answer, he gave me a bland reply in relation to support for volunteers. At the Dispatch Box, will he stiffen his sinews and say that the Government not only welcome volunteers, but will find extra ways to

provide modest resources to them, so that they can continue to give confidence to the communities in which they work and continue to get the police out on the beat?

Mr. Clarke: I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurances that he seeks and apologise if my earlier reply was bland. That was certainly not my intention. I investigated that matter soon after I took up the post of Minister. One of the things that surprised me was the wide range of volunteering initiatives in different forces throughout the country, which are treated extremely positively both by the police and by the communities that they serve. We are positively looking at ways of extending such initiatives. I am happy to confirm that that is one of the issues that we are addressing with the police in relation to measures to increase visibility and to reassure communities. Those initiatives can be set up in both isolated and non-isolated communities and are often constructive.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): My hon. Friend will know that the Pennine division in the Lancashire force and indeed the Lancashire force as a whole have effectively ensured that the police are out on the beat doing the job and are doing less administration work. They have made excellent progress, but does he agree that one other concern is that far too much police time is taken up attending court merely for the deferment of a case?

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is entirely right. Some of the changes that we have already put in place—for example, the Narey changes—are already helping, but much more needs to be done. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister asked Lord Justice Robin Auld to conduct a review of the whole criminal justice process. The inefficiencies that hit police also hit many other parts of the community. Substantial reforms are needed.

A good range of evidence has been presented to the review. I hope that, when the report is published in a month or so, we will have an agenda on which we can make progress. The changes for which my hon. Friend is looking will have the impact of increasing the police presence locally, which I am sure the whole House would welcome.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: The hon. Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly) is absolutely right when she talks about bobbies on the beat. Time and again, my own constituents in Macclesfield talk to me about the need for police to be visible in the community. Does the Minister—who has given very rational and responsible replies to the initial question and to the supplementary ones—accept that police officers on the beat in the community, building relationships, can genuinely lead not only to a reduction in crime, but to greater information for the police force so that it can prevent crime?

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman is entirely correct. I should like to add just one measure to the list of those that I think are important to improving the situation. Recently, new guidance has been issued on tenure for police officers, which has ensured a less rapid turnaround of community officers. That rapid turnaround had made it necessary, every couple of years or so, for new community officers to renew relationships, which was a very time-consuming process.

It is precisely the type of personal relationship that the hon. Gentleman has described which has made the difference in many communities across the country, as individual community beat officers have thrown their own energy into building relationships with, for example, housing organisations, schools and doctors. We want to do everything that we can to encourage that.

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): I congratulate my hon. Friend on recognising the particular needs of rural police forces, such as North Yorkshire, in maintaining contact with the public. May I invite him to make an early visit to the experimental police station in the East division in my constituency, which is focusing particularly on making that contact with rural constituents and ensuring that law and order is ever-present in rural areas such as mine?

Mr. Clarke: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. I should also like to take up that invitation when next I am able to do so. I was delighted that, only a couple of weeks ago, on 26 January, the North Yorkshire police force chief constable and the chairman of the police authority announced:

"North Yorkshire will have more police officers than ever before"—

I stress "than ever before"—

"with the proposed increase in strength taking the force to 1,420 officers by March 2002."

That was an historic announcement, and I know that the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) will welcome it just as much as my hon. Friend does.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): But is not the Minister aware that matters are getting worse, not better? Has he heard of the comments of the chief constable of Lincolnshire, who talks of his force being

"in danger of sinking under a sea of targets and measures"?

Is the Minister aware of the comments of Chief Inspector Ray Shepherd, of West Yorkshire police, who asked:

"Is Charles Clarke, the Home Office Minister, being fed so much nonsense that he isn't aware that police officers nowadays have far more paperwork to complete than before?"

Does not that help to explain the 60 per cent. increase in voluntary resignations from the police since 1997? Does not it help to explain the one-third fall in the number of specials? Is not it wrong to be putting police officers on to tasks of counting, measuring and filling in returns when we want those officers out there doing the job? Does not that explain why the Prime Minister will not debate the Leader of the Opposition on those matters?

Mr. Clarke: I meet the chief constable of Lincolnshire very often; he is a member of the national crime reduction taskforce which I chair. He is not an unhappy man, but a very happy one, and I hope to see him later in the week. The hon. Gentleman can be as rhetorical as he likes, but the facts are that crime levels are falling, as they have been doing throughout this Parliament; police numbers are increasing, for the first time since 1993; police morale is increasing, contrary to what he has to say; and the various measures that we have implemented to deal with particular aspects of crime, both nationally and in specific geographical localities, are improving the situation. I do

not hide the fact that there is a great deal still to be done—that is certainly the truth—but we are doing extremely well, and shall continue to do so.

Police Funding

9. **Mr. Colin Pickthall** (West Lancashire): What research he has undertaken into the correlation between the funding of police forces and their success in controlling the levels of crime and disorder. [147095]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): As tables that are on the record in the *Official Report* show, changes in the number of officers alongside changes in crime at force level over a period in the 1990s indicate little correlation between the two.

However, the Audit Commission reported in March of last year that there is no consistent link between increases in spending and improvements in performance. Some forces with among the best records in reducing crime have had below-average increases in funding during these years. Police numbers and funding are of course important, but as important is how effectively the resources are used.

Mr. Pickthall: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply, because it is important to understand that there is no direct, easy correlation between spending on police and success in fighting crime and disorder. It is as much a question of good management, good targeting and good prioritising by chief constables. Does he agree that some of the disparities between forces, in this regard are striking? How can the Home Office ensure that the poorest performers are brought up to the standards of the best, such as Lancashire and Cumbria?

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend is entirely right that the disparities in performance are striking, even when we compare like with like as closely as possible. We are doing that with the crime statistics; grouping basic command units in crime and reduction partnership areas into what are called statistical families, which show the striking differences in performance. They also show striking differences in the use of resources. Some forces which have had average or below-average increases in funding in the past six years have increased police numbers. In other forces, the chief constables have decided to spend the money on other things. It is crucial that performance data are made available and that there is measurement and not ignorance, so the public in each area can judge the performance of their force and their police area compared with others and so forces are held properly accountable at an operational level.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): With great respect, I must take issue with the Home Secretary's comments in regard to my part of London. Surely if police numbers fall, if the time that officers have on the beat reduces and if morale is low, those ingredients are responsible for an increase in serious crime. Does not that make it more difficult for the police force in question to maintain the law and keep the peace? Will he look again at the figures, which are having serious and deleterious effects in my part of London?

Mr. Straw: I accept that increased funding and police numbers are important. As the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), has just pointed out, we are increasing funding and police numbers, reversing the decline that started in the early 1990s. Nowhere was that decline sharper than in the Metropolitan police area, where there was a drop of nearly 2,000 officers under the previous Government. With the greatest respect, I do not recall the hon. Gentleman protesting about that at the time. More resources and more police officers are important, but if he looks at the data in the *Official Report*, he will see striking differences in the performance of otherwise similar police areas, just as there are differences between different police divisions within the Metropolitan police. There is no magic about this. It comes down to a truth that everybody in management in the private and public sectors knows: how one performs at a given level of resources depends on management, leadership and organisation. I am pleased to say that respective performance is now improving, which is why recruitment is going up and morale is rising.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): I congratulate Kent police on the 23 per cent. reduction in crime since 1997; in some areas, such as Lorton close, crime has been reduced by 70 per cent. since 1997. Does my right hon. Friend accept that, in part, that may be due to the significant increases in the resources available to Kent police but, more importantly, that it is due to the leadership provided within Kent police, its effective work within the local community and local authority and the measures taken to reduce the causes of crime; the last, perhaps, being the most significant factor of all?

Mr. Straw: I agree entirely. Kent makes my point exactly. It has the best record for crime reduction between 1996–97 and 1999–2000 of any of the country's 43 police forces, even though it was only ninth in terms of changes in police numbers and had around average budget increases. That shows what could be done by other forces with excellent leadership of the kind provided by Sir David Phillips, with well-motivated officers and with the funding that we are now putting in.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): Does the Home Secretary accept that, just as it is not right to reward poorly performing police forces, it is equally wrong to penalise those that perform well? Dorset has the second lowest funding per capita in the United Kingdom but, thanks to the inspired leadership of Jane Stichbury, our chief constable, and members of her force, it does remarkably well by targeting certain areas. It has reduced burglary and car theft, but there remains a severe problem with street crime, which is growing, and drug-related crime, because we have drug rehabilitation centres to which people are sent from all over the country.

With yet another very low settlement, we are falling further and further behind. We were managing to maintain standards only by stretching all our resources absolutely to the limit—indeed, to breaking point.

Mr. Straw: Like the hon. Gentleman, I pay tribute to the chief constable and all her officers and staff for their very good record. Police numbers in Dorset have increased since March 1997. I understand that the arguments about how the overall money should be

allocated within the standard spending assessment are perennial and will go on for ever, but it should be noted that we have made special provision for rural forces, including Dorset, and that in the full year it will receive £440,000, a substantial grant, in recognition of the county's rural needs.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): We all want more police on the street, but does not the research into the funding of police authorities show the importance of tackling social exclusion, having more facilities for young people, and a whole variety of measures to combat the causes of crime, in the effort to bring the crime figures down?

Mr. Straw: I agree entirely. I congratulate my hon. Friend, his district council and the local police on all the work that they are undertaking. Of course, it is the case that, if we are to get crime and disorder down, we must attack the underlying and immediate causes as well as incidents of crime when they happen. That is why we are targeting potential young offenders as well as those who have actually committed crimes. We are also joining up the powers of the education authorities and the police so that they can conduct truancy sweeps and ensure that the youngsters are back in school, as well as doing much other work the better to support families and their children at risk.

Police Manpower

11. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): If he will list those police forces which do not have a full establishment of officers. [147097]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Under legislation passed by the previous Government, chief officers of police were given the power to determine within available resources the number of officers that there should be in their force. There is therefore no centrally determined establishment.

Mr. Brady: I am grateful to the Minister for that response, although it could only be categorised as less than full and frank. Will he now give the rather shorter list of those police forces that do have a full establishment of officers?

Mr. Clarke: I am terribly sorry, but the hon. Gentleman is simply not grasping the point. As a result of legislation passed by the previous Government, there is no longer a centrally determined establishment for each force in Britain, so his question is essentially meaningless. That was what I was trying, as courteously as possible, to point out.

Police Funding

12. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): What assessment he has made of the average percentage change from 2001–02 to 2000–01 for police authorities in England and Wales in respect of *(a)* total revenue expenditure and *(b)* council tax precept. [147098]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I am glad that the very full exchange on the previous question indicated its essential meaninglessness.

These are matters for individual police authorities, which are required to set their net budget requirements and issue precepts for 2001–02 by 1 March. We can make serious assessments about levels of total revenue expenditure and council tax precept only after that date.

Mr. Heath: Even if the Minister does not know the answer, I at least have some idea of it from having examined some of the budget papers of the west country police forces. The increase in precept has been anything from 5 per cent. to 9.7 per cent., and it has been 7.5 per cent. in my local force, Avon and Somerset constabulary. The problem is that most of the money will pay not for extra police officers but for the area cost adjustment, which the *Western Daily Press* has called the "tax on the West". When will we be able to put money into having extra police officers rather than paying for a national scheme that involves our funding other councils?

Mr. Clarke: Through the police grant and our crime fighting fund, the Government are putting resources directly into funding police officers up and down the country. We debated that point last week during the police grant debate. As the hon. Gentleman well knows, the area cost adjustment is a matter for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, within which the police system works. However, for the reason suggested by the hon. Gentleman, we are putting extra resources into the crime fighting fund and rural funds, and we are, by various other means, putting more resources into policing. That is reducing crime throughout the country, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman would welcome that.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. In view of ever-increasing incursions by Albanian or Kosovo Liberation Army forces into southern Macedonia and southern Serbia and of the apprehension of KLA personnel by British personnel and their handing over not to KFOR but to the Americans at Camp Bond Steel, have you had any request from the Ministry of Defence to comment on those important events?

Mr. Speaker: No.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You will remember that the Leader of the House of Commons promised on Thursday that there would be a statement from the Deputy Prime Minister when his talks with the commissioner for transport in London had reached a refined stage. Are not the travelling public in London facing a crisis at a refined stage of misery because of the political strike on the London underground? Have Transport Ministers suggested to you that they should face up to their responsibilities by making a statement to the House?

Mr. Speaker: There is a further point of order.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. In view of the lack of investment in the tube over the past four years, the clear deterioration of the tube and today's dreadful strike, and because of the statement made by the Deputy Prime Minister on Friday—a humiliating climbdown for him and a clear change in Government policy—do not the Government owe the House the courtesy of an explanation and a statement?

Mr. Speaker: Both hon. Gentlemen have raised that matter as a point of order, but it has nothing to do with the Chair.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. A few moments ago, the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), said that a question was "meaningless". Is it not up to the Clerks and the Table Office to determine whether a question is meaningless? Was it not discourteous to the Table Office to say so?

Mr. Speaker: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman should worry too much about the Table Office, which can handle itself.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Further to the point of order made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), Mr. Speaker. In what circumstances can we expect the Deputy Prime Minister to make a statement to the House? Is it not a normal courtesy to make statements to the House rather than at a press conference?

Mr. Speaker: That is up to the Deputy Prime Minister.

Opposition Day

[4TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Poverty (Wales)

Mr. Speaker: I should inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.33 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I beg to move,

That this House notes that there is growing poverty throughout Wales, both in rural and urban areas with a widening gap between rich and poor; further notes the Government's failure to avoid the problems in the manufacturing industry as evidenced by the huge job losses announced by Corus which will add greatly to the problems of social exclusion in Wales; further notes that the Welsh Affairs Committee in the Third Report of Session 1999–2000, HC 365, 'Social Exclusion in Wales' reported on the matter, concluding that: Government should consider regional variations in tax to encourage investment, that it may well be necessary for the basic state pension to be increased in line with average earnings, that Government should initiate a comprehensive national benefit take-up campaign, that increasing the level of benefits is central to tackling social exclusion, and that the Barnett formula should be reassessed to reflect a needs-based formula.

The term "social exclusion" conjures up many images and has been subject to a great deal of academic debate. It appears to be a moot point whether social exclusion must include poverty, but it seems to me that wherever there is an example of social exclusion, poverty is there or thereabouts.

Social exclusion is not confined to urban areas—far from it; it also exists in rural areas where public transport is poor, where village shops and post offices are closing and where the infrastructure of rural life is under threat. All of that is exacerbated by the crisis in agriculture, which has had a huge impact on the rural economy. Throughout Wales, once-bustling market towns are now quiet; the effects of out-of-town shopping and the current crisis cast a dark shadow on them. The rural post office is in danger of becoming merely a fond memory. Again, that affects people in the greatest need and those most at risk of exclusion—the elderly, the poor, the unemployed and those for whom public transport is the only means of transport.

Since taking office, the Government have stood by as one in eight of our sub-post offices have closed. Every month, Members receive a pro forma letter from Post Office Counters Ltd. about proposed closures, asking whether we know of anyone who would be interested in taking over such businesses. The advertising campaign mounted by Post Office Counters is a joke. Typically, it consists of putting up one sheet of A4 in the shop window of the nearest sub-post office for six or seven days. One would have thought that this Labour Government—of all Governments—would realise that such publicity was not very effective.

The Select Committee on Welsh Affairs has made some useful suggestions on the matter. It recommends that the Post Office should appoint a network development officer and officers in rural and socially deprived areas to ensure that unnecessary post office closures are avoided.

The Committee recommends that, when it is known that a manager is about to retire, Post Office Counters should immediately initiate an active campaign to find a replacement on terms favourable to a prospective applicant.

The Select Committee calls for full implementation of the performance and innovation unit report. Let us not forget, however, that it was the Labour Government who initiated the Horizon project and who will, I fear, deprive us of our rural post offices—40 per cent. of their income is under threat and 60 per cent. of the existing network is estimated to be at risk.

Freudian slips are being made by Post Office Counters. When a decision is taken to close a given sub-post office, reference is made only to the nearest sub-post office that remains open. I have no doubt that the agenda of Post Office Counters is that of so-called rationalisation. An excellent candidate in my constituency—with an already flourishing business and an extremely good track record—was told by a Post Office Counters operative that taking over the post office was a waste of his time and "not worth it". How do we counter that?

Last Thursday, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry spoke in the House about job losses at Corus. I share the right hon. Gentleman's genuine concern at the behaviour of Corus and its chairman, but the Government must face up to the fact that they have done little over the past 18 months to two years. It should have been obvious that Corus was in some difficulty—18 months ago, the company's accounts showed a loss of £1 billion. That should have rung some alarm bells among the Government.

I do not accept that it is good enough for a Minister to claim that Corus would not speak to the Government about that or that a Minister could have remained in ignorance—in the strictest sense—of what was going on. I always thought that Governments had certain economic levers available to them; after all, they have an interest in our communities and in maintaining a good manufacturing sector. Unfortunately, it appears that they have done nothing. During Labour's time in office—more than three years—16,000 manufacturing jobs have been lost in Wales alone.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): The hon. Gentleman mentions discussions between Corus and Ministers. I should be interested to know whether he has held discussions with the chief executive and chairman of Corus. I assure him that, on the Monday before the announcement, my Labour colleagues held discussions with the chief executive and chairman, who told us categorically that no decision had been made on any plant. If he was telling the truth, it shows that the decisions were made in only two days; if he was not telling the truth, it shows both deceit and the contempt in which he holds the work force, Parliament and the Government. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Mr. Llwyd: I certainly partly agree, but I agree most definitely about last week's behaviour. I was making the point that it has been known that the industry was in difficulty for more than 18 months, and that operating aids could have been offered. We should be considering better regional policies, given the disparity between the south-east and the other constituent parts of the United Kingdom.

I take the point made by the hon. Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) and I certainly could not condone such behaviour, but the risks have been known for some time and the Government have been inactive. Until I hear differently, that is my view. During Thursday's statement, I specifically asked the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what help had been offered to Corus. His answer was that I should find out what the National Assembly had done. With respect, his reply did not take the matter much further, and it tends to support my view that very little has been done. We can think about what happened to Rover.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): The hon. Gentleman and I disagree on some matters, but does he agree that the statement made by my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) is true? Many of us attended the meeting with the chairman of Corus. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Corus has treated a magnificent work force most shabbily? He might agree that the Shotton work force should not have had that kick in the teeth and that Shotton steelworks should receive investment. He might find that some of his ideas agree with ours.

Mr. Llwyd: The right hon. Gentleman is right. I do not doubt for a second what the hon. Member for Monmouth says. I know him too well to doubt anything that he says on the Floor of the House. I agree entirely with the right hon. Gentleman that things should not have happened as they did, but we have to question what action the Government took in the preceding few months. No one can condone what happened, and it is an absolute disgrace that those communities in Wales are now being cast aside in such a callous, cynical manner—the worst possible example of capitalism gone bad. [HON. MEMBERS: "Blame Corus."] That is exactly the point that I want to make if hon. Members will contain themselves for a minute or two.

I am trying to develop the point that a regional policy, operating aids and so on should be considered. If not, what is the point of objective 1, under which it is recognised that parts of the United Kingdom are doing very badly, while others are doing well? That is not only my view. I shall quote the following:

> "Since 1990 the share of GDP within the UK has declined significantly in the North East, the North West, the West Midlands, Wales and Scotland. It has increased significantly in the Eastern Region, London and the South East. These are symptoms of something fundamental. We don't have to look far for some of the causes. In 1998 manufacturing businesses invested over ten times as much in research and development in the South East—£1.9 billion—than in the North East—£164 million. Lack of investment, poor skills and education qualification, these are some of the underlying causes we need to tackle."

Those comments were made by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in November. Obviously, he recognises that there are regional economic disparities in the United Kingdom, but what has been done to counter the problem in Wales? I shall leave the point there; I hope that it is well made. Although there is much agreement in the Chamber, it is still a moot point, and I am sure that one of my right hon. or hon. Friends will develop it further.

The quotation that I cited shows that the Secretary of State has acknowledged the disparities for some time. Therefore, why has no attempt been made to develop a regional economic policy for Wales? I mentioned

[Mr. Llwyd]

operating aids, and in this context the Government would be entitled to introduce a lower corporation tax and a lower employer's national insurance contribution. Other grant aid is available as a spur for manufacturing industry in general. A specific package could have been introduced to assist Corus with its difficulties.

Why have those suggestions not been taken up? It is all very well making a speech about economic disparities, but what answers have been given to deal with the problems of the various regions and parts of the United Kingdom?

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): The hon. Gentleman refers to disparities in Wales and elsewhere and to the answers that have been given to overcome them, but will he comment on what happened in the Assembly when his colleagues abstained in the vote that provided an additional £5.5 million for Blaenau Gwent? They failed to vote for that money. If their inactivity had been rewarded and the money had not come to Blaenau Gwent, not only would public services have been slashed dramatically but our council taxes would have increased by between 50 and 60 per cent. Does he think that not voting for money for areas such as Blaenau Gwent is the answer to overcoming disparities and deprivation?

Mr. Llwyd: The answer is that the settlement was totally inadequate. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman may laugh, but he has made his point and I did not find it very funny.

Mr. Smith *rose—*

Mr. Llwyd: If the hon. Gentleman bears with me, I shall respond to him. The settlement was insufficient—cuts have been made here, there and everywhere in local government. More important, much of that money has gone towards match funding for objective 1 projects, and I speak with some authority on that subject.

Mr. Smith: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the logic of his argument is that nothing is better than something? The nationalist party did not vote for any additional money for Blaenau Gwent; it failed to vote for the £5.5 million that was allocated to our community.

Mr. Llwyd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point, but it was a Labour budget and it was unamendable. What does he suggest could have been done in those circumstances?

Mr. Smith: The nationalists could have shown their support for some of the most deprived communities in Wales by voting for the £5.5 million that the Labour Administration allocated for Blaenau Gwent. The fact that they failed to do so showed their disdain for my community and for some of the poorest communities in Wales.

Mr. Llwyd: I shall not respond to that final point, because it was getting ridiculous.

I shall return to the main point of this debate and the 16,000 jobs that have been lost to manufacturing industry in Wales since the Government took office. I can conclude only that some inactivity—either intentional or otherwise—has led to many jobs being lost in the perceived Labour heartlands in Wales. The mood is one of anger—anger at inactivity and anger at being taken for granted as traditional Labour voters.

The next election in Wales will prove to be very interesting, and more interesting even than the National Assembly election. That might have something to do with the peculiar behaviour of Mr. Adrian McMenamin.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): Who is he?

Mr. Llwyd: The right hon. Gentleman asks, "Who is he?" I did not know either until Mr. McMenamin started misbehaving; he is such a useful member of the Wales Office team. He was employed by the Secretary of State for Wales as a ministerial special adviser and he is still employed—lucky man. He is paid out of the public purse and he spends time at home and in working hours denigrating members of Plaid Cymru—the Party of Wales—in the most offensive manner. The Secretary of State for Wales says that such behaviour is okay, but I will not dwell long on his view. He is not here today and I have been told why, so I shall not make an issue of it.

The Secretary of State cannot get away with the argument that Mr. McMenamin is not prohibited from behaving in the way that I have described outside office hours, because he jolly well is. Under his designation, he is not supposed to take political actions—however strange they may be—during office hours or at any other time. I sincerely believe that, if the right hon. Gentleman wants to consider himself a right hon. Gentleman, he must dismiss Mr. McMenamin, whether he is a maverick or part and parcel of something else.

Currently, two computers are busily churning out offensive remarks about members of my party. One has been registered to Millbank and the other to the Wales Office. We know that the previous Government were beset by sleaze, but it is sleazy of the Labour party to pay an official to insult Plaid Cymru Members as individuals. The last thing that I would do is insult a Labour Member, or, indeed, a member of any political party. We have a right to express our views and not to be denigrated and slagged off.

Mrs. Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): I was interested by the hon. Gentleman's remarks about the use of public funds for political opportunity. Will he assure me that the press releases sent out in my area from the office of a Plaid Cymru Member of the European Parliament are paid for by his party, rather than from the public funds allocated to MEPs?

Mr. Llwyd: Of course they are paid for properly, but, if the hon. Lady wants to raise that issue, why does not she write to the person concerned? We are such a growing party that I cannot know what goes on in every office.

Mrs. Lawrence: I did write to the office, but I did not receive a reply.

Mr. Llwyd: I hope that the hon. Lady will take cognisance of my words. I shall e-mail the MEP concerned and ask her to address the point. I hope that that will be helpful.

Parts of the British economy are doing very well, mainly because of the way in which economic policies are being implemented. However, their success has its cost in other areas, as Welsh Members of Parliament know. I am afraid that Wales is bottom of the United Kingdom regional competitive index table—a place that I think is shared by the north-east. Wales is also bottom of the regional knowledge-based business index table. In terms of the knowledge economy, it is lacking and is in worse circumstances than any other area. Although we agree with the long-term goal, the short to medium term looks very bleak for Wales, because of the difficulties caused by the failure to establish a regional policy and to target the region's specific problems.

There must be greater balance between high-tech jobs and those in more traditional industries such as manufacturing. The Government are rightly putting a lot of emphasis on the knowledge economy, but they seem to be ignoring the needs of traditional economies. We need to ensure that incoming companies feel comfortable with the development of regional policies. We should be taking measures such as those that I have mentioned, including cuts in corporation tax, national insurance and so on.

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): The hon. Gentleman mentioned the need for incoming companies to be attracted to Wales. What does he think of the comment made by Seimon Glyn, a Plaid Cymru councillor, who said that the English are a drain on Welsh resources? Does he think that that comment will attract or repel inward investors?

Mr. Llwyd: Before I answer that question, I refer the hon. Gentleman to remarks made by the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas), who said:

"One particular area of concern I have brought to the attention of the Committee is the way in which some landlords are able to play the system and bring in large numbers of people from outside the area to live in substandard accommodation."

He pointed out that the cost was placed on local government. Worse still—I am quoting a publication of which the hon. Gentleman is aware—he said:

"The police do recognise there are problems in Colwyn Bay. There are those with little or no stake in the community who are known to be criminally active."

Before the hon. Gentleman or any other Labour Member throws any brickbats, let me say that I know the councillor to whom he referred, and I am not sure what he said, but he has since apologised.

Perhaps Labour Members should look a bit nearer home. A serving Member of the House has been terribly abusive to incomers to north Wales, so let us not start insulting each other across the House on that subject—there is nothing in it for the Labour party.

Mr. Ruane: Will the hon. Gentleman give way again?

Mr. Llwyd: No, I will not. The hon. Gentleman should sit down.

According to a recent report published by Robert Higgins of the centre for advanced studies at Cardiff university, entitled "An Index of Competitiveness in the UK: Local, regional and global analysis", Wales ranks last but one in the UK regional competitiveness index. Higgins notes:

"The index makes it abundantly clear it is the southern regions of England that are driving economic growth in the UK."

Good luck to them. I am saying that there should be a different approach in other parts of the UK. Higgins goes on to say:

"It is these regions that are home to the highest density of firms, the most knowledge-intensive firms, the highest level of economic activity, which in turn gives firms based in the areas a higher level of productivity".

He asks:

"Should we not be pushing for stronger incentives to help make the uncompetitive areas more competitive?"

That is my point.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): The hon. Gentleman's main theory about the economy is that Wales is being treated unfavourably and is at the bottom of various league tables. I understand his argument, but will he concede that in his constituency unemployment has fallen by a third from 1,640 in December 1996 to 1,051 at present and that there have been parallel falls in unemployment throughout Wales? Despite the picture of doom and gloom that he is painting, the job situation in Wales, including in traditional industries, the rural economy and south Wales, is pretty good.

Mr. Llwyd: Modesty prevents me from saying why unemployment has fallen in Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the constituency has an effective Member of Parliament. If he were to listen to my contribution, he would realise that I am not whingeing but talking about what could be done to improve various areas of the UK. I say good luck to the south-east, but this is not a one-size-fits-all situation, as the Department of Trade and Industry appears to believe. I give due credit to the Government because unemployment has fallen, and of course I am pleased about that. However, manufacturing jobs have been lost, and we need to take our eye off one ball and keep it on another. We must ensure that we have a comprehensive regional approach to the problem, and that is what I am developing. I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the figures that he quoted.

The Welsh Affairs Committee made a recommendation about regional variations in tax, and I hope that the Government will respond in due course. Happily, Plaid Cymru policy accords with that recommendation.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): That is because Meirionnydd has a good MP.

Mr. Llwyd: I will not overdo the self-congratulation.

The Select Committee also made an important point about pensions. It said that it will

"watch the combination of the Pension Credit proposals and the Minimum Income Guarantee take-up campaign"

to ensure that pensioners are not left in poverty in future. It concluded that if those proposals do not work, the basic state pension will have to be linked once more to average earnings. That mirrors a recommendation by the Scottish Affairs Committee, and it is long overdue. That argument has long been raging in this place, and I am sure that we

[Mr. Llwyd]

will revisit the matter. Suffice it to say that pensioners require a better deal than they are receiving at present. Few people, inside or outside the Chamber, can forget the 75p debacle.

On benefits, the Select Committee took the view that the Government should

"conduct a comprehensive national benefit take-up campaign".

It said that

"the benefits system allows people to survive, but does not lift them out of poverty."

It rightly concluded:

"Lifting the level of benefits is central to tackling social exclusion."

The Committee also examined the poverty trap, which acts as a disincentive to re-entering work. To be fair, the working families tax credit should assist. However, a substantial disincentive remains for childless people. In my view, and in that of many commentators and others who gave evidence to the Committee, there should be a transitional or tapering benefit for the first three to six months of new employment to attempt to deal with that damaging disincentive.

The Secretary of State for Wales and I have fallen out drastically about what he said or did not say in answer to a question that I asked or did not ask about the vexed matter of the Barnett formula. The Committee concludes that the Barnett formula needs reconsidering and to be made more needs based. Lord Barnett said:

"I had always assumed its use would be temporary until a more sophisticated method that took account of needs could be devised."

"Temporary" in that context is as temporary as the old traffic lights at Drws-y-nant in Rhydymain. It meant 23 years in that case; the Barnett formula is doing even better. We appreciate that such matters need to be reconsidered from time to time because they are important to the governance of Wales.

A preliminary glance at the figures shows that Wales has nothing to fear from a needs-based assessment as long as it is impartially conducted. Wales does not have to depend on the Barnett formula in its current form and would do better from a fairly calculated Barnett mark 2. We hope that the Government will take the initiative and develop a new formula after the next general election. There will be increasing pressure to reconsider an outmoded mechanism, which has worked well in the past, but should be re-examined after such a long time.

The Barnett formula constitutes a mechanistic approach and does not take account of the changing or current needs of Wales. The National Assembly has had much to say about that. It behoves us as Members of Parliament of all parties to chip in on the debate, further it, discuss it with our Assembly colleagues and try to devise a formula that is more needs based. I am therefore happy to endorse the Select Committee's recommendation that the Barnett formula should be reviewed or replaced by a needs-based system. Indeed, that is self-evident, given the huge disparity in GDP between England and Wales.

I know that several hon. Members want to speak in the debate, and I shall not take up much more time.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Before the hon. Gentleman concludes his jocular remarks, will he explain the reason for his belief that there is growing poverty in Wales? He said that 20,000 jobs had been lost, but that 40,000 jobs had come to Wales, including 500 today to Bridgend and 500 two days ago to Rogerstone.

The hon. Gentleman said that pensioners had a raw deal last year. Will he acknowledge that they had the biggest increase in 25 years this year? They will get rises beyond the level of earnings and that of inflation. When will he produce the evidence to support his case that there is growing poverty in Wales?

Mr. Llwyd: I do not have to look far: the GDP of Wales is decreasing. Sometimes the hon. Gentleman is beset by prejudice. He described my remarks as jocular. They are not. He might find the subject funny, but I do not. It is serious, and other Select Committee members are fully aware of the evidence that was taken in the past 12 months. We know that poverty in Wales is increasing. Yes, the Government are attempting to address the problem, but GDP in Wales goes ever downward. Let us not beat about that bush.

When the Government were elected, the cry of "Things can only get better" was uttered ad nauseam. Things have not got better for students, schools, people on benefits—such as those who have been taken off invalidity benefit—coal miners, members of the farming community, rural dwellers or Welsh steelmakers. Things have, however, got even better for the well off. That is a grave indictment of the new Labour Government and their priorities.

4.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"notes the Government's central aim is a fair and prosperous society that offers opportunity for all, and that both economic prosperity and social justice depend on people being able to achieve their full potential; endorses the Government's commitment to eradicating child poverty, to providing employment opportunities for all who can work, to rewarding saving, and to ensuring that older people live secure, active and fulfilling lives and to tackling the root causes of poverty and social exclusion; further notes and expresses concern at the announcement by Corus on 1st February 2001; believes that the Corus action is a short term solution which is damaging for the individuals affected and the communities concerned; and calls on the company to think again about the planned closures and redundancies and instead work with the trade unions, Government and the National Assembly for Wales to identify a better way forward.".

Every right hon. and hon. Member will have been shocked by the devastating announcement made by Corus last week. The company has made a short-term decision that is bad for Wales and I believe that it will look back on it and regret it. Our steel industry has achieved magnificent productivity gains over the past 20 years, averaging 10 per cent. a year. We have the greatest output per employee in Europe: 571 tonnes per man, compared with 543 tonnes in Germany and 534 tonnes in France.

There is strong evidence of the underlying strength of the economy. Employment grew by 239,000 last year, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) pointed out, it grew in Wales, too. Manufacturing output rose by 0.7 per cent. and manufacturing exports, despite a high pound, grew by 7 per cent. Many other companies recognise that underlying strength in the economy. In the past two

months, many companies have announced important investments in Wales, including Wireless Systems International, which is investing to create 264 new jobs at a high-tech telecommunications project in Cwmbran, and Ford, which announced 500 new jobs at Bridgend today.

The Government urge Corus to reconsider its decision. The company should be working with the trade unions, the National Assembly for Wales and the Government. The Secretary of State for Wales had meetings in Cardiff today with the First Minister and the Finance Minister of the Assembly, and he will also have meetings with Cabinet colleagues today, including the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. At this moment, he is having a meeting with the Prime Minister.

Mr. Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth): Would my hon. Friend care to contrast the behaviour of Corus with that of Ford when jobs at Bridgend were threatened? Over a considerable period, the management of Ford in the UK—right up to Ian McAllister—and the local trade unions at Bridgend worked closely with Ministers, particularly with me when I was Secretary of State for Wales. The battle was taken to the management, and the door was open for negotiations as far away as Detroit. Is it not sad that Corus will not take such a positive approach and work with us on such difficult issues in these difficult times?

Mr. Bayley: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right and his experience gives real weight to his comments. It is in the interest of Wales, of the work force, of the Government and of the company for Corus to work with the Government to look for ways forward in circumstances such as these.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): Does the Minister accept that if Corus had wanted to announce in Holland the kind of redundancies that it has just announced in Wales, it would not have been able to do so because the Dutch Government have adopted the EU regulation on consultation between trade unions, the Government and other bodies? Will the Minister give us an assurance that the Government will reconsider the introduction of those regulations? We do not want any company to treat Welsh workers in this way again.

Mr. Bayley: I do not accept that, because the redundancy package in the Netherlands is broadly the same as the severance arrangements here in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, there has been dialogue between the Government and the company. We have raised the question of a package of measures, including assistance with business rates, environmental projects—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman shakes his head, which shows that he is not interested in tackling the real issues. It is right that the Government made those offers to the company and it is unfortunate that the company did not respond, but we still want to work with Corus. The Government urge it to think again.

Mr. Wigley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Bayley: No, I must make progress.

Across the board, the Government are making progress in tackling poverty and social exclusion. The Corus announcement is a painful reminder that obstacles will continue to get in our way and that the Government have more to do, but let us consider the facts. When the Government came to power three and a half years ago, the problems of poverty and social exclusion in Wales were stark and the gap between rich and poor had been widening for two decades. One child in three in Wales lived in a low-income household; one child in five lived in a household in which no adult was in work; about one pensioner in four in Wales lived in a low-income household; and the poorest communities in Wales had high unemployment, high levels of poor housing and high crime. After years of neglect by the Conservatives, whole generations and whole communities in Wales had been written off.

Those problems are deep and complex, interlinked and inter-generational. They span people's lives, from childhood through working age to retirement. New solutions were desperately needed to challenge years of Conservative complacency and inaction. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security announced in February 1999 that we would publish not a vague wish list, but an annual report setting out the action that we were taking to tackle poverty, backed up by indicators against which we would be judged.

In March 1999, the Prime Minister put tackling child poverty right at the heart of that strategy with his historic pledge to halve child poverty in 10 years and eradicate it in 20. Alongside that, we set goals to end long-term unemployment, to help adults into work when they can work—while providing more support for those who cannot work—to ensure that pensioners live secure, active and fulfilling lives and to ensure that we rebuild communities crippled by years of inaction by the previous Government.

Those goals are challenging, not easy, and cannot be achieved overnight. There is no simple way to brush aside two decades of high unemployment and growing poverty. As the Corus announcement shows, there will be setbacks even when progress is being made, but the Government remain determined to make a difference, and we are making a difference because we are following policies that make a difference. Our first annual report on poverty, which was published in September 1999, examined the problems that we faced and outlined what we would do to overcome them. In September last year, we published our second annual report, which provided a detailed account of the actions that we have taken in Wales and elsewhere since we announced our strategy in September 1999.

The motion stresses the importance of benefit levels and take-up. Those are indeed important, but the motion ignores what the Government have done to improve benefits in real terms for those who cannot work and what we have done and are doing to promote take-up. We introduced a minimum income guarantee for pensioners in 1999 to target more help on those who need it most. Last year, we launched the most comprehensive take-up campaign ever run to help more pensioners to claim the minimum income guarantee, but poverty and exclusion are much wider ranging and more complex than just a lack of cash. Therefore, the Government strategy set out in the "Opportunity for All" reports focuses not simply on low income, but on access to education and quality in child care, housing and health.

[Mr. Bayley]

Instead of focusing only on benefits and income, our strategy is to address the causes of poverty as well as the symptoms and to tackle in the round the problems that can drag people down into poverty and social exclusion at different stages in their lives.

Mr. Edwards: Will my hon. Friend confirm that the success of the Government's welfare-to-work policies has led in part to a reduction in expenditure on social security? Will he acknowledge the concerns of citizens advice bureaux and other advice agencies and the recommendation in paragraph 69 of the Select Committee's social exclusion report that, as a result of those savings, the Government could centrally fund independent advice agencies like the citizens advice bureaux and thus improve the take-up of benefits and other services?

Mr. Bayley: Let me pay tribute to my hon. Friend, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones) and all the members of his Committee, for producing an important piece of work. The Government are considering it and will respond in the normal way to the report and its recommendations. The fundamental point that my hon. Friend raises is absolutely right: we promised in our manifesto to reduce spending on the costs of economic failure and instead to make pathways back into work for people who could work. We have done so, and unemployment is now at its lowest level for two decades. That has released resources that we are able to spend elsewhere, not least on making substantial increases in pensions, which will be introduced in April this year.

Children are a special priority in our poverty strategy, because they have only one opportunity to get a good start in life. That is why £11 million a year has been spent on sure start in Wales, on programmes approved by the Assembly and delivered by a partnership of local authorities, health services and voluntary organisations, to provide better services in the crucial early years of a child's life. We are investing in education, too, to give children the tools they need to succeed in the 21st century. An extra £12 billion was announced in the spending review for education and training in the UK over the next three years.

If we are to raise children out of poverty we need to raise family incomes, and we are doing that. Measures in the past four Budgets will lift some 50,000 children out of poverty in Wales. Those measures include a significant increase in child benefit—now £15 a week for the eldest child and £10 a week for other children. Plaid Cymru, in its manifesto at the last election, promised to link child benefit with the cost of living. We have linked child benefit with the cost of living and done more—26 per cent. more—than that. There has been a 26 per cent. real-terms rise in child benefit since 1997. If hon. Members want to do something to relieve child poverty, here is something that the Government are doing. Some 650,000 children in 360,000 families in Wales gain from those increases.

The introduction of the working families tax credit and the minimum wage together guarantee families with children, with one person in full-time work, a minimum income of £208 a week, which rises to £214 a week in April of this year. Some 67,000 families in Wales are benefiting from that. We also increased the sure start maternity grant from £200 to £300 in September last year.

Thus all families with children in Wales will be better off by on average £15 a week. A couple on income support with two children under the age of 11 will be better off by nearly £30 a week compared with 1997. Families on the working families tax credit receive on average £30 a week more than they received on family credit, which it replaced. More than 30,000 lone parents in Wales receive benefit from the new working families tax credit.

However, we can and should do more for parents and their children by encouraging parents into work, which we are doing through the new deals and the ONE service. Children are benefiting from being in families with higher incomes and from seeing at first hand that work is the route out of poverty and the way to a better life. The new deal for young people has helped some 35,000 young people in Wales so far. Half of those have found work, while a further 11,000 have entered training or education.

Another barrier to work is the difficulty in getting affordable child care. That is why we have introduced the child care tax credit, which is now claimed by 5,600 families in Wales. The average gain from the child care tax credit is about £32 a week, compared with £22 a week with the family credit.

The Tories used to say that they wanted wealth to cascade down the generations. It always has, but poverty is inherited, too. If people are poor, their children grow up in poverty and are more likely to be in poverty in adult life. We want to break that cycle of deprivation. We are helping people of working age to rise out of poverty and social exclusion.

The system that we inherited was designed 50 years ago and is no longer up to the job. Our goal is clear: we want a modern, active welfare state that creates opportunities and incentives, and is based on the fundamental principle of work for those who can work and security for those who cannot. We are making progress towards that goal. Employment is up by more than 1 million since the election. More people are in work than ever before. Since 1997, we have more than halved the number of long-term unemployed in Wales: it went down from 27,000 in May 1997 to around 12,000 in May 2000. We have reduced youth unemployment, which went down from 22,000 to about 15,000 in the same period. We have also cut the overall level of unemployment in Wales from 6.5 per cent. to 4.6 per cent. We are investing £89 million in the ONE service to bring together benefit and employment services in 12 pilot areas, including south-east Gwent, which will help the unemployed to work.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): At the start of this long list of Government achievements, the hon. Gentleman gave three headline figures for poverty in Wales which were the legacy of the Conservative Government when the Labour party took over. Will he give the current figures, so that the people of Wales can see what has been achieved in the past four years—not what will be achieved?

Mr. Bayley: The hon. Gentleman may have stopped concentrating for a minute. I gave him the unemployment

figures for May 2000. *[Interruption.]* He asks me a question, then he will not listen to the answer. He asked for figures for May 1997.

Mr. Thomas: No.

Mr. Bayley: Yes. The hon. Gentleman asked for figures for May 1997 and for more recent figures. I have given him the figures that are available, which are the unemployment figures. Unemployment has come down in Wales.

Mr. Thomas: I fear that I may have misled the Minister, although not deliberately. I referred him to the three headline figures that he used at the start of his list of Government achievements. They had nothing to do with the unemployment figures. He referred to the number of children in fatherless, unemployed households, and the number in pensioner poverty. What are those figures after four years? He has not given them.

Mr. Bayley: Those figures for Wales, as opposed to the United Kingdom as a whole, are not yet available because of the way in which the statistics are collected. However, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that the number of children growing up in workless households is down in Wales as it is elsewhere in the UK. That is good. Some of the other figures will take longer, because they are produced two years after the event. They will be published, and we should and will be judged by them. Progress is being made, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that more is needed. We cannot wipe out 20 years of increasing social exclusion and deprivation under the previous Government in just a few years. It is a long haul, but we have started.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): While the Minister is rattling through this glorious Government's wonderful list of achievements, will he give some attention to the farming industry, which is suffering greatly under this Government? Will he tell us how many people have left farming, and the levels of income in the industry under this Administration?

Mr. Bayley: The hon. Gentleman ignores his party's lamentable record on farming. The level of support for farming, in Wales and elsewhere, is higher than the level of support for all other industries put together. I do not deny for a minute that smaller farmers have real problems, but our Government are addressing those problems.

To encourage people to move from welfare into work, we need to ensure that work pays. We have introduced the national minimum wage, which is helping about 90,000 workers in Wales. As I have said, we are doing more to give extra help to pensioners: the minimum income guarantee has already helped around 95,000 of the poorest pensioners in Wales.

Over the weekend I read the Select Committee's report. It is a very good report, but let me be clear about one thing. Those 95,000 pensioners who benefit from the guarantee would not have gained at all from an earnings uprating of the basic state pension, because every penny that they received on the basic pension would have been taken off their income support.

The Tories may have different plans, but let me make it crystal clear that under this Labour Government the basic state pension will remain the foundation of retirement income. For most people, however, the best way to secure a good standard of living in retirement is to contribute to a good second pension. As a result of our reforms, more people than ever will retire with better second pensions, and some will be able to receive such pensions for the first time ever.

As we promised, we are building on SERPS through the new state second pension, and 18 million people will have significantly better second pensions as a result. For the lower paid, the state second pension will in some cases more than double what they would have received under SERPS. That means that someone earning £120 a week will be £40 a week better off in retirement than he or she would have been under the Tories.

Moreover, for the first time, full-time parents, carers and disabled people will receive more money in retirement. For example, a state second pension of £50 a week, on top of the basic state pension, will be available to someone who has been a carer throughout his or her adult life. For people who cannot have access to occupational pensions and for whom personal pensions are inappropriate, we have introduced stakeholder pensions, which are flexible, secure and good value for money. They are revolutionising the way the pensions industry does business, by cutting charges, although they are coming on stream only from April this year. Those reforms mean that more and more people will retire on decent incomes. We will ensure that people who save during their working lives are rewarded.

More recently, my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Social Security announced further help for vulnerable groups. We are tackling pensioner poverty by aligning all the rates of the minimum income guarantee with the highest rate. The winter fuel payment has been increased from £150 to £200 for this winter only, as part of a bridge to our new pension credit. We have abolished capital limits in the sure start maternity grant and funeral payments, to ensure that families on low incomes with small amounts of savings receive support to help cover the costs associated with the birth of a baby or the death of a close relative.

We have introduced a package of measures to help carers and the severely disabled on low incomes. That means that from April this year there will be an extra £10 a week for carers on income support, increasing the rate from £14.15 to £24.40. The disabled child premium, within income support, will rise from £22.25 to £30, a real-terms increase of £7.40. The new disability income guarantee will increase the weekly incomes of the poorest and most severely disabled people by £7.25 a week for single people and children and by £11.05 a week for couples, which means that a single person on DIG will receive £142 a week while couples will get £186.80.

These policies are already making a difference to people's lives, but we are developing more. By 2003 we shall be introducing the integrated child credit, a new employment tax credit and a pension credit to reward pensioners who have worked and saved hard during their working lives.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Bayley: No, I shall not.

We are already witnessing real change as a result of our policies. The close consultation and co-operation between the United Kingdom Government and the

[Mr. Bayley]

devolved Administration lie at the heart of our joined-up strategy. We are determined to continue to make a difference to people who live in Wales by providing real opportunity for all.

4.30 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am grateful to have an opportunity to contribute to the debate.

Mr. Ruane: Where are the hon. Gentleman's mates?

Mr. Evans: Plenty of my mates will be here after the next general election. We will be sitting on the Government Benches, not on the Opposition Benches. We look forward to that and we will miss the hon. Gentleman.

I have been told that the Secretary of State cannot be here because he is having a meeting with the Prime Minister today about the steel job losses. I accept that fully. I hope that considerable progress can be made at that meeting. I urge the Minister to encourage lobbying for the traditional 1 March debate, so that we can discuss Welsh issues on a much wider scale.

This is a vital debate on social exclusion, poverty and job losses in Wales. I welcome the Minister, with his particular remit on social security. As we have heard, he knows his statistics well, although many people living in Wales will be scratching their heads and wondering how much of that relates to them. I think that he will understand what I mean when I refer to certain sectors in Wales that he failed to mention.

The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) said that there were many interpretations of social exclusion. He referred to the rural economy, although the Minister made scant reference to it. It plays a dominant part in Wales. We need a vital rural economy to ensure that many people, particularly those living in west, mid and north Wales, can benefit from any growth in the economy generally.

Mr. Öpik: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the rural economy is affected by the on-going loss of manufacturing jobs in places such as mid-Wales? For example, uncertainty surrounds 200 jobs at the firm formerly known as BSK, in Llanidloes. Does he agree that it is incumbent on the Government to work with the Assembly in Wales to ensure that those rural jobs are not forgotten, despite the situation at Corus, which naturally gives rise to concern?

Mr. Evans: I rarely agree with the hon. Gentleman, but on this occasion I do. Manufacturing jobs are vital: if jobs in rural areas are lost, it will be incredibly difficult to attract industry back to those areas. Infrastructural and service problems exist there, so losing 200 jobs in a rural area has a greater impact than it would in an urban area. Long-term problems of attracting jobs back to rural areas is that much more difficult.

Mr. Alan W. Williams: I have looked up the unemployment figures for the constituency of the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik). The latest figures for December show that 594 people were out of work, an unemployment rate of 2.2 per cent. I think that he and many of us who represent rural areas are relieved that unemployment is relatively very low in our areas.

Mr. Evans: I hope that the hon. Gentleman never loses that book, because he will have nothing to say if he does. It is all very well to trot out statistics glibly and to say what the rate of unemployment in the Montgomeryshire constituency is, but everything the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) said was right. People are fearful of jobs going in rural areas. The arrogance that the hon. Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams) is displaying does him no great credit. People who work in manufacturing industries, not just in Wales but throughout the United Kingdom, will know that, since 1997, 370,000 manufacturing jobs have been lost. In Wales, 16,000 have been lost. It is a real problem when manufacturing jobs, the bread and butter, the guts, of British industry, are lost.

Mr. Öpik: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, although the statistics for Montgomeryshire are very good, that is not an excuse for ignoring the dangers that he has been describing? The thousands of Corus job losses are unquestionably a serious matter. However, the loss of 200 jobs—the losses are not definite yet—in a place like Llanidloes would have at least the same impact as the Corus job losses will have at Ebbw Vale.

Mr. Evans: Of course I accept that job losses in rural areas have a disproportionate impact. I suspect that Labour Members representing rural constituencies will also accept that and realise how much more difficult it is to attract industry to those areas. I should hope that all hon. Members agree that jobs, particularly manufacturing jobs, in rural areas are hard to come by.

We have already heard about the post office closures of the past four years. We also know that, for many people, the post office may be their only village shop. It is pointless saying that those people can simply get into their cars and go to a neighbouring village where a post office may have survived, because many people do not have a vehicle. Additionally, rural transport is poor—although I concede that it has always been poor. The state of rural transport, however, should only make us recognise all the more the importance of the post office network in rural Wales.

Petrol is another bugbear. We now have some of the highest petrol prices and petrol taxation in the world. We really do need to recognise that fact. Several months ago, spontaneous petrol disputes were a recognition of that fact. Since then, however, very little has happened to change the situation. We have all heard about the wonderful new low sulphur petrol, but I have yet to see it being sold in any of the garages that I visit—*[Interruption.]* I am not saying that it will not be available, but currently many garages do not sell it.

Mrs. Lawrence: As the hon. Gentleman does not represent a Welsh constituency, he may not be aware that the Government's policy on both ultra-low sulphur diesel and ultra-low sulphur petrol has secured, in the medium to long term, the refinery in my constituency which is one of the major employers there.

Mr. Evans: I was in the hon. Lady's constituency, with the excellent Stephen Crabb, the prospective

parliamentary candidate for her constituency, who showed me round Haverfordwest and Milford Haven. As she herself would concede, Milford Haven is an unemployment black spot and has tremendous problems, and it would take a disproportionate effort to attract jobs to her constituency. I realise that. I lived in Swansea for 33 years, and it was difficult to attract investment even there, although it is only an hour from Cardiff. It will take even more energy to attract investment further west.

Mrs. Lawrence: The hon. Gentleman's comments seem to highlight his lack of knowledge—despite his recent visit to my constituency, about which he did not notify me. The employment figures in my constituency have improved massively, primarily because of the 1,500 jobs at Cyber Park that we anticipate will have been created by June, although almost as many have already been created. Most of Cyber Park's employees come from my constituency. At the opening of the latest development there, the Employment Service made the point that those jobs have had the knock-on effect of creating another 4,000 jobs in the community. Perhaps, having been to my constituency, the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge at least those facts.

Mr. Evans: I have apologised privately to the hon. Lady for the discourtesy in not notifying her, and I do so again publicly. I can also guarantee her that, in just a couple of weeks, when I visit her constituency with the most excellent Stephen Crabb, I shall most certainly let her know. Perhaps she could join me in a walk-round. Perhaps we could go to Milford Haven and see the problems there. Although I hear what she says, I am sure that she will concede the difficulty of dealing with unemployment in western and rural Wales and the need for even more energy to be devoted to attracting industry there.

Mr. Alan W. Williams: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: No. I have to make a little more progress, but I shall give way later.

I asked the Minister about farming, and he conceded that it is experiencing real and severe problems. Even the Minister, however, may not fully understand the impact that the farming crisis is having in parts of Wales. Recently, the *Western Mail* reported that 73 jobs a week were being lost to Welsh farming. The total number of people employed on Welsh farms in June 2000 was 55,700, 3,800 fewer than a year before. These statistics come from the National Assembly. The president of the Farmers Union of Wales, Bob Parry, said:

"This serves to underline just how badly the agricultural sector in Wales is suffering."

Hugh Richards, the president of the National Farmers Union in Wales, described the figure as

"a very sad indictment of the appalling state of the agriculture industry in Wales."

There has been a dramatic fall of 13 per cent. in the number of full-time farmers over two years, from 25,800 in 1998 to 22,600 in 2000. Mr. Parry said:

"Politicians must take this crisis seriously and take positive action to stem the flow of jobs from farming. Losing 73 jobs every week in rural Wales has a detrimental knock-on effect on the entire economy, a fact that must be recognised by the Assembly and also by Whitehall."

From 1995–99 to date, farm incomes have fallen by more than half, and some farmers now survive on well below the minimum wage. They are self-employed; as one farmer said to me, not all farmers go out of business, but a lot go poor. Unfortunately, that is happening in too many areas. When we talk about poverty and social exclusion in Wales, we must not forget the farming industry.

Many of those involved in farming are coming to London on 18 March. I have encouraged the Prime Minister to be here on that date to meet a delegation of rural dwellers from my constituency. Perhaps the Under-Secretary of State could say whether he will be here on that date to meet representatives of Welsh farmers and those who live in rural areas; they will have a strong message to send to him. Many people in Wales are scratching their heads and wondering why time is being taken to legislate on hunting with hounds when there are so many deep-seated problems in Wales.

An additional problem for which the Government are specifically responsible is the introduction of the climate change levy. I ask Ministers to look carefully at the impact that that will have on those farmers in Wales—particularly horticulturists—who use a lot of energy. Will Ministers scrap this dreadful and appalling tax?

Tax on petrol, in particular, is regressive and hits the poorest parts of society. On average, each family in Wales is paying £670 net more taxes today than in May 1997; after the Government's promise that there would be no new taxes, that seems a bit rich to these people. The real problem comes when people think, "We are paying the taxes, so where are the services?"

I shall refer to one example that should worry everyone in the country. Nothing is more socially excluding or hurtful to the poor than to have the NHS not delivering the decent health care that they expect after paying their taxes. Many people in this Chamber could afford private health care if they so wished. Those who are socially excluded and live on low incomes have no choice; they must use the health service. The total of Welsh residents waiting for in-patient or day-case treatment has gone up from March 1997 by 14.7 per cent. The number of patients waiting over 12 months rose between 31 March 1997 and 31 December 2000 by 85 per cent. For the same period, the number of patients waiting more than 18 months has gone up by 251 per cent. Those are chilling figures, and the Government should work with the Welsh Assembly to ensure that we get a much improved service for the people of Wales.

When the Government of Wales Act 1998 was enacted, establishing the Assembly, Government Members gave the impression that everything would be rosy and that it was guaranteed that waiting lists would go down. We were almost tempted to believe that the Welsh rugby team would win every game—although, sadly, after Saturday, that is clearly not the case. There is not much that the Government can do about Welsh rugby, but there is everything that they can do about the health service in Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): How will the hon. Gentleman's proposed cuts in public spending help the national health service in Wales? How will his opposition

[Mr. David Hanson]

to the working families tax credit, to child benefit rises, to the minimum wage and to public spending by local authorities help socially excluded rural areas?

Mr. Evans: The Government trot out the line that the Conservatives plan to cut expenditure, but they fail to recognise that we may well plan to cut the proposed enormous increases in expenditure by £8 billion overall, which will be returned to the people in tax cuts that they can spend themselves; but we also intend to ensure that we spend money more effectively and efficiently.

The cost of government has gone up by £2 billion a year, for example. In Wales, we now have MEPs, MPs, Assembly Members, local authority councillors—where does it all stop? This all costs an enormous sum. Are the people of Wales getting a better service? No. At a time of crisis in the national health service in Wales, the Welsh Assembly is to spend £42 million on a new building, when people who voted in the referendum were told that it would cost between £12 million and £17 million. Surely it would be better to stay within budget and spend the difference on the health service. Does anyone here believe that the money should be spent on the Assembly building? The silence at least indicates some consensus. [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Plaid Cymru may have something to say.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): My hon. Friend will have heard the Under-Secretary referring to the working families tax credit. Does he agree that it shares with the child care credit and the student loan repayment administration regulations, whatever their intrinsic merits or demerits, the characteristic of shuffling responsibility from central Government to beleaguered businesses, forcing them to become unpaid tax collectors and benefit distributors? Would not it be sensible, instead of creating the deepest sea of regulation that businesses have ever had to negotiate, if the Government eased the burden and allowed them to breathe, to grow and to prosper?

Mr. Evans: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. *[Interruption.]* He can see that many hon. Members are keen to reply to his telling point.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Evans: I think that Plaid Cymru should have its say on the Assembly building.

Mr. Llwyd: The hon. Gentleman mentioned £42 million being spent on the Assembly building. Will he remind the House of the cost of the office in which he is situated, and perhaps compare the figures?

Mr. Evans: I had no involvement in the costs of that building and have gone on the record to condemn its extortionate cost. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that the people of Wales, who were told that the new building would cost between £12 million and £17 million, but who now face a bill of £42 million—and no one seriously expects it to be built for much under £60 million; at least, I do not—would rather have the money spent on a palace for self-styled Ministers than on the NHS, he is more out of touch than I suspected.

The hon. Gentleman cannot deflect me from the excellent points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). I attended the launch of "Barriers to Survival and Growth in UK Small Firms", a document produced by the Federation of Small Businesses in November 2000 following responses from 927 small businesses. I own a small business in Wales, but I am not a member of the federation so have no interest to declare. Small businesses make the economy grow, and we must look to them to expand it in all parts of Wales, particularly rural Wales.

Mr. Ruane: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: In a moment.

Some 95 per cent. of respondents said that they were dissatisfied with fuel costs, a fact that should not be lost on the Government. Some 71 per cent. said that they were dissatisfied with local council business charges, and 76 per cent. were dissatisfied with the amount of local business. On the very point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham, table 28 on page 25 refers to dissatisfaction with legislation. Some 81 per cent. were dissatisfied with the volume of legislation; 83 per cent. with its complexity; 79 per cent. with the rate of change in legislation; 79 per cent. with the interpretation of legislation; 59 per cent. with the ability to employ staff—

Mr. Flynn: The weather?

Mr. Evans: The hon. Gentleman may make light of the problems that small businesses face, but steelworkers in his constituency are losing their jobs and will seek new jobs from small businesses. If I were he, I should not treat so lightly the concerns of 927 small businesses in Wales. He should listen instead of making cheap comments.

Some 65 per cent. of respondents were dissatisfied with the cost of compliance, and 66 per cent. were unhappy with the implementation of European Union regulations. The Minister may already have read this excellent document; he is giving half a nod, so I shall ensure that he is sent a copy and will highlight the tables to which I hope he will pay some attention. Small businesses want to grow but the Government are stifling them.

Mr. Bayley: Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that employment in Wales is going up and that unemployment is falling? Many of the new jobs are in the small business sector.

Mr. Evans: Of course unemployment has gone down, as it did towards the end of the period of Conservative government. The trend left as part of the previous Government's economic legacy has been continued, but we fear that the legacy will be destroyed. If job losses rise, I am sure that the Government will say that it is not their fault—"it's not me, guv.com." Nothing is ever the responsibility of the Government, but the United States of America is in fear of job losses and a recession, and the same thing is happening in Wales.

Mr. Ruane: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: In a moment.

Manufacturing industry is Wales's bread and butter, and more important, proportionally, than it is elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire spoke of fears of job losses in his constituency, which I am certain are real. I applaud the announcement of 600 new jobs made today by Ford; the £240 million investment in Wales comes as a welcome tonic for us all. However, it cannot be taken in isolation.

As I listened to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry making his statement on the job losses at Corus, it was almost as though he were making a speech about how wonderful manufacturing is in Britain; but we know that there are real problems. We cannot hide the fact that there are severe job losses in manufacturing: at Courtaulds Textiles in Wrexham, 167 jobs were lost; we know exactly how many jobs will be lost at Corus—on top of job losses at the company last year; at Dewhirst, the women's clothing factory in Pembrokeshire, 300 jobs were lost—

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Evans: I shall give way in a moment.

At Scottish Courage, 1,300 jobs were lost. There were also job losses at Hitachi, Sony and Panasonic. The announcement about Corus was made the day after Dairy Crest announced 500 job losses and the creation of 250 jobs—a net decrease.

Mrs. Lawrence: The hon. Gentleman again makes a fundamental mistake about my constituency. No job losses have occurred at Dewhirst in my constituency. Hopefully, with the help of the Assembly and Members of the House, there will be no such losses. Negotiations are at a sensitive stage; the matter depends on commercial considerations. I would be grateful if the hon. Gentleman got his facts right for once.

Mr. Evans: All I can say is that the announcement was made. If the National Assembly for Wales is able—

Mrs. Lawrence *rose—*

Mr. Evans: Perhaps the hon. Lady could restrain herself for a moment.

If the National Assembly and, indeed, the Secretary of State for Wales and the First Minister, can do something to alleviate job losses from that factory, I should welcome it.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: I shall give way in a moment. I am always grateful for any assistance from the hon. Gentleman; I once tried—completely unsuccessfully—to prevent him from getting his job.

On the job losses at Corus and elsewhere, we all have to recognise that part of the problem relates to who is speaking for Wales on the economy—that came out on Thursday when the job losses were announced. Is it the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry? Is it the Secretary of State for Wales? Is it the First Minister? Is it the Liberal Democrat Deputy First Minister, the Minister for Economic Development? There has been such fragmentation of responsibility.

People who are losing their jobs realise that the one great growth industry in Wales is politics—there are far more politicians and assistants for politicians. However, it certainly did not help the workers at Corus to hear the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry say at the Dispatch Box that he knew nothing about the job losses. If only the right hon. Gentleman read the *Financial Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* or any other newspaper, perhaps he would have had an inkling.

Mr. Thomas: The hon. Gentleman recently visited my constituency and informed me of his plans to do so. Unfortunately, he has not realised that the job losses at Dewhirst to which he referred took place in my constituency—165 jobs were lost. There is also a threat of job losses in Fishguard, to which many of my constituents travel to work. That is the reality of job losses in rural areas; in a small town such as Lampeter, the loss of 165 jobs—mainly held by women—is a tremendous blow.

Mr. Evans: On top of all that, an enormous number of jobs has been lost at Associated Dairies during the past two to three years. Furthermore, it is extremely hard to put jobs back into the dairy sector.

I know that a meeting on job losses is being held today. Many people will be affected; not just those who work directly for Corus, but those working in other industries that rely on the company. Service jobs and those in other manufacturing sectors depend on the health of Corus. Those people will be looking to the Government to set up a package of support and regeneration in the area. I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for Wales will be able to offer us some guidance on that matter as quickly as possible; those people must be extremely worried about the job losses. I do not know whether the meeting has finished—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman indicates that it will finish shortly.

The Library has produced figures on social exclusion in Wales; in each category, the document gives figures for the United Kingdom as a whole, followed by the figures for Wales. The number of children in workless households is higher than in the United Kingdom generally. The number of children in households with relatively low income is higher in Wales. The number of working-age people in employment is obviously lower in Wales. The number of working-age people in workless households is higher in Wales. The number of working-age adults on income support for two years or more is higher in Wales. That makes fairly bleak reading.

The report entitled "Social Exclusion in Wales"—to which the hon. Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones) will, no doubt, shortly refer—contains some chilling statistics, especially those on teenage pregnancies, to which he refers specifically.

Mr. Martin Caton (Gower): If the Conservative party is so concerned about social exclusion in Wales, why has it boycotted the entire social exclusion inquiry by the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs?

Mr. Evans: The hon. Gentleman is referring to the fact that the Select Committee's Conservative Members were unable to be present during the deliberations.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Evans: I will not give way. The hon. Gentleman will be able to discuss that matter with the individuals concerned.

The incoming Labour Government told us that things could only get better in Wales; they were trusted by people in Wales, but things have got decidedly worse in the past four years. Things will get better; they will get better in a few weeks' time when we have a general election. We are fed up to the back teeth with hearing statistic after statistic from Ministers. They tell us how good things are, but we know from visiting villages, towns and cities in Wales that there is real poverty. There are areas of growth, too, but the pockets of poverty hurt deeply. Things will only get better when this rotten Government are chucked out a few weeks from now.

5.1 pm

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) requests that there should be a further look at the Barnett formula. He calls for a Barnett formula mark 2, which would be more needs based and perhaps more sophisticated than the current one. The Select Committee on Welsh Affairs also issued that call. I certainly would not resile from that, but if we have a needs-based Barnett formula mark 2, more money will presumably come to Wales from the British Exchequer. I do not object to that; it is the purpose of having a better formula, but neither the hon. Gentleman nor his hon. Friends have told us how their policies could bridge the gap between the even greater public expenditure derived from a Barnett formula mark 2 and the amount of tax, sadly, that is raised in Wales.

Total public expenditure in Wales is about a third higher than the total sum raised in tax. If we had a better Barnett formula—let us have one—that gap would be even greater. Plaid Cymru Members want to leave the British Union and join the European Union. That is their policy, and they are perfectly entitled to it, but they must tell the people of Wales how they would bridge that gap in expenditure.

Plaid Cymru Members may say that they could somehow borrow the difference, but that would be practically impossible because a borrowing requirement of 15 per cent. of GDP would be involved, but the Maastricht criteria allow for 3 per cent. at most. If they borrowed at that 15 per cent. rate, they would not be allowed to join the euro, and they would have given up the British pound. Perhaps they will therefore tell us in what currency would the Welsh steel industry trade. Clearly, that policy would be a total disaster not only for the Welsh steel industry, but for the Welsh economy.

I agree with the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy and the terms of the motion tabled by his party that the Corus cuts and closures will worsen the problems of social exclusion in Wales. Of course, they will certainly make them worse in the short term, but I hope that the position can be retrieved in the medium term. I speak as the Member of Parliament for a constituency that does not produce basic steel, but it does produce tinplate. It has produced tinplate from before the first world war and it was producing it when President McKinley and the United States imposed the McKinley tariff on Llanelli tinplate.

In the 1970s, three factories in Wales produced tinplate. They were at Trostre in my constituency; Velindre in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Mr. Caton); and Ebbw Vale in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith). If the Corus proposals go through, only one plant will remain. In the 1970s, those three factories had 90 per cent. of the domestic tinplate market in the United Kingdom. More than 20 years later, that figure is now down to 50 per cent. and British Steel has never explained to me how it managed to lose almost 40 per cent. of the market. Perhaps it was too much to expect it to hold on to 90 per cent. of the domestic market—that figure may have been artificial—but the considerable decline has left us with the prospect that only the plant at Trostre will remain.

It gives no pleasure to those who work in Trostre and those who live in my constituency—they have lived with the problem for years—that our plant will be the last one remaining. Under the plans, the plant at Ebbw Vale is expected to close. We hope that the proposals put forward by the trade unions mean that at least two plants will produce tinplate in Wales. We need two plants to maintain a 50 per cent. market share, and, if that share is eroded any further, it will affect the plant in my constituency and the plant at Port Talbot that produces steel for the tinplate industry.

My hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) and others mentioned the meeting that some of us had with the chairman and chief executive of Corus. We heard what was said and have considered it carefully. Indeed, I have studied the press release that Corus issued. It seems fair to say that Corus gave three reasons for embarking on this venture. First, the euro-sterling exchange rate is a problem; secondly, it sees a decline in the UK's manufacturing base; and, thirdly, problems are associated with the overproduction and price of steel. I shall return to those three reasons shortly, but they are all external to the company.

I accept that the company was losing money but, as I understand it, the reconfigurated debt will be higher than the one it had before the reconstruction and all the cuts and closures took place. Although the company was losing money, no one has ever suggested that there were internal reasons for that. As we have heard, productivity is excellent and the steel industry in Britain is probably as efficient as almost any steel industry in Europe and it is close to being as efficient as the industry in Japan. The problems are not internal, but Corus is using internal measures—a blood sacrifice or slaughter of the innocents among the workers in the industry—to try to solve or react to external problems. It is not sitting down with the Government and the trade unions to consider how to deal with those external factors.

No one is suggesting that a solution is easy—some forces are outside all our control—but the company should do what Ford did. It should sit down with Government to try come to terms with the problems. The company's problems are not the result of a lack of productivity, but of external factors. Although we accept that the chairman and chief executive of Corus is under considerable pressure, it is totally indefensible for him not to come to Government to describe the external problems that the industry faces and to ask for help in alleviating them as best we can. The company failed to do that and engaged in an old-fashioned blood sacrifice that will not resolve the problem. Such an approach is totally out of date.

I should like to deal with the three reasons to which I referred, for which I have a ladder of escalation. The third reason on that ladder is the relative values of the pound and the euro. There is no doubt of the importance of that factor, as the exchange rate clearly worked against the steel industry. It has now improved a little, but the weakness of the euro was bound to affect British companies—including those in the steel industry—that were trying to export to the continent at a time when the pound was strong.

However, we should not imagine that the problems would not have arisen or that jobs would not have been lost if we had joined the euro. Indeed, we are not hearing that suggestion as much as we did previously and I certainly do not believe that Corus takes that view. When I ask people who favour joining the euro at what rate they would do so, I do not get an answer. Joining it at the present exchange rates or even the higher rates of six months ago would crucify not only the steel industry, but most of Welsh and British manufacturing.

On the other hand, it is sometimes suggested that devaluation is a great panacea. I have never thought that that is the case; devaluation is merely something that occasionally has to happen. I shall not betray any confidences, but I think that the Corus chief executive said in our meeting that, if devaluation was to help the company, it would have to occur at a rate of some 20 per cent. on present levels. Indeed, some European Commissioners have suggested a devaluation of 20 to 25 per cent. I find surprising the idea that the Germans and French would allow us to devalue at such a rate. If they did so, there would be other consequences: higher interest rates, higher taxes, cuts in public expenditure or a combination of the three. We would be in a completely different situation. Devaluation is not a panacea, and neither is joining the euro.

The second factor on my escalator of reasons is the decline in manufacturing industry. We must agree with Corus to some extent on that point. Yes, there has been a decline.

Mr. Öpik: I was of the belief that the reduction of interest rates was a mechanism by which one could devalue a currency. The right hon. Gentleman appears to feel that the opposite is true.

Mr. Davies: If the hon. Gentleman is speaking about a slow and gradual devaluation that enables us to slide into the euro at a much lower rate, then perhaps we could reduce the interest rates, but how would that affect inflation? Interest rates cannot be reduced for the sake of devaluation alone; other factors must be taken into account.

There has been a decline in manufacturing, partly for structural reasons. Emerging countries have moved into the basic manufacturing activities in which Wales has been especially involved. Years ago, people laughed at Brazilian steel, but that does not happen these days. The emerging countries are producing the basic heavy metals and goods that Wales produced in the past. Structural decline has occurred not only in Wales and Britain, but in Europe and the United States. British Steel was responsible for the reduction from 90 per cent. to 50 per cent. of Wales' share in the tinplate market. That affected the steel industry; less steel can be produced in Port Talbot because so much of the tinplate market was lost. British Steel was, therefore, responsible for some of the decline.

I remember well the benign neglect and antipathy with which successive Conservative Governments treated the manufacturing industry in the 1980s. They had a hatred of the industry and its unions that was seen by the House time after time, year after year. Perhaps reality crept in towards the early 1990s, when it was, to some extent, realised that such an attitude was mistaken. However, manufacturing was a pariah for long periods and was not to be supported in any way.

All Governments seem to have the notion that they cannot touch manufacturing or the markets. The European Union has introduced competition rules that did not exist in the 1970s, and which make it much more difficult, although not impossible, to support manufacturing. The general agreement on tariffs and trade and the World Trade Organisation also make that much more difficult. Governments and politicians have to try to reassert themselves. We must state that we have a role. These rules cannot be made to dominate us when our communities and entire economies are under threat. It will not be easy, but politicians must stand up, rather than allowing matters to drift and fashion to prevent us from assisting manufacturing.

Corus gave three reasons for its decision. Hon. Members can choose which one is the most important, but for me, the main reason is our old friend—or perhaps not a friend—global capitalism. I talk to people in manufacturing industry in my constituency, such as those at Trostre. Enormous pressure is exerted on prices by global forces that none of us can really understand or control. That pressure means that costs must constantly be driven down to try to make a profit at the lower prices.

At our meeting with the chairman and chief executive, he said, in answer to a question that I asked, that we are getting to a point at which there is a world price for steel. I am not a great expert on the steel industry, but having been the Member for Llanelli, where tinplate is made, for 30 years, I have observed the industry. There did not used to be a world price for steel. I can see that the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) is anticipating what I am about to say. There used to be a national steel price and a regional steel price. Indeed, there was a common belief in the industry that the prices were fixed. I do not know whether they were fixed, but if they were, those who fixed them were very clever about it, because the steel industry managed to keep out of the restrictive trade practices court, unlike cement manufacturers, who were frequently before that court.

It was thought that there was an unofficial European steel cartel. I do not blame the industry for that. Territories were carved up, partly because steel is heavy and it costs a great deal to transport it a long way. There was, perhaps, some price fixing, but it is all disappearing. It is significant that the chairman and chief executive of Corus said that we are close to having a world price for steel. He said it as if he could not believe it—after all, he is of that earlier generation in the industry.

We have heard a lot about farming. I do not want to provoke some of my hon. Friends who are not as keen on the farming community, but we have world prices for agricultural products. World prices, whether in manufacturing or farming, are determined by the lowest

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costs, which are often in emerging economies outside Europe and north America. When asked about that, the chairman and chief executive of Corus said, "Where is the steel coming from then?" It is coming from Brazil and former Soviet Union countries such as Russia, and Soviet satellites such as Poland and Czechoslovakia. Perhaps it is not very good steel—I do not know. Maybe one could not make tinplate from it; it probably has too many impurities. However, it is pouring into Europe and creating a world price for steel.

I understand that the European export price for hot-rolled coil has fallen by $100 a tonne in the past 12 months. The price at the beginning of that period was $300 a tonne, and is now down to $200 a tonne. I am not saying that the price will fall further. Maybe special factors were involved. I am not an expert on the steel industry, but what will happen to Corus if the price falls again by $100 or even $50 a tonne? Where will that leave our industries? All Governments and politicians must pay less obeisance to the market and to globalisation than we have tended to in the past. We must see what we can do; otherwise, our communities and our economies may gradually disappear. That is why Corus should have talked to the Government. Perhaps they could not have provided a solution, but the company did not have an answer either, and it should therefore have consulted the Government. It is better to talk, to get together and try to resolve the problem.

We live in deflationary times but we have a structure for inflation. The marketplace determines the price and the grand governors of central banks—the Basle mafia—decide interest rates and pretend that they are all powerful and that they have made a great impact. That also applies to Dr. Alan Greenspan. Perhaps those bankers are all right when there is inflation, but they are no good in times of deflation. For example, half the Japanese banks have gone bankrupt. In times of deflation, we do not need central bankers, but government. We needed government in the past in such times, and we shall need it again in future if deflation worsens.

I have listed the three factors, and I believe that the third is most significant. Whatever factor is most important, companies should talk to Governments, let them get involved and ascertain whether we can tame the forces that often drive our industry to the wall. It will be a major task to rebuild our communities, but I believe that it can be done. We must try to broaden our manufacturing base. Everybody says that, and it is easy to say, but harder to do. We must broaden our base to include information and communication technology if we can. That will not be done by what my noble Friend Lord Healey used to describe as monetary and financial wheezes. A couple of points off corporation tax and 0.5 per cent. off the interest rate may help—I do not decry such measures—but many of our communities in south Wales have a genuine structural problem.

There is also a structural problem in education, especially in science and mathematics. I do not mean training after leaving school, but basic education in those subjects. Why is the south-east of England powering ahead in manufacturing? Why is the gap widening, as the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy said? Partly because the education and training that people receive there is better than that in Wales. We must match the best. We must start pursuing excellence again, and stop equating excellence with elitism, which is different. We did it once, and we can do it again. We must show the political will to achieve that. Yes, we must have the resources, the money from the Treasury, but let us show the political will to raise the standard of education and learning in our communities. Then we will solve the problem.

5.23 pm

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) on his speech. I agree with many of his comments, and his point about education was vital. We must regenerate our pride in education and our commitment to it. It is essential to future industries, technologies and job opportunities in Wales.

I congratulate the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs on its comprehensive report, which forms the background to the debate. It makes many excellent recommendations, and I congratulate its Chairman, the hon. Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones) and its members. I congratulate especially my hon. Friend the Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) on getting so many Plaid Cymru policies adopted by the Committee. His influence is far reaching.

The challenge is to persuade the Government to adopt the Committee's recommendations and not to leave the report on dusty shelves. They need to be implemented. The Minister's opening speech made no commitment to taking any action on the report. As he knows, I have a lot of respect for him, but his speech was awash with complacency. He boasted about action that the Government claim to have taken. Poor people in Wales know the truth; they experience the reality of poverty. No amount of Government spin can change that.

Let us consider some of the economic factors that form the background to the report. Gross domestic product per head in Wales has dropped from 92 per cent. of the United Kingdom average in the 1960s to 79 per cent. now. In 1999, the proportion of working-age people in employment in Wales was 68 per cent., compared with 80 per cent. in south-east England. The proportion of working-age people in workless households in Wales was 16 per cent., more than twice as high as in south-east England.

The employment rate for people with disabilities in Wales was only 31 per cent., compared with 51 per cent. in south-east England. The employment rate for lone parents in Wales was 47 per cent., compared with 56 per cent. in south-east England. The employment rate for those aged over 50 was 56 per cent. in Wales, compared with 74 per cent. in south-east England. Those are some of the background figures to the social and economic problems that Wales is facing.

Mr. Ruane: The right hon. Gentleman mentioned some of the negative statistics for Wales. May I counter them with some positive ones? There have been 40,000 new jobs in Wales since 1997—29,400 in the two years to September 2000—and 67,000 families have benefited from the working families tax credit. The new deal has helped 27,000 jobless people into work in Wales. More than 100,000 workers in Wales are benefiting from the

national minimum wage—approximately 10 per cent. of the work force. All that has been achieved under Labour over the past three and a half years.

Mr. Wigley: I was not expecting the hon. Gentleman to read out his manifesto for the forthcoming election in his Clwyd constituency. No doubt he will put the best spin that he can on the figures that exist. However, he acknowledges that—as the Committee stated in its report—severe problems face Wales. Of course, we welcome the new jobs have that have been created, such as the 600 at Bridgend that were re-announced today by Ford. We welcome any good news. However, we must look at the targets at which we should be aiming. The gulf in GDP per head has widened over the past 20 years, and the problem is getting progressively worse—even over the past three years, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones) rightly said.

I turn to this week's disastrous news about the job losses in the steel industry. The hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) will not be surprised that I am referring to this, because the decision has hit Shotton as it has hit the steelworking towns of south Wales. The First Minister in the Assembly, who represents Cardiff, West here at Westminster, has estimated that the total effect of the decision, including knock-on effects, will be the loss of about 7,000 jobs in Wales.

That loss will be on top of a loss of between 2,000 and 3,000 jobs in the agricultural sector over the past 18 months, which was mentioned earlier. Although we welcome the confirmation of the new jobs that have been announced, even with the knock-on effect taken into account, they go only one tenth of the way towards remedying the recent job losses, and they will certainly not represent any progress in increasing the amount of income per head in Wales.

It is unacceptable that any company should treat its work force as Corus has done. It is equally unacceptable that the Government should have stood back from the crisis that has been rapidly developing over the past 18 months. When we warned of the dangers, we were told to stop scaremongering. However, not only the steel industry but all manufacturing has been hit by the Government's policy of maintaining the high parity of the pound. The number of manufacturing jobs in Wales decreased from 230,000 in 1990 to 192,000 last year—a decrease of 38,000 jobs. Tourism and agriculture have also been hit by the over-valued pound.

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): I want to correct the right hon. Gentleman. As I understand it, the Government's policy is not to maintain the parity of the pound but to maintain interest rates. That has nothing to do with the parity of the pound.

Mr. Wigley: Goodness me! If one retains interest rates as the only tool with which to control inflation, and holds them at too high a level, that will inevitably affect the parity of the pound because money will be sucked in. That is basic economics. Handing over control to the Bank of England, with only one objective—to control inflation—will inevitably have a knock-on effect on employment. Even the United States gives its central bank the twin objective of having regard to employment and to inflation. The Government are totally culpable in passing over responsibility to the Bank of England without giving it responsibility for employment as well as inflation.

Mr. Llew Smith: The right hon. Gentleman obviously disapproves of handing over powers to the Bank of England, and I agree with him about that, but what are his views on handing over powers to the European central bank? As I understand it, if we hand over such powers, the matters that the right hon. Gentleman believes should remain in our control will no longer do so.

Mr. Wigley: I believe that such policies must be accountable to the people and that policies followed by the Bank of England or the European central bank must have an eye on what is acceptable to the people in terms of employment as well as inflation. For the Government—a Labour Government—to have abandoned employment as a criterion for the Bank of England in controlling the economy beggars belief. The founding fathers of the Labour party, including those in the hon. Gentleman's Blaenau Gwent constituency, must be turning in their graves as they contemplate this situation.

There is a need to get the pound to a realistic parity against the euro and I believe that, having achieved that realistic level, we should be in the European currency system to give manufacturing the confidence it needs to plan its future. It is unacceptable that the factories of Wales—

Mr. Smith: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Wigley: No, not at the moment. I shall make progress rather than take running interventions from the hon. Gentleman.

I hope that some Labour Members agree, unless they have totally changed their colours, that it is unacceptable that the factories of Wales should be put in jeopardy by the vagaries of the currency casino from which we are suffering, now and over recent years.

The steel issue runs even deeper. Steel is a basic commodity of the manufacturing economy, basic for construction and basic for any independent defence policy of these islands. For the Government to sit back and allow the future of that basic industry to be determined by shareholders in the New York stock exchange and decisions of Dutch executives is not acceptable. The steel job losses will hit Gorseinon and Shotton and cast a grave shadow over the future of the Llanwern steelworks, where productivity is 20 per cent. higher than that of the Dutch steelworks that will benefit from Corus's cuts in the United Kingdom.

For Ebbw Vale—yes, the constituency of the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith)—the news is absolutely calamitous. That community depends on steel. It still has not got over the previous round of cuts and has some of the worst figures in Wales for poverty and deprivation. Now it is to be hit by the scandalous and unacceptable closure decision. A Labour Government—yes, a Labour Government—are sitting back and letting that happen, but let us not pretend that they are helpless.

Of course the Government can do something, as the right hon. Member for Llanelli suggested. They could and should have intervened to tell Corus in no uncertain terms that they would not sit back and allow such a

[Mr. Wigley]

vital industry to be undermined, but they did not. They could intervene even now on the basis of the strategic importance of the steel industry, as suggested last week by Edwina Hart, Labour's Minister for Finance and Communities in the National Assembly. They could say that, unless Corus rethinks, they will act to take the United Kingdom steel industry back into some form of public ownership or, at the very least, to underwrite the trade union proposals for a takeover or a management buy-out. They could examine the model successfully followed by Tower colliery or the Glas Cymru model for Welsh Water.

What is not acceptable is for the Government to wring their hands, shake their head and utter spurious, cynical noises of sympathy while doing absolutely nothing to save those vital jobs.

Mr. Smith: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Wigley: Not at the moment.

What on earth is the point of electing a Labour Government if they stand back and watch communities such as Ebbw Vale be sacrificed on the altar of the New York stock exchange?

Mr. Hanson: The Labour Government are not sitting back and watching jobs being lost. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) and some of my hon. Friends, I represent steelworkers. We met Corus and met the unions before, during and after the announcement and we shall continue to do so. I will not take posturing from the right hon. Gentleman on those points.

Mr. Wigley: And I will not take mock anger at the Dispatch Box from the Minister. If the Government were doing something, we should have known what they were doing. By now, they should have shown their colours by their actions.

It is time that the Government shook themselves out of the self-congratulatory complacency that they have shown in the debate. We need action on steel. We need a proactive regional policy, as recommended by the Select Committee. We need to lower corporation tax to attract new investment, as has been done in Ireland. We need regional variation of tax as a tool of regional policy, as recommended by the Select Committee. We need operating aids such as lower national insurance in objective 1 areas. We need—again, as highlighted by the Select Committee—a revised Barnett formula to ensure that resources are available to tackle social deprivation in Wales in line with our needs. It is sad to see that the Secretary of State for Wales has already ruled out that option in his reply to a question on 18 January.

It is outrageous that the funding available for Wales in 2001 is still based on the 1978 formula, taking no notice of the enormous structural changes in the Welsh economy over the past 20 years. Unless the Labour Government are prepared to act on such social priorities, what on earth is the point of their existence? The clock is ticking not just for Ebbw Vale and Llanwern, but for new Labour in Wales. Unless they change course, their time will soon be up.

5.35 pm

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): For me and for my constituency, the past week has been sad, dramatic and awful—to say the least.

For many years, my community has been built on coal and steel. The coal industry was wiped out by the previous Tory Government immediately after the 1984 miners' strike, when miners in my community stood up to defend their industry and, indeed, their community. Now, the steel industry might also be wiped out, once again by the privatisation policies of the previous Tory Government.

What annoys many people in my community is the refusal to accept that privatisation is the problem. What makes us angry is when Corus spews out a long list of excuses why Ebbw Vale as a steel town should close and why other steel jobs should go. We are told on one day that it is a problem of transport costs, on another that it is because of the climate change levy and on yet another that it is a problem of rates. We are then told that it is a problem of the euro.

Corus seems to have changed its position on the euro almost daily. A few weeks ago, it said that the euro was the problem. A week or so ago, one of its chief executives said that the euro was not the problem. When the closure was announced, we were told once again that the euro was the problem. However, some 24 hours after the closure, the *Financial Times* reported that the euro was not the problem. I do not believe that the euro, transport costs, the climate change levy or rates had anything to do with the closure of the Ebbw Vale tinplate plant and the loss of other jobs throughout the steel industry. I believe that it has happened as a result of the incompetence of the Corus directors, who, instead of building on the productivity achieved by the work force, spent the past 18 months asset-stripping the industry. The community in Blaenau Gwent is now paying for that.

I have said it before and I shall say it again: ominously, on the day on which Corus was formed, one of its first acts was not to make a statement saying that it was determined to build up the steel industry but to hand over approximately £700 million, which Moffatt described as a special payment, to its shareholders. As Moffatt said, had the £700 million not been handed over, it is unlikely that the merger would have gone ahead. Thus, we know that the merger was about money, not about building up one of our greatest industries.

Corus also appropriated some £900 million from the workers' pension fund. It was a workers' pension fund in more ways than one. Corus seemed to have forgotten that much of the money was paid into that fund when the steel industry was publicly owned. Over the past 18 months, Corus has spent some £135 million buying up companies throughout the world. Although it found the £135 million to do that, it could find only £3 million to invest in the UK steel industry.

It is ironic and obscene not only that Corus did not invest in the plant in Ebbw Vale as it should have done, but that 24 hours before the closure was announced, it got around to investing in a nameplate for the plant. During the previous 18 months, the company had not been willing to invest in a new nameplate. A piece of white tarpaulin with the name "Corus" splattered across it had been thrown over the previous nameplate. That says something about the company's contribution.

The joint chief executives were sacked a while back. If we accept what we were told, they were sacked for incompetence, so why were they given millions of pounds of compensation? On top of that, when Corus was formed, one of its first acts was to give massive wage increases to the former Dutch managers. Surely that cannot be right. It is certainly not right when we compare that with the treatment of the steelworkers—the people who built the industry, and turned the plant in Ebbw Vale into one of the most efficient and productive in the world.

Steelworkers in Ebbw Vale have made sacrifice after sacrifice by accepting changes in their conditions of employment and wages. All that seems to be irrelevant to Corus. After making those sacrifices and building the industry and the plant into one of the most successful in the world, surely the workers should have been rewarded for their endeavours. In fact, they have been punished.

The media have reported that 750 jobs will be lost if that plant closes. They are wrong. Over the past couple of years, Corus has outsourced much of its work. People who were previously employed by the company are now employed by other firms but are still working at the plant. That is another 250 jobs. On 1 March, another 250 workers will be made redundant as a result of the last lot of job losses. The small community of Ebbw Vale will suffer 1,250 job losses. No matter how we measure deprivation—unemployment, low wages, ill health or bad housing—sadly, that community is top of the list. We have not recovered from the previous job losses in the steel industry or from the wiping out of the mining industry.

What annoys people in the community is that they made cuts in their conditions of employment, such as wage standstills, but Corus has never accepted that it is those workers who are the real experts. They have worked in the steel industry not for one or two years, but for 20, 30 or 40 years. They know the industry inside out. Sadly, their skills, talents and creativity were ignored by Corus's management. On no occasion did Corus say to those workers that it wanted to use their skills, talent and creativity to help it to build up the industry in the months ahead.

Corus showed disdain not only for the work force but for the Government, trade unions and other public representatives. I have been going into the tinplate works in Ebbw Vale for many a long year, but in recent years there has been a change and I have been prevented from doing so. A few weeks back, I said to Mr. Stuart Wilkie, the works manager, that I wanted to go into the plant to have a chat with the management and the union regarding the problems facing the industry and the possible job losses. Mr. Wilkie said that I could go into the plant, but only after the decision had been taken. Indeed, on the day of the decision, Mr. Wilkie said that Mr. Vickers, one of the managing directors, had asked him to contact me to explain the redundancies.

Like most other Members who are present, I never use foul language. Never does an "expletive deleted" pass my lips. That occasion, however, was an exception, because the Mr. Vickers who advised the plant manager to inform me on the telephone of redundancies and the closure of the plant was the very same Mr. Vickers—the very same managing director—who, on the day on which Corus was formed, rang me at home at 8.30 am and assured me that there would be no job losses, that the plant's future was not threatened and that the plant was secure. Obviously the position has changed dramatically, because of the contribution of the Moffats of this world, the Vickerses of this world and yes, the works managers of this world. Instead of building up the industry, those people have tried to destroy it.

I think I am known in my group as one who, when I think the Government are wrong, says so and votes accordingly. In this instance, however, I do not believe that the Government are to blame. The blame lies entirely with Corus, and any Member who tries to shift the blame will do a disservice to my community—to the 1,250 people who will lose their jobs, and the 1,250 families who will suffer. They will suffer as a result of Corus: Corus and privatisation have caused this disaster.

When we met Mr. Moffat some days ago, I came away totally demoralised—not just in the context of the future of Ebbw Vale, but in the context of the steel industry's future in the United Kingdom. If the Moffats of this world remain in power within the industry, I predict that in five years there will be no steel industry in the United Kingdom. It seemed to me that Mr. Moffat had no commitment to the industry and no strategy for it; I sensed short-termism.

What probably happened was this. Mr. Moffat sacked the two chief executives and then thought, "I will sort this out", but he could not sort it out. He could not sort out the problems that obviously existed with the banks.

Another thing annoyed me. Mr. Moffat told us that no decision had been made about the future of the Ebbw Vale plant, yet about 24 hours later he and the others were planning a press release saying that the Ebbw Vale tinplate works would close. Mr. Moffat was lying through his teeth: it is impossible to reach any other conclusion.

It was bad enough to lie to me. What is more repulsive is the fact that Mr. Moffat lied to people who depended on the industry and the plant for their future: he and people like him will not be forgiven for that.

The current debate in Ebbw Vale is not about whether the Government can provide extra money; it is still about saving the plant, and that is what we must do. By working-class standards—by the standards of Blaenau Gwent—those were 1,250 good jobs. When the people who no longer have those jobs sign on the dole, the alternative will be not 1,250 jobs in some other manufacturing firm but, probably, security officers' jobs at £4 an hour. That cannot be right.

All our energies must go into saving the plant. In doing so, we shall not only be saving the lives of many people in that community; we shall be saving the life of the steel industry. That is a goal worth fighting for, which is what those in my community are still doing.

5.49 pm

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): My heart goes out to the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith). What Corus has done to his community is unforgivable, and he rightly makes a cry for a fightback by the work force. We must all support him in that, whatever party we are in. We must do something to save the community, which depends totally on the steel industry. I feel strongly about the matter.

In Wales, the background to this subject is extraordinary. Social exclusion has been linked with problems of unemployment, poor skills, low incomes,

[Mr. Richard Livsey]

poor housing, high crime, poor environment, bad health and family breakdown. The archetypal view is that social exclusion is found on inner-city estates, but one must remember that it can be found in rural areas, too, and that poor people in rural areas can be particularly excluded because of a lack of transport, increased costs and remote services.

Wales suffers disproportionately compared with other areas in the United Kingdom. Wales has a higher rate of children living in poverty, lower levels of educational achievement, more housing of poor quality, low rates of pay, a higher rate of households with no one in employment, a higher proportion of people on income-replacement benefits, a particularly high proportion of people in receipt of sickness and disability benefits, lower life expectancy and higher mortality rates. I am sorry to have to say it, but that is a legacy of 18 years of Conservative rule. The Conservatives have nothing to be proud of in leaving that legacy for us to pick up.

Social exclusion refers to more than a set level of income. It refers to the marginalisation of people in society and to their exclusion from what we would normally think was a thoroughly decent society.

Gender is important in this respect. In Wales, 245,000 women live on or around the poverty line. That is inexcusable. Lone parents, who are nearly always women, are even less likely to be in paid employment. Women represent the most significant group of socially excluded members of society. That must not be forgotten. With all the job losses, it is the women who have to struggle to bring up their families in poverty—that is what we are talking about.

People over state retirement age comprise 20 per cent. of the Welsh population. That is higher than in the UK as a whole. In my constituency, 24 per cent. of the population are in that category.

Mr. Öpik: Does my hon. Friend agree that sparsity considerations make it more expensive to cater for the social needs of the elderly in rural areas such as mid-Wales and that it is important that the Government are sensitive to that? Otherwise, they create elderly ghettoisation, which exacerbates the life expectancy and health problems that he describes.

Mr. Livsey: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, but, as he knows, that problem already exists in many areas. Indeed, where post offices have closed, elderly people cannot go to collect their pensions. I know that they can get them through the post, but that contributes to closures of even more post offices. The blame for that lies both with the previous and present Governments. They have both closed an awful lot of sub-post offices.

Chronic ill health and mortality rates are significantly higher in Wales than in England. A lack of public transport, particularly in rural areas, hits people very hard.

Children and young people are disproportionately affected by social exclusion. Thirty-seven per cent. of children live in poverty—in a household with well below 50 per cent. of average income, which currently stands at £200 a week. More than 5 per cent. leave school at 16 with no qualifications. In some parts of Wales, the figure is much higher than that. It used to be about 20 per cent. in some of the valley areas, but that is being tackled.

Young people aged 16 to 18 are excluded from the national minimum wage. I am a member of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, which investigated social exclusion. We met that problem head on in interviews with young people. They must get fair treatment and assistance to earn the full minimum wage. Few young people have access to a car, so they are particularly affected by the lack of public transport.

The rate of teenage pregnancy is particularly high in Wales. The vulnerability of children who are looked after by local authorities has been highlighted by the north Wales child abuse tribunal. It is important to remember that children in care and those leaving care are highly vulnerable. We are starting to attack that problem, rightly, with the establishment of a Children's Commissioner for Wales.

People with disabilities or long-term illnesses are frequently excluded from the mainstream of society. People in ethnic minorities suffer higher unemployment by far than those in other categories.

The crisis in agriculture and the disastrous decline in farm incomes have had a knock-on effect on the rural economy. Good jobs in the sector are in short supply. The rural population is ageing. As those of us in mid-Wales know, the average age of farmers in the area is 58. I do not know whether young people will replace them. We are losing an entire generation of young farmers, who are finding work elsewhere and, indeed, leaving our communities. A graphic figure has been quoted in a different context: between 1998 and 2000, 6,000 farmers left the land in Wales. That is the equivalent of the announcement by Corus last week on the steel industry: 6,000 people in England and Wales as a whole will have to leave the industry.

There is a crisis in both manufacturing and farming. Wales overall depends on both sectors. The 3,000 job losses at Corus are supplemented by 550 job losses in the dairy manufacturing industry in Carmarthen and Cardiff. Welsh milk is to be bottled in Gloucestershire and sent back again. The environmental costs of that are frightening.

Wales's gross domestic product has declined by 12 per cent. in the past 20 years. Half a point of GDP went for every year of the 18 years that the Conservatives were in power.

The problems with pay are serious. We have 28.3 per cent. of the population earning less than £250 a week. As a result of unemployment and low pay, many people in Wales depend on social security benefits. Twenty-five per cent. of households in Wales and nearly 500,000 people received income support or family credit in 1997, for example.

The Corus announcement comes on top of everything that I have referred to. We believe that many aspects of the Corus shutdown and the redundancies in the steel industry mean that there will be very little, if any, investment and a great decline in jobs.

There is a strong case for a management buy-out of the Ebbw Vale plant. It should be by a combination of management and work force. The Government should support that with investment money. We should start with Ebbw Vale and go through to Llanwern because, again, almost half the work force is going there.

It was stated over the weekend that Corus had no plans whatever for new investment in the steel industry. I agree with the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent—I do not think that there will be a steel industry left in five years. I am critical of the Government for allowing British Steel to be amalgamated into Corus, which was a fundamental error of judgment.

Steel is a fundamental part of our economy and we can have very little manufacturing without it. The Government must intervene in the matter, but that must not involve straightforward renationalisation. The work force have to be assisted to manage plants, perhaps by bringing in management, and to secure a profitable industry. There may have to be restructuring and the industry may have to be made more efficient, but that cannot happen without massive investment to make the industry more competitive.

Mr. Llew Smith: The hon. Gentleman talks about a management and workers' buy-out at Ebbw Vale. Although I have no knowledge of such a buy-out, he may be aware that Mr. Moffat, the chairman and chief executive of Corus, has said that he does not favour competition and that he will not accept a buy-out of any part of the industry. It seems ironic that people who oppose public ownership because they oppose monopolies and who support privatisation because they support competition do not favour competition when it is in their own backyards.

Mr. Livsey: I understand why the hon. Gentleman says that. However, Corus's objective is to remove 3 million tonnes of steel from United Kingdom steel production. That figure has been chosen because it is the amount of UK steel production that is currently being exported unprofitably.

We cannot expect a very sympathetic response from some multinational companies. I worked for a multinational company for quite some time and I realise that some boardrooms will cut and run. I think that we are dealing with just such a boardroom in this case. Other boardrooms will co-operate and negotiate. In its announcement today, on Bridgend, Ford has given an example of the latter type of management. Hon. Members are wrong, however, if they think that Corus will negotiate; it will not. Corus will not even try to negotiate.

I believe that we must resurrect the steel industry and that we have to do so in the many plants that will be closed down.

Mr. Smith: There is obviously a communication problem. I thought that the point of my comments was to make it clear that Corus is not going to negotiate with the Government, public representatives or trade unions. It is not going to negotiate, full stop. I was not implying that Corus will suddenly decide to negotiate on the possibility of allowing alternative ownership for plants being closed. Corus has categorically stated that it will not sell those plants. We therefore assume that it will knock down and clear away the buildings.

Mr. Livsey: The hon. Gentleman is correct to say that Corus is a public company. However, if the company is £1.6 billion in debt, as it is, and if an offer can be made, surely it would be better to pursue that option than to spend money for years on social security payments for those who have lost their jobs, which is what could happen. There is room for a constructive initiative to save Britain's steel industry. That is what we are talking about. We must save our steel industry as a basic part of our economy.

There are many ways in which action can be taken. We have to encourage the development of skills in the work force. I should say, to be fair, that the National Assembly is taking some action to address that issue. We are committed to training programmes that will bring enormous benefits to the overall economy. However, it is essential that we have even more investment in education.

We must also reduce the gap between rich and poor, and not allow it to widen as happened under the previous Conservative Government and is occurring even under this Government. However, I applaud the efforts being made, through the new deal and other measures, to try to plug the wealth gap.

More has to be done for pensioners and for people on low incomes to improve their quality of life. As the Welsh Affairs Committee's report makes clear, much more assistance must be given to poor nations and regions. Additionally, reform of the Barnett formula has to be based on needs themselves. We should help lower-paid people by reducing taxation for poor taxpayers. The Liberal Democrats' policy is to raise tax on those earning more than £100,000 and to redistribute it among those who are on very low incomes.

We hope to regenerate deprived rural and urban communities, wherever they are, and to boost local services by directing more money to the provision of high-quality services, such as those provided in post offices. We also believe in tackling social disadvantage by developing an inclusive society.

Liberal Democrat Members believe very strongly that the Assembly must have more power and that fundamental new primary legislation would enable us to take immediate action to abolish, for example, tuition fees for students. We could also take immediate action to provide free care for the elderly, as has happened in Scotland.

Such legislation would also enable us more strongly to encourage the Government to change employment law, to ensure that the type of disaster that Corus has thrust upon us does not happen again. There was an opportunity at the Nice summit to take action on that issue, but it did not happen. The Government must think again about providing our employees with greater protection. Additionally, corporation tax relief and national insurance tax relief should be available in hard-hit regions.

One of our fundamental problems is that, on 1 January 1999, we did not enter the eurozone. It is a massive problem which has aggravated the difficulties with the steel industry and the exchange rate. I disagree with hon. Members who believe that it has not been a problem. Steel is not profitable largely because of the exchange rate and our position outside the euro. Manufacturing and agricultural commodity prices, whether for milk, lamb or steel, have all been affected by the disparity. The Government have to tackle the problem.

There is a lot of work to be done. The steel industry has to be saved, but only Government intervention can do that. There was intervention in the 1920s and 1930s, when

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my family was ejected from the iron and steel industry in south Wales, to which we were never to return. I do not want another generation to be placed in a similar position.

About 20 years ago, 14,000 people were working in that plant in the constituency of the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent. Today, we are bemoaning the loss of 1,250 jobs there. The massive productivity of the steelworkers has made those jobs much more precious. Wales's steelworkers have to be rewarded for their efforts. We must give them a hand up and help them as much as possible. If that requires direct Government intervention, so be it.

6.8 pm

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak on an issue that, for much of the past two years, has exercised the Welsh Affairs Committee and been the focus of our work. The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) is not only a Committee member, but moved today's Opposition motion. Although I am pleased to be able today to debate and to defend the Government's action to tackle social exclusion in Wales, I am somewhat puzzled about Plaid Cymru's real reason and motive for initiating the debate.

On Monday 15 January 2001, the Welsh Affairs Committee published its much awaited report "Social Exclusion in Wales", which has attracted cross-party support in Wales. On that very day, in an interview with BBC Radio Wales, the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy said:

"The Report is a step in the right direction".

It is indeed a step in the right direction.

The hon. Gentleman went on to tell the BBC that he wanted to see both the Government and the National Assembly for Wales working together to tackle social exclusion. As he put it, he wanted to see "all agencies working together". In today's motion, however, he has demonstrated supreme impatience with and discourtesy to one of those partners, by criticising the Government before they have been able to give their considered response to the Committee's report. Allowing such a response to be made is not only a convention of the House, but the most sensible way of approaching serious and important matters such as social exclusion.

By tabling today's motion, Plaid Cymru is simply jumping the general election gun. I believe that Plaid Cymru Members are losing their nerve at the most critical moment because they see that we have put in place the new deal, achieved the lowest ever unemployment in Wales, helped 100,000 people in Wales with the minimum wage and created the pensioners' minimum income guarantee and the working families tax credit. Only today, we heard the Government's announcement on the child tax credit. Plaid Cymru has demonstrated possibly the worst case of premature elaboration seen in this House for many years.

Mr. Llwyd: I am not going on the record as a sufferer. With respect to the hon. Gentleman, he knows as well as I do that it took nine months for the Government to respond to the last report. Frankly, that is not good enough. All Committee members were concerned about that; this debate may elicit an early response.

Mr. Jones: I agree, but the Government have not had time to respond to the report—they have had 21 days—so what he says is slightly disingenuous. Plaid Cymru wants things both ways. The motion castigates the Government for their alleged failure, yet it cannot wait for the Government to give a detailed response. That is not good enough.

Last June, the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy rightly berated the Government, saying:

"Over the past few years, we have been disappointed in the content of the responses from Governments to reports, and in the fact that there have been delays of nine, 10 or 12 months before such responses have been made available. These delays have been something of a scandal."—*[Official Report, Westminster Hall,* 21 June 2000; Vol. 352. c 69WH.]

I agree. However, that does not mean that the Government can respond in 21 days.

Mr. Llwyd: Has the hon. Gentleman read the motion? It does not ask for a response within any given time; the motion merely "notes" certain matters.

Mr. Jones: That is a bit disingenuous. The hon. Gentleman must be expecting a response to a motion that asks the House to take note of a report. If he carries on at this rate, he will be demanding that the Government respond to our reports before we have even had the inquiries.

What have Plaid Cymru achieved by holding this debate today? If the motion is an attempt somehow to wrong-foot the Government, it has failed miserably. If it is a serious attempt to address the problems facing Wales, it has failed. The Welsh Affairs Committee has already had an inquiry into social exclusion and we now await the Government's response. If the motion is an attempt by Plaid Cymru to advance its own agenda on social exclusion, it has failed, on its own admission. I am sure the House will be delighted to learn that Plaid Cymru fully supported the recommendations of the report.

Let me not just criticise Plaid Cymru, however. At least its Members are here—all four of them. The official Opposition showed their contempt for the issue by having only two Members sitting on their Benches. I tell a lie; the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) popped in after 56 minutes, stayed for 25 minutes and has now disappeared.

Mr. Evans: My hon. Friend spoke more sense during his short contribution than the hon. Gentleman is speaking now.

Mr. Jones: Oh no, he didn't. That is the hon. Gentleman's opinion; I do not think any other Member of the House would agree.

Mr. Edwards: Could I remind my hon. Friend that when the hon. Member for Buckingham was on the Welsh Affairs Committee, he did at least attend the Committee? Would my hon. Friend confirm that the two Opposition Committee members during the social exclusion inquiry attended virtually no sittings whatever in the entire year?

Mr. Jones: My hon. Friend can say that; as the Chairman of the Committee, I could not possibly comment.

One of the problems with having the debate today is that it is likely that the Liaison Committee will not now accept my bid for a debate on the report. Although we have very little time, I need to make a few points about the report.

The inquiry that led to our report started early in 1999—a few months before devolution—and continued until nearly the end of last year. It was one of the largest inquiries undertaken by the Committee, involving consultation with nearly 100 organisations, nine formal hearings and 11 days of visits throughout Wales. We also held three seminars—two with academics and one with representatives of ethnic minority groups in Cardiff—and an informal meeting, to which the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) referred, with young people in Machynlleth. That was very enlightening. In addition, we visited the Republic of Ireland in March 2000, and the United States of America in June 2000.

Tackling social exclusion is a key area in which co-operation between the UK Government and the National Assembly for Wales is crucial. The National Assembly has responsibility for housing, health, transport, education and training and local government in Wales; but responsibility for social security benefits, taxation, the Employment Service, the regulation of financial services, the indirect management of the Post Office and the fight against crime all rest with the UK Government.

The Committee's main emphasis was on those areas for which the UK Government have responsibility. It is quite proper that, as a Committee of the UK Parliament, we should seek to examine most closely the activities of the UK Government. Equally, it would be difficult for us to carry out our scrutiny of the Government effectively without impinging from time to time on matters that are properly for the National Assembly for Wales.

The main area where we believe the Government can make a difference in tackling social exclusion in Wales is in tackling poverty and financial exclusion. By poverty, I mean the lack of money to buy the necessities of life and to participate fully in society. There is obviously scope for debate on what constitutes poverty and what constitute the necessities of life. The Government use an indicator of relative poverty to measure poverty—normally 50 per cent. of average incomes—but some of our witnesses argued for different definitions.

Whatever definition of poverty is used, it is all too clear that many people in Wales are poor. Unemployment in Wales is higher than in the UK as a whole, and the employment rate is lower. In some areas of Wales, such as Blaenau Gwent and Merthyr Tydfil, the proportion of the working-age population in employment is less than 60 per cent. However, there is no evidence of absolute poverty increasing and plenty of evidence of employment rising.

It is not only a matter of unemployment; for those who are in work, low pay contributes to poverty in Wales. Some 28.3 per cent. of full-time adult employees in Wales earn less than £250 a week, compared with 23.7 per cent. for Great Britain as a whole. We recommended the lower rate of the national minimum wage for 18 to 21-year-olds and entitlement to the minimum wage being extended to 16 and 17-year-olds, as the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire pointed out. I hope the Government will respond to that, although we would not expect a response today.

The problem of poverty is further exacerbated by the fact that, for many poor people, the necessities of life are more expensive. Those who have no car often pay more for their food in local shops than they would if they could reach the out-of-town supermarket. Meter payment rates for gas and electricity are higher than the rates available to those who pay monthly by direct debit.

We believe that uplifting social security benefits is central to tackling social exclusion. At present, the benefits system allows people to survive, but does not lift them out of poverty. Although poverty is one of the most obvious causes, and one of the symptoms, of social exclusion, it is not the whole problem. People may be socially excluded because they are elderly; because they have a disability; because of poor education or language barriers; because they live in a remote area with poor amenities; or for a host of other reasons. It is important to bear in mind the fact that the problems that we are addressing are varied and complex, and we should not expect simple solutions to be effective.

Central to our report is the emphasis on local solutions within a national framework. During our visits in Wales, one of the common, positive themes that emerged was that the community spirit is very much alive and just needs a helping hand. We witnessed that in the Maes Geirchan estate, in Caia Park in Wrexham, at Llanelli Hill in Abergavenny, in the City of Swansea—

Mr. Ruane: In Rhyl?

Mr. Jones: As my hon. Friend says, we witnessed it in Rhyl, and when we published our report last month at the Dusty Forge centre in Ely, Cardiff.

Capacity-building programmes—led from the bottom up by enthusiastic, energetic local people—can, we believe, be extremely effective in tackling social exclusion, especially when they are run in close co-operation with a supportive local authority, as we observed in Swansea, Torfaen and Wrexham.

The common problem associated with all the projects has been a lack of stable, sustainable funding. To address this, we recommend that funding for social exclusion projects should in most cases be for a minimum of five years. Project organisers should be given a little breathing room to put their begging bowls away for a few years and concentrate on the core work of the project. It struck us that many enthusiastic, talented people who wanted to put their energies into regenerating their local community had to spend much of their time justifying their funding and trying to make sure that the project would still exist the following year.

Pump-priming has its place and can produce impressive results, but it will not be enough in every case. In some of the most disadvantaged areas, funding may be required on a permanent, or at least an on-going, basis. We also believe that the funding regime for social exclusion projects should be streamlined and simplified. At the moment, there are too many different pots of money and too much bureaucratic control is exercised over them. It may be that we need to learn to accept a degree of risk in our social investment. After all, how often is the cost of not investing in a project given equal consideration to the cost of spending the money?

We need to move away from challenge funding to sustainable funding wherever it is required. But the National Assembly will be unable to provide this unless

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it is provided with adequate resources. Objective 1 offers a unique opportunity to bring a large injection of public funding to west Wales and the valleys, and we must ensure that it is used to good effect to tackle social exclusion. European funding is not the only answer, though. The Government must match their fine words by tackling social exclusion with hard money. The extent of social exclusion in Wales must be recognised in the funding allocation to Wales.

Ms Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the key issues highlighted in the Select Committee's inquiry was the difficulty of moving from benefits into work? Is it not one of the important recommendations that new benefit ideas should be tried out in a pilot area in Wales?

Mr. Jones: Indeed. We need to test which benefit changes might work in the effort to tackle social exclusion. In Ireland, benefits are tapered to allow people back into work without running into a brick wall of benefit loss.

It is true that the Barnett formula is probably overdue for a revamp to reflect the real needs of both Wales and other parts of the United Kingdom. We need an anti-poverty strategy with the goal of eliminating not only child poverty—as the Prime Minister has already pledged—but all poverty, within a realistic time scale, based on clear, objective measures of the number of poor people. The Government have set the date of 2020 for the elimination of child poverty, so perhaps we could aim at eliminating all poverty in 30 years.

Mrs. Lawrence: Does my hon. Friend agree that the fact that 360,000 children are benefiting from increased child benefit shows that the motion is totally incorrect in its insinuations?

Mr. Jones: Absolutely. I will not read out the whole list of all the benefits that the Government have brought to Wales. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh, go on."] All right, then. In Wales, 67,000 families are benefiting from the working families tax credit; 27,000 jobless people have been helped into work through the new deal; since the launch of the new deal throughout Wales, the number of 18 to 24 year-olds unemployed and claiming jobseeker's allowance for six months or more has fallen by 73 per cent; more than 100,000 workers are benefiting from the national minimum wage—that is especially impressive in Wales, with our lower gross domestic product; and 500,000 pensioner households are receiving the increased winter fuel payment of £200.

Mr. Ruane: How does my hon. Friend feel about the contrast with the Conservative Government, under whom 5,000 pensioners froze to death—they had hypothermia—in their own homes in 1985 because they were too scared to turn on their gas or electric fires? How does that compare with Labour's record of reducing VAT on fuel from 8 per cent. to 5 per cent.—the Tories wanted to stick it up to 17.5 per cent.—and giving pensioners £200 last December in a winter fuel allowance so that they can be secure in their own homes and know that they can keep warm and pay their fuel bills?

Mr. Jones: Winter fuel allowance for those on income support means that they, too, need not suffer from cold in the winter.

In Wales, 210,000 pensioner households are entitled to free television licences; all 630,000 pensioners are to gain from above-inflation pension increases this year and next; 360,000 children are benefiting from increases in child benefit; and we have had the longest period of sustained low inflation since the 1960s.

The Government are also responsible for the tax regime, which is so important to the economic prosperity of Wales. In Ireland, the tax regime—notably the low rate of corporation tax—is attractive to both inward investors and domestic entrepreneurs, who consider it far more important than objective 1 funding in promoting economic growth and regeneration. It is time for the Government to consider regional variations in tax to encourage investment in the less developed areas.

Mrs. Lawrence: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the major issues in tackling social exclusion must be economic stability, especially for people on low incomes? Does he agree that the fact that we have the lowest mortgage and interest rates for 30 years and the lowest unemployment rate since 1978 will go a long way towards tackling social exclusion?

Mr. Jones: Absolutely, and that also gives the Government the wherewithal to help those areas of the economy that have not yet benefited from the economic turnaround.

Mr. Evans: I am sorry to intrude on the love-in taking place on the Government Back Benches, but what about the fuel tax, which hits poor people disproportionately hard?

Mr. Jones: We reduced fuel tax from 8 per cent. to 5 per cent., as my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) said. The hon. Gentleman cannot have been listening.

Mr. Evans: I am talking about petrol tax. We have among the highest petrol taxes in the world.

Mr. Jones: The Conservative Government put the biggest chunk of tax on fuel when they increased VAT to 15 per cent. The hon. Gentleman is trying to stir up this nonsense again about fuel costs being down to tax. He talked about how farmers are struggling. Many of them are struggling because of the increase from 7p to 28p a litre. There is no duty.

Mr. Evans: When farmers drive cars and use lorries to transport goods, they are paying duty. When the accelerator had done its bit and it was proved that it was not working—

Mr. Jones: You introduced it.

Mr. Evans: Indeed, but when accelerators come to the end of their useful life, they should be scrapped. The Government have been putting petrol taxes up for four years, hitting the poorest hardest.

Mr. Jones: The hon. Gentleman argues against his own case. The fuel tax escalator—rather than accelerator,

as he was saying, perhaps because he knows that if he kept his foot off the accelerator he would not be spending so much on fuel—was begun by the Conservative Government, and we stopped it.

Mr. Evans: Labour put it up.

Mr. Jones: Of course we put up the price in accordance with the escalator before we stopped it. Fuel for the hon. Gentleman's farmers went up from 7p a litre to 28p a litre. That was the biggest increase, and everyone else was paying it, too. As usual, he is talking a load of nonsense.

Mr. Denzil Davies: To return to the proposal about a differential rate of corporation tax, and the Irish lower rate, did the Committee consider the fact that the lower rate in southern Ireland covers the whole country, so that Dublin and Galway do not have differing rates? Did it consider the problem that, if we introduced a differential system in Wales, there would be a different rate in Newport, outside the objective 1 area, and in Swansea, which is inside it?

Mr. Jones: My right hon. Friend is right. The Irish corporation tax rate is nation wide. We noted that a lot of the country's industry is based around Dublin. The economy as a whole is doing very well, but there are regional problems. We should try out different ideas, recognising that they might not all work.

Mr. Öpik: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that road haulage is particularly important in rural areas where there is no rail network on which to move goods? It would be helpful if the Government gave strategic consideration to managing that issue so that the countryside was not disadvantaged.

Mr. Jones: The hon. Gentleman will remember the Chancellor's special measures for rural transport, which added up to the equivalent of 8p a litre. The Government have listened on that point and they recognise the problem, as the Committee does in the report.

My time is up. The Committee awaits the Government's response with great anticipation. Plaid Cymru, in submitting today's motion, have demonstrated an impatience and a need to grab headlines for a day instead of waiting for a considered response from the Executive. That is sad.

6.30 pm

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I congratulate the hon. Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones) on his chairmanship of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs. He and his Committee deserve all credit for their hard work on the excellent report before us. That said, I cannot accept the hon. Gentleman's criticism of our timing of the motion. Today's timely debate has allowed many Labour Members to give their views on matters including manufacturing and Corus, and to express constituency concerns and angers. Our motion is worded extremely carefully. It notes the report, and calls for no action from the Government. We expect Labour Members to support it because it is a tame motion and has cross-party support.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire (Mr. Ainger), who made a great contribution to the debate by distributing useful lists among Labour Members. He has provided much fun. Unfortunately, as my hon. Friend the Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) has just said to me, those lists give only the good news. I agree that new Labour has a good news story to tell on job creation, and neither we nor our motion have detracted from that.

The motion addresses the wider issues of social exclusion that my hon. Friend set out in his sterling opening speech. By setting out his definitions of poverty and social exclusion, my hon. Friend made it clear that social exclusion goes wider than employment or even wages. It includes access to services, particularly in rural areas, where there are many difficulties in Wales. My hon. Friend was clear on how steps could be taken to engender indigenous business growth and support. That could have been of use to Corus, although it is too late to find out whether that would have been so. Certainly, such support should be available for the future support of what remains of the steel industry in Wales.

My hon. Friend made it clear that the Government could yet intervene in the debate on the future of that industry. The right hon. Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) acknowledged that the Government have a role, and it has been too long since a Government were prepared to intervene in industrial policy. After 18 years of Conservative Governments ignoring industrial policy, we have had four years in which Labour has been content to let the Bank of England decide industrial policy. That has been disastrous for Wales.

My hon. Friend the Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy concluded with some remarks on the Barnett formula. It is worth impressing on the House some views on the formula. Lord Barnett himself assumed that it would be temporary. My hon. Friend compared the formula to the Drws-y-nant traffic lights, which he said had been in place for 23 years too long. I must tell him that the Barnett formula has existed for 22 years, so it will need only one more year before it beats that record. As with traffic lights on roads that we pass along every day, we have grown used to the Barnett formula. It can turn red or green as it lets us have some money one year or none the next. We never question the need for the formula, and that is the point of this debate.

I was pleased to hear Labour Members acknowledge the need to review the formula because it is outmoded, mechanistic and formulaic. It is based on what the Welsh economy was like 20 years ago, when gross domestic product was closer to 90 per cent. than the 80 per cent. that it represents today. For 20 years, the formula has been entrenched, instead of dealing, as it was supposed to, with changes year on year. The passage of time means that it deals with figures above the funding coming into Wales, not just with changes to funding. The case for changing the formula is unanswerable. The only opposition to change has come from the hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone).

Mr. Caton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Thomas: I do not have much time. I did not write a brief before arriving, as many Ministers do, and I want to respond to everyone who has made a point in the debate. If I have time later, I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Labour Members suggest that we see the Barnett formula as meaning that every part of the country must get back what it gives in income tax and other taxation.

[Mr. Thomas]

That is not the purpose of the formula. In fact, that is the view taken by the hon. Member for Brent, East, who is now the Mayor of London. The Barnett formula should be a true, needs-based analysis of the needs of the Welsh economy and public services, and any review should take that into account. If that were so, the formula would go closer to doing what European regional development funds do. They consider what happens all over the European Union and recognise which areas need extra support.

Redistribution is a good, old-fashioned socialist word, but that is what we want enshrined in the relationship between Wales and the Westminster Parliament so long as the people of Wales still want that relationship to exist. The Barnett formula has its place, but it must be reviewed and its analysis must be more closely based on need. If it is not, the people of Wales will question even more the relationship between this place and the National Assembly and Government in Wales.

We welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), to a Plaid Cymru debate. Usually, the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) attends Welsh questions, and it is good to see her neighbour today. The Minister spoke well from his brief—he had it off pat—but it was a brief full of statistics with no feeling for how people lead their lives in Wales. What he said would not go down well with those who feel the depths of social exclusion, poverty and low incomes. By telling us always what the Government intend to do, the Government betray their own voters, who expected them to have done something after four years in government.

The Minister was quite right to refer to the 18 extraordinary years of Conservative Government, but the Government have had nearly a quarter of that time: they should be at least a quarter of the way towards reforming society, but that does not seem to be so.

Mr. Bayley: If the hon. Gentleman reads my speech later, he will find that I have listed not what the Government intend to do, but what we have done. When we came to power, 95,000 pensioners had pensions of £62.45 a week or less, and they now receive the minimum income guarantee. Their incomes are £18 higher, and will rise to £92 in April. Unemployment is down, and the number of parents no longer on income support but in work has risen. In response to the hon. Gentleman's point on children, I can tell him that 21.1 per cent. of children in Wales were in workless households in spring 1997, and the figure is now 19.5 per cent. We are moving in the right direction, although I would be the first to agree that there is a long way to go.

Mr. Thomas: The Minister finishes on precisely the point that I wrote down from his speech—the Government need to do more. That is precisely what the motion says. Statistics may show movements this way or that, but there is an amazing sense of complacency from Labour Back Benchers, particularly as regards manufacturing industry.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) was correct to concentrate some of his remarks on the rural areas, because they have been somewhat ignored by Conservative Members. I was pleased to see him occupying the Conservative Benches this afternoon. He is right to point out the problems in rural areas. When numbers of job losses are small, they do not give rise to the shock headlines that the media want to publish.

There is a lack of understanding of the real social exclusion in rural areas. It has to be seen to be believed. It takes a visit to a dairy farm where the farmer's income is less than £4,000 and he is too proud to claim the benefits that are available. He will not make that claim on behalf of his family because he is a business man who has always run the farm himself—he has always kept it going. That happens increasingly in rural areas.

In two years, 6,300 farming jobs were lost—under the Labour Government, not under any previous Government. By comparison, 16,000 manufacturing jobs were lost. Between 165 and 175 jobs are being lost in my constituency: of 700 people—mainly females—employed in manufacturing in Ceredigion, 165 have lost their job overnight, with the closure of a factory in a town of fewer than 2,000 people. That has a devastating effect. Such job losses may not make the headlines, but they are just as damaging to small communities.

In the countryside, we are experiencing a silent shutdown. The countryside is slowly being turned off—tractor by tractor; factory by factory; post office by post office—until it will be nothing but scrubland or a nice place to visit. That is the truth about what is happening in the countryside at present. Labour Members must understand that context for social exclusion and poverty, as well as that for the large numbers of people affected in the valleys and the south-east of Wales. Those areas are equally important, but the countryside has been overlooked.

The right hon. Member for Llanelli pursued excellence in his speech. He gave a concise account of his understanding of the events at Corus during the past few months. I do not disagree with his three analyses. His speech was similar to the one that he always makes about Barnett; he made a threadbare defence of the Treasury's control of the economy of Wales.

Mr. Caton: Will the hon. Gentleman answer the question posed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies)? Under an independent Wales, if Plaid Cymru was successful, how would it meet current public expenditure with a much lower tax take? We need an answer to that question.

Mr. Ruane: Where is the beef?

Mr. Thomas: Hon. Members will have to wait for our manifesto at the general election—*[Interruption.]* I recommend that the hon. Member for Gower (Mr. Caton) reads the manifesto. He will see exactly what our policies are for the people of Wales—*[Interruption.]* We will certainly send a copy to the right hon. Member for Llanelli. He will need to read the Plaid Cymru manifesto, because he will need to know where his opposition is coming from.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) made the most powerful speech of the debate—with its combination of intellect and emotion. I pay tribute to him. The House will miss his voice—as a Member of this place for a quarter of a century, he has advocated policies in an impassioned way. That will be

missed. The National Assembly's gain will be our loss, although I am sure that the Plaid Cymru Bench will be full enough—partly, at least, to make up for that.

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) is no longer in the Chamber. He spoke eloquently on behalf of his constituents and expressed their anger at the closure in Ebbw Vale. All hon. Members have great sympathy with them. Plaid Cymru Members realise that Ebbw Vale and Blaenau Gwent are among the most deprived areas in Wales. Our motion does not seek to undermine that.

Although British Steel was privatised by the Conservatives, its merger with Corus was approved by the Labour Government. At the time, the situation in the financial markets was known; the Government must have known that the merger presaged large financial restructuring. There is Government responsibility. Although Corus wielded the axe, the death sentence was passed by the Government's economic policies.

I can do no more than read from a memo; it is internal to the National Assembly, but unfortunately, it fell into the wrong hands. It states:

"So I think the message is the Government is not willing to offer any help to Wales at this very bleak time."

That memo was sent to civil servants by the second most senior civil servant in Wales. It shows clearly that the Government have responsibility for what happened at Corus.

The hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) made his usual measured and excellent contribution, although his party has partial responsibility for the actions of the National Assembly. Its members in Wales will be judged on that record.

The motion sets out the recommendations of the Select Committee, although our debate has been somewhat overshadowed by events at Corus—rightly so. In a recent report on manufacturing in Wales, the TUC referred to the haemorrhaging of jobs—that is clearly shown at Corus. The motion includes short-term and long-term prescriptions that have cross-party support. We are not actually asking the Government to do much more than note the motion. It would thus be delightful if Labour Members who represent Welsh constituencies could join us in the Division Lobby to show the people of Wales where their hearts are and where their intentions lie.

In the meantime, the Government make the lame argument that at least they are not the Conservatives. Thank goodness that in Wales we have Plaid Cymru to take on the fight from the Labour party at the next general election.

6.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): The debate has been interesting. I want to clear up one matter immediately for my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones). We very much welcome the report of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs. The Government will consider it and will respond to it in due course, so I do not want to pre-empt discussion of the report in this debate.

One of my hon. Friend's key points was about partnership. The Government are considering that idea; we support partnership between ourselves, the National Assembly and local authorities in Wales to ensure that we tackle social exclusion. I shall take lessons from no one in the House about social exclusion. I see it every day in my constituency—as my right hon. and hon. Friends do in their areas. Many of us came into politics to tackle social exclusion. The contribution of the Select Committee is certainly welcome, but we recognise those exclusion issues and we will take them on in due course.

There has been considerable discussion of the situation at Corus. My right hon. Friends the Members for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) and for Llanelli (Mr. Davies), the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley), my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith), the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) and other hon. Members referred to Corus in their contributions. Last week's announcement at Corus was devastating for the individuals and communities affected. I live among steelworkers—the Shotton plant is close to my constituency. Many of my friends and neighbours work there.

There is no doubt that Corus has been facing difficulties. Trading conditions are difficult; the company has had to consider such issues. However, for the Government, I say that the response of Corus represents short-termism at its worst. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli pointed out, that response is defeatist; it is a short-term reaction, with no planning for the longer term.

Other manufacturing companies in Wales have taken a different stance. They have taken the long-term view, as my right hon. and hon. Friends pointed out. Toyota and Nissan, in recent weeks, and Ford at Bridgend today have taken decisions on investment in the United Kingdom that are not based on short-term issues.

The Corus decision does not reflect the excellent productivity gains made by the UK steel industry, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli pointed out. In 1999, UK steel output was 571 tonnes per man—compared with 543 tonnes in Germany and 534 tonnes in France. As has been noted, the Government and Corus should get round the table. Corus should reconsider its decision and work with the trade unions, the Government and the Assembly to make progress on the matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent is not in the Chamber because he is meeting the Prime Minister—as is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales—to try to bring some common sense to the matter. They want to discuss with Corus the issues that have been raised in the debate and show the company the correct way forward. Not one steelworker in Wales needs to lose his job. Corus should think again. The company and Corus should consider those issues.

Mr. Caton: Will my hon. Friend assure me that the discussion with Corus will move on? If we cannot persuade Corus to maintain production, it should allow the management and work force to takeover and run the plants themselves. The fact that Corus is frightened of competition suggests that the units can function perfectly well. The work force and management in Bryn Gwyn and Gorseinon in my constituency are considering that option. We must press Corus to allow that to happen, if it is not prepared to carry on production itself.

Mr. Hanson: I hope that Corus will consider those options. As the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire

[Mr. Hanson]

said, Corus should consider such issues. In fact, proposals have been put to it from several sources, including Llanwern. However, having attended, as a constituency Member, last week's meeting with Sir Brian Moffat, as did many of my right hon. and hon. Friends, I doubt whether Corus will consider those issues.

While dealing with Corus, I wish to nail an issue to the floor. In his speech, the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) mentioned e-mails from the National Assembly. Discussions are under way, but no final decision has been taken on the issues mentioned in the e-mail, which does not represent the final view of officials, let alone those of Ministers or Assembly Members. The Treasury has not been involved in those discussions. I ask the hon. Gentleman to work with the Government to ensure that we deal with Corus on a united front, as we should.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: I welcome the Minister's assurance that we have moved on from the information given in that e-mail. Will he assure the House that if the Treasury provides money for Wales as a result of those job losses, it will be in addition to the Barnett block and will not be set off against, or top-sliced from, our current budget? Will it be additional money—yes or no?

Mr. Hanson: The hon. Gentleman would expect me to say that the discussions are on-going. We need to work for a solution for Corus and Wales as a whole.

It is not all bad news in Wales today, as many of my hon. Friends have said. In the past two months, the creation of many new jobs has been announced, including 264 jobs at Wireless Systems International in Cwmbran; 110 new jobs at Pure Wafer in Swansea; 100 new jobs at IQE (Europe) in Cardiff; and 83 new jobs at Surface Technology Systems in Newport. BAE Systems has created many new jobs near my constituency, with Government support. Today, Ford has announced more than 500 new jobs at Bridgend, bringing the production of a new generation of Jaguar V6 engines to Wales. The employment action zones in Preseli, Merthyr and north Wales have been important in bringing employment to Wales.

Ford's £240 million investment in Bridgend is particularly welcome because it shows that the Welsh economy and the British economy are open to major foreign investments, which support and bring employment to this country. That challenges the issues that Corus has brought to the table about the impact of Government policy on the steel industry. If that massive investment can go ahead, I feel confident that other investment will also go ahead.

Mr. Öpik: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hanson: Time is tight, so I am afraid that I shall have to carry on.

The good news is reflected in many Plaid Cymru Members' constituencies. For example, in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Caernarfon, unemployment has fallen by more than 400 and 800 people have started work under the new deal since the general election. In Ceredigion, unemployment has fallen and more than 650 have started work under the new deal since the general election. In Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, unemployment has fallen by more than 500 since the general election. In Ynys Môn, unemployment has risen, but more than 1,000 people have benefited from the new deal since the general election.

As hon. Members have said, the resolution of such problems are not easy. The hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire mentioned the legacy of 18 years of Conservative rule, but I noticed that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) did not apologise for many of the problems that have led to social exclusion. My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South also made that point. The basic need of deprived communities in Wales and elsewhere is a strong and stable economy. The Government are not complacent about those communities. We are driving forward an active industrial policy, investing in skills, making the most of new technology and supporting industries for the future. We are supplying a platform of economic stability, by cutting public borrowing and ensuring low inflation.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South and other hon. Members have mentioned, we now have the lowest level of unemployment since the general election and for many years before. Some 1,000 new jobs are being created every month by the Government in Wales. Youth unemployment has fallen by 63 per cent and long-term unemployment has decreased by more than 12,000. On the basis of those sound economic policies, the Government, in partnership with the Assembly, can tackle social exclusion and begin to target special assistance on the communities that need it most.

The Government's generous settlement in the spending review—£8.5 billion in 2001, increasing to £10 billion in 2003-04—represents a real investment. The securing of objective 1 funding will bring wealth and prosperity to Wales and the country as a whole. My right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli has asked on numerous occasions how those resources and objective 1 funding would be secured and matched if Wales were independent. That question has not been answered tonight; nor has it been explained to the Welsh Grand Committee or at any Welsh Question Time. I look forward to hearing the explanation at the general election because, without the strength of the Government behind Wales, those resources would not be invested and we would not be tackling social exclusion.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley said that we should do this and that, but if he were in government after the general election, he would cut public spending. The nationalists could not afford, and the Conservative party would cut, the increases in state pensions and child benefit, the free television licences, the new deal, the working families tax credit and many of the policies that my right hon. and hon. Friends know benefit their constituencies and tackle social exclusion. On the impact of British Government policy, let no one in Wales forget that the Conservative party would cut public expenditure and the nationalists would not have the resources in Wales to make the fundamental shift involved in using the resources of the United Kingdom to ensure that people in the poorest communities in Wales secure a better deal.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion said in both the Welsh Grand Committee and in this debate that we have accomplished no real achievements in Wales. However,

as my hon. Friends have pointed out, we have created 40,000 new jobs since the general election. In addition, the number of jobs in Wales has increased by more than 29,000 in the past two years; 67,000 families benefit from the working families tax credit; 27,000 people are going through the new deal scheme; 100,000 workers benefit from the minimum wage; 100,000 pensioner income households benefit from the minimum income guarantee; and 500,000 pensioners benefit from increased winter fuel allowances. Those are the Government's real and genuine achievements in Wales.

The rural economy has also been mentioned, and all the measures that I have described benefit it as well. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's summit on 30 March last year meant that an extra £15 million of agriculture expenditure was made available for less-favoured areas in Wales; £2.2 million was provided for the dairy sector; £2.5 million for the beef sector; and £6 million for the sheep sector. They are important measures that impact on rural and urban areas.

The agenda on social exclusion has become clear from the debate and it is clear that there are issues that the Government need to deal with further. There are measures that we can and will take in our second term to increase inclusion in our society. However, if we follow the Conservative way, we shall have further cuts in public spending and, if we have an independent Wales, the country will not be able to afford the benefits that a Labour Government bring to Wales. I commend our amendment to the House.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 37, Noes 271.

Division No. 103] **[6.59 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cotter, Brian
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gorrie, Donald
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Elfyn Llwyd and
Mr. Simon Thomas.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Leslie, Christopher
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallober, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert

Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffd Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. Tony McNulty.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House notes the Government's central aim is a fair and prosperous society that offers opportunity for all, and that both economic prosperity and social justice depend on people being able to achieve their full potential; endorses the Government's commitment to eradicating child poverty, to providing employment opportunities for all who can work, to rewarding saving, and to ensuring that older people live secure, active and fulfilling lives and to tackling the root causes of poverty and social exclusion; further notes and expresses concern at the announcement by Corus on 1st February 2001; believes that the Corus action is a short term solution which is damaging for the individuals affected and the communities concerned; and calls on the company to think again about the planned closures and redundancies and instead work with the trade unions, Government and the National Assembly for Wales to identify a better way forward.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You will be aware that the close friends and associates of the Deputy Prime Minister have today organised a tube strike that has caused the most appalling suffering and inconvenience to the travelling public. There have been scenes of complete carnage on the streets and the strike has been a grotesque inconvenience. Have you received an indication from any Minister, however lowly, of a wish to explain to the House what has happened and what has been done to try to restore the travelling privileges of the British public?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): As the hon. Gentleman might suspect, no such information has been supplied to me. However, his remarks will have been heard.

Care for the Elderly

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I should inform the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.13 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the NHS Plan's commitment to a care system founded on the principles of equity and fairness; regrets that the Plan discriminates against older people with chronic and long-term illness by continuing to means-test them for their own care; believes that the Plan creates a fault-line between nursing and personal care; further believes that the Plan fails even to provide nursing care free on the basis of need, limiting the concession to registered nurse time; and calls on the Government to implement the Royal Commission's proposals for personal and nursing care to be provided on the basis of a person's assessed need instead of means.

Three and a half years ago, the Government established the royal commission on long-term care. Liberal Democrats welcomed the initiative, which offered the prospect of a fresh start and an end to the scandal of people being forced to sell their homes to pay for their care. The royal commission was asked to conduct its inquiry and report quickly, and it did so. In little more than a year, it published a detailed report that analysed the problems, offered a practical blueprint and set out how long-term care could be reformed for the future. The report was published in February 1999, and it is now more than three years since the commission's work was initiated. In those three years, a discredited and unfair system of means testing has remained in place, people's means have determined the care that they receive and more homes have been sold to pay for care.

The royal commission said that charges for personal and nursing care should be scrapped. Liberal Democrats agree. We recognise that charges

"increase the proportion of funding from the unhealthy, old and poor compared with the healthy, young and wealthy"

and that they

"discourage the use of necessary services."

Those are not my words, but those of the NHS plan. We should be mindful of them in this debate.

Those who argue for means-tested care say that personal care has always been means tested, but that is not true. This debate does not concern luxury goods and services that people choose to obtain, but essential and intimate care—tasks that frail, sick or disabled people would carry out for themselves if they had the necessary strength, will or knowledge. Long-term care is a contingency, not a probability. Its costs fall disproportionately on the sick, frail and disabled. That is why the royal commission said that personal care should be free, but on the basis of an assessment of need.

Care costs will not run out of control. As royal commission member Claire Rayner said in a letter published in *The Times* today, the tasks in question include

"intimate personal care such as washing, feeding and help with lavatory needs".

People will not demand to be washed more often or to be helped to be fed more regularly merely because the service has become free. Care costs will balloon only if the level of unmet need in this country is far greater than the current Government or any previous one have been willing to admit. The royal commission did not say that all costs should be paid by the state. It made it clear that the board and lodging costs of care should be met by individuals and said that we should expect to need to meet our housing costs throughout our lives. Liberal Democrats believe that the costs of care are a risk that should be met collectively.

By rejecting the royal commission's central recommendation, the Government are continuing a means test that discriminates against older people with chronic and long-term illness. The Government's position is clear: wealth, not health, will determine what care a person receives. If one has lifetime savings of £18,000 in a bank account, a pension or a home, the Government's message is clear. They say, "Don't get frail, sick or old, because if you do, you'll be charged." Our care system should not be a substitute for our tax system. If the Government want to redistribute money from the wealthy people in this country, they should not use poor health as the criterion for accessing it. Our care system should transfer wealth from the well to the sick, with no ifs or buts along the way.

What are the Government doing in practice? They would like hon. Members and people outside the House to believe that they are acting on the royal commission's proposals for free nursing care, but that is not the case. They have chosen a very narrow definition of nursing care and their proposals do not even make all nursing procedures free at the point of delivery. Only the costs of registered nurse time that is spent providing, delegating or supervising care will be met by the NHS, which will not pay for the time of the health care assistant or care worker who carries out the bulk of long-term care work.

That most mean of definitions, which treats nursing as registered nurse time, is clearly provider based and is a long way from being people centred. How are the Government to disentangle the costs of nurse-provided care from those of nursing care that is provided by others? Care homes will find themselves forced to measure costs and to cost the amount of nursing time that somebody receives. That will produce a system that is not only costly and bureaucratic, but which rewards dependence and drives people into dependency.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): Is my hon. Friend aware that many people in residential care require more nursing support as they get older, but not enough to justify their being transferred to the nursing care sector? That is imposing on the residential care sector great cost burdens that are not reflected in the income that it receives.

Mr. Burstow: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. Indeed, in many cases it is entirely appropriate for people to continue to live in what they regard as their home, rather than to move to another place to receive nursing care, and for the care to be brought to them. There is a problem with the fees for many residential homes, which is one of the reasons why there has been a collapse in confidence in the residential and nursing home sectors—a collapse that has led to the closure of many nursing homes.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way because I think that he is making some sensible points. Does he agree that the

[Mr. John Bercow]

Government's arbitrary and capricious distinction between nursing and personal care is rejected not only by the Liberal Democrats, as he made clear, and the official Opposition but, at least as importantly, by the Royal College of Nursing and the Patients Association?

Mr. Burstow: It is certainly rejected by a long list of organisations, including the RCN, Age Concern and Help the Aged. However, perhaps the speech of the Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), will establish whether the Opposition view the distinction between the two items as capricious. We need a clearer idea of the Conservatives' policy on long-term care.

Mr. Bercow: Our policy is very clear.

Mr. Burstow: I have seen the future of care, and it is a barcode. In the USA, a definition similar to that proposed by the Government has resulted in a barcode system being used so that care homes can electronically account for the time spent by members of staff, and residents can be billed accordingly. In some states, care staff carry hand-held barcode readers and laminated sheets of barcodes for residents' names, each task that is performed and the start and finish times.

A health care assistant will arrive to help Mrs. Smith, for example, to get up in the morning. She will scan the barcode for Mrs. Smith, the barcode for the start time for the job, the barcode for dressing and the barcode for the finish time. At the end of her shift, she will go to the desktop computer and download the data from her scanner so that, task by task, the care that Mrs. Smith receives can be itemised, analysed and charged. In America, that was described as a pioneering system for managing nursing time in care homes. I think that it simply turns care homes into supermarkets and care into a commodity.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): My hon. Friend is describing an absolute dystopia. With conditions such as dementia, is there any realistic distinction between nursing care and personal care? They seem to me to be exactly the same in many instances.

Mr. Burstow: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Earlier today, Methodist Homes came to Portcullis House and staged a short play to demonstrate that if we are serious about people-centred care and about removing the divide between health and social care, we need to focus on individual needs. Unfortunately, maintaining a charging system for personal care makes it impossible to provide seamless care to the individual, and the result is discrimination against people with dementia, Parkinson's disease and many other chronic, long-term conditions. That undermines the Government's claim that they want a seamless service, because until they deal with the issue that the royal commission was asked to address, they will not achieve that seamless service.

Following the intervention by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), I want to tackle the Conservatives' policy, which he said is clear.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden) *rose—*

Mr. Burstow: I will happily take the hon. Lady's intervention because I am interested to hear precisely what the Conservatives' policy is and whether they will be sticking to the Government's spending plans for social services.

Mrs. Spelman: I can probably save the House a great deal of time by pointing out that during the Second Reading of the Health and Social Care Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) made it perfectly clear that we would match the Government on personal care and NHS funding. We share the hon. Gentleman's concern about the definition of nursing care.

Mr. Burstow: That is why I felt that the policy was not clear. What the hon. Lady said is as clear as mud. Taking their classic position, the Conservatives want it both ways; they want to be concerned about the definitions, and we share that concern, but they want to stick up for the Government's position on financing care rather than committing themselves to the necessary finance. Are they prepared to find the extra resources to deliver free personal care?

Mrs. Spelman: We may be taking things out of sequence. I shall make our position perfectly clear. I repeat that we will match NHS spending, as we said on Second Reading of the Health and Social Care Bill. My hon. Friend made it clear that we will match the Government's spending on the provision of nursing care, as more accurately defined, which I shall come on to later. When I make my speech, I will explain the reasons for that position.

Mr. Burstow: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's further clarification. She has told the House that she and her Front-Bench colleagues wish to sustain the capricious separation of definitions to which the hon. Member for Buckingham referred. By taking the position outlined by the hon. Lady, the Conservatives will stick with the definition, which the Government are introducing, of registered nurse time only and the costings for that. The hon. Lady has well and truly buried the Conservatives' policy on free personal care. The Government's proposals mean that there is no money in the system to provide free personal care, so the Conservatives will not deliver that if they stick to the Government's spending plans, unless they make lots of cuts to other services. I shall come on to that point later.

Until the hon. Lady intervened, it was unclear whether the Conservatives supported the status quo, an insurance-based system, which seems to be their preference for other parts of the NHS, or the Government's position. We now understand that, for the moment at least, their position is the same as that of the Government.

Where do the Conservatives stand on what I regard, using their language, as a stealth tax on the elderly and the sick? We have a tax that penalises people for being sick and disabled. It is clear from reading speeches in this House, the Lords and elsewhere that the Conservatives are all over the place, as we have seen this evening. Despite the hon. Lady's comments, it is hard to find a definitive statement by a Conservative Front Bencher that clearly sets out the party's position on the royal commission's proposals. Even during the Second Reading of the Health and Social Care Bill, the exchanges about the

Conservatives' commitment to social services spending made it clear that they were not prepared even to match the Government.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. Does he agree that it is interesting that the Conservatives' policy, announced today, to make tax free any income from savings for older people, contrasts rather badly with the continuing idea that older people must sell their home, which may be the bulk of their savings, to get personal care?

Mr. Burstow: My hon. Friend highlights another inconsistency in the Conservatives' health policy.

Speaking of inconsistencies, the shadow Health Secretary, the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), complained that Labour now has two policies on long-term care and talks of a two-tier health system, but he forgot to mention that a two-tier system is exactly the policy that his party now espouses. In Scotland, the Conservatives have supported the Liberal Democrats and backed the royal commission in full. They will play a part, with the Liberal Democrats and others, in securing free personal care in Scotland.

Until tonight, to find out the position of the Conservatives in England, one had to look to their lordships House for a definitive statement. We should thank Earl Howe, the Conservative health spokesman in the Lords, for setting out that policy. He confirmed that the Conservative party would stick with the Government and implement the same policy.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): The hon. Gentleman is characteristically generous. He seems to think that there is something slightly strange about the fact that there might be a difference of emphasis between Conservatives in Scotland and Conservatives here. In the other two Parliaments in this country, the Liberals keep the Labour party in power, but they are pretending today to be opposed to Labour.

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Gentleman should take up that point with the hon. Member for Meriden, who has effectively attacked his colleagues in Scotland for allowing the creation of a two-tier system. He should check his lines before delivering them in the House.

It is hardly surprising that Conservative Members are all over the place on the subject of our debate—they caused the mess. They closed long-stay wards in the 1980s and 1990s without a thought for the thousands of older people who would have received free NHS care, but were confronted with means-tested care. It was a cost-cutting measure that was dressed up, with warm words, as community care. During their 18 years in government, the Conservatives drew the boundaries of state-funded care ever tighter. Thank God they were not re-elected at the last general election; otherwise, the fate of the public sector would have been to act as the 21st century administrators of a new poor law.

Before the election, the Conservatives set out plans for a private, insurance-based solution to the problem of long-term care. They were complex and, as the royal commission pointed out, it was difficult to perceive the benefits and to whom they would apply. The American experience of similar schemes shows that their take-up is low and that, in practice, many pensioners would be too old, too poor or too great a risk to qualify for immediate private cover.

Those who oppose the royal commission's recommendation to scrap charges for personal care say that it would do nothing to improve services. They are wrong; they have accepted the Treasury mantra hook, line and sinker. Let us consider the report of the Scottish Parliament's Health and Community Care Committee, which undertook a comprehensive inquiry into the royal commission's proposals. It found evidence that convinced all its members that for health and social care to form a genuinely seamless service, the two systems of charging and assessment—indeed, the multiplicity of assessment systems around the country—should be brought together.

The Royal College of General Practitioners presented evidence to the Health and Community Care Committee's inquiry to show that people had refused the most appropriate care in the most appropriate setting because they would be charged. Removing the obstacle of charging would therefore ensure that people received the most appropriate care. That means a better outcome for them and their families.

The Government found money to pay for free television licences for the over-75s. No means test was used. Collective responsibility led to the provision of a welcome universal benefit. They also found the money for a winter fuel allowance. Again, no means test was employed. A universal benefit was provided and collective responsibility acknowledged. If the Government can find approximately £2 billion to fund those initiatives, it must find the political will to take responsibility for the chronically sick and disabled in this country.

When the Select Committee on Health considered long-term care in 1999, it quoted the royal commission chairman, Sir Stewart Sutherland, who said:

"We need to change. The status quo is not acceptable."

That was in April 1999. The Committee's report stated that it supported the royal commission's approach. It issued a warning:

"Failure by the Government to act urgently would be a serious dereliction of duty."

That view was formed two years ago.

Liberal Democrats believe that the royal commission offers a fair, sustainable and workable basis for organising and funding long-term care in the United Kingdom. Instead, the Government, with Conservative support, are imposing an unfair, unsustainable and unworkable system. The message is simple: those who get sick had better get well quickly. Those who do not get better, those who suffer from a chronic disease, dementia or Parkinson's will have their life savings bled away before the state offers a helping hand.

For a Labour Government to do nothing to end such injustice and to take a Parliament in which to do it is a serious dereliction of duty. Liberal Democrats will campaign throughout the country to make people aware of that and to ensure change.

7.34 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"welcomes the NHS Plan's commitments to a care system founded on the principles of equity and fairness; welcomes the measures the Government has announced to reform the funding of long term care and to invest in new health and social care services for older people; notes that this matches the extra spending on long term care recommended by the Royal Commission; believes that the implementation of free nursing care on the basis of need and not ability to pay will bring an end to a major injustice affecting tens of thousands of older people in nursing homes; welcomes the new investment announced in the NHS Plan of £900 million annually by 2003–04 in new intermediate care services for older people; supports the priority the Government has rightly attached to improving front line services for older people; and calls on the Liberal Democrats to set out what services they would cut in order to fund their proposals."

It is common knowledge that we live in an ageing society. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) acknowledged that. Today, one member in five of the population is over 60, and the trend is upwards. Many people are living much longer. Between 1995 and 2025, we expect the number of people over 80 to increase by almost half, and the number of those over 90 to double. That reflects the achievements of organisations such as the national health service, social services and the voluntary sector. It is something to celebrate. However, it also poses real challenges and choices.

As the primary user of long-term health and social care services, older people account for approximately 50 per cent. of the resources that are consumed in health and social care services in England. They occupy approximately two thirds of general hospital beds and are responsible for at least 50 per cent. of the recent increase in emergency hospital admissions.

As a society, we face the challenge of ensuring that, in future, health and social care services better meet the needs of older people to lead healthy independent lives, thus avoiding unnecessary institutional care and the costs associated with it. We must find a fairer way of funding long-term care for older people. It should strike the right balance between what the state should fund and the responsibility of the individual, ensure that people are not forced to sell their homes to pay for their long-term care costs, and that older people lead healthier lives for longer.

All that obviously requires major new investment and the redesigning of our care services—I am sure that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam accepts that—and the Government are committed to doing it. That is why the NHS plan outlined a major expansion in care services for older people: £900 million by 2003–04 and a further £360 million a year on making the funding of long-term care fairer. It will not be possible to achieve those objectives if we divert spending elsewhere.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): My hon. Friend mentions fairness. I accept that the Government have inherited a problem that the previous Conservative Government created by withdrawing free long-term nursing care from the health service and introducing privatised social and nursing care in care and nursing homes. Is it fair or right that people who have paid all their lives and expect to receive free NHS long-term nursing care have to pay for it again because of the previous Government's withdrawal of free NHS care?

Mr. Hutton: The answer is no, it is not fair.

Mr. Burstow: Change it.

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman must be patient. I will tackle that shortly, but I have only just started my remarks. I intend to deal with continuing long-term, NHS-funded care later.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): The royal commission correctly pointed out that there is no prospect of a demographic time bomb and that most of the expenditure on health and personal care happens during the last six months of people's lives, irrespective of age. That weakens the Minister's argument about the awful prospect that the Government cannot cope without extraordinarily high expenditure.

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman knows that I have a lot of respect for him. I do not mind repeating that tonight, even if it embarrasses him. However, I was not making the argument that the hon. Gentleman suggested. If he will bear with me, he will follow my comments more clearly.

There is no demographic time bomb: that is not the heart of the Government's response to the royal commission. I shall return to that point shortly. However, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows from his practice that the health and social care needs of frail older people in our ageing society are becoming more intense. People often require nursing and residential care much later and their needs are more intensive and extensive.

Priorities lie at the heart of our debate. There are no easy choices, and it is foolish to pretend otherwise. Those difficult choices have been recognised by the Scottish Executive, and they include the impact on other spending priorities and the benefits system, to which the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam did not refer. However, the hon. Gentleman, in an otherwise characteristically good speech, fell into the trap. Liberal Democrat Members try to pretend that there are no difficult choices. The system that the hon. Gentleman advocates, as he rightly said, would still involve a means test, and the difficulty of defining personal care would remain. He will need to spell out his proposals in more detail in future.

Making personal care free does not avoid boundary issues between what is free and what should be means-tested. It simply shifts the boundary. If food preparation, which is a daily cost that everyone has to bear, were charged for under the hon. Gentleman's proposals—as I think he would say that it should be—but help with eating were free because that might be considered to be personal care, he must say at what stage help with eating would become free. Would it be when the care worker lifted the food on to a fork or spoon, or when he or she put the food into a liquiliser?

The hon. Gentleman will need to be able to devise an accurate way of distinguishing between food preparation that he thinks should be treated as personal care and food preparation that should not. I look forward to hearing his answer. It is inevitable that his system would be based on

a list of tasks. Any such list would generate controversy and argument about what should be included and what should be left off.

Mr. Burstow: The Minister is developing an important point about definitions. Does he agree, however, that the Government have ducked the debate about definitions by saying that the registered nurse's time will be free and that the decision will depend on what the registered nurse does? For example, if the nurse put the food into the liquidiser, the service would be free, but if a care assistant did so, it would not be.

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman has put forward such arguments before, and he is wrong. I shall explain why in a second.

Given the simplistic way in which the hon. Gentleman has presented some of the choices, it strikes me that his arguments are more opportunistic than principled. That is made even clearer when we consider the record of the hon. Gentleman's party on the matter. The Liberal Democrats' manifesto at the previous election contained no hint that they believed that personal care should be free. Exactly the opposite was the case. It might be a long time since the hon. Gentleman has looked at his manifesto, and it might be inconvenient for him and his right hon. and hon. Friends to do so.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): We have taken the royal commission's recommendations into account.

Mr. Hutton: I shall come to that point in a second, if the hon. Gentleman will bear with me.

I quote from page 39 of the Liberal Democrats' manifesto:

"We will introduce national charging and eligibility guidelines to ensure a 'level playing field' of provision and charges . . . We will, as resources allow, raise the threshold at which older people are required to make a contribution to their long-term care."

There is no suggestion that personal care should be universally free. I wonder whether the U-turn that the Liberal Democrats have undergone has anything to do with a calculation about perceived political gain. It is not just the Tories who like to leap on bandwagons.

When the hon. Gentleman was a Liberal councillor in Sutton—

Mr. Burstow: I wondered when we would get to this.

Mr. Hutton: Indeed; I think that it is worth getting to. When the hon. Gentleman was a councillor, I understand that it was his party that first introduced means-tested charges for home care services. A little less posturing from him on the subject would, therefore, be advisable. No one has a monopoly on compassion—certainly not the hon. Gentleman and his party.

Mr. Burstow: I wondered when the Minister would get to that part of his speech, because I had heard that his officials had been busy winding up council officers in Sutton on Friday to provide him with a brief for this debate. His facts are incorrect. The charging policy was first introduced by the council in the early 1980s, when the Conservatives were still running the borough.

Mr. Hutton: I am aware of that. However, the hon. Gentleman and his party introduced a means-tested charging regime. Before that, the policy introduced by the Conservatives provided for a flat rate. The hon. Gentleman and his party changed the system. They did not decide not to charge; they introduced a different charging policy.

It is also worth bearing in mind that in Wales, the hon. Gentleman's party supports the view that we have taken in England on these issues, which is that the right priority at present is to invest in better NHS and social care services for older people and to end the unfairness of means-testing people for their nursing care in care homes. There are, therefore, disagreements between and within political parties on the issues. It might have been better if the hon. Gentleman had referred to that in his remarks.

Of course, the funding of long-term care must be fair and reasonable. No one disputes that. However, the acid test that we should use in deciding to increase public spending, given what we know about the existing range of services for older people that are on offer, is whether any option leads to improved and better health care for older people. We should also ask whether more older people would receive the help that they need at home to remain independent for longer, surrounded by their friends and family in the community, where they want to be. We need to ask who would benefit from any extra spending and why, because—as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear last week—we cannot spend the same resources twice. That is how we should judge the proposal that personal care should be universally free.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): Does the Minister agree that three significant things have happened since the previous election? First, there has been a recognition that more resources are available, and that we can, therefore, do more; secondly, there has been a royal commission that supports that view; and thirdly, when people come into care now, they do so with greater needs than they did five or six years ago—a point to which the Minister has already agreed. We have not changed; we have simply moved on.

Mr. Hutton: I am tempted to offer some comment on the hon. Gentleman's last point. Of course his party has changed its position; he should not worry about that.

Mr. Hancock: We have moved on.

Mr. Hutton: The Liberal Democrats have moved on, and they have changed their position. They have moved from a position in which they believed in charging for personal care at all levels—at home and in residential care—to one in which they no longer believe in so doing. We are entitled to ask, when a party changes its position like that, precisely why it has done so.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hutton: No, I will not.

I understand that the point made by the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) was that the royal commission has subsequently reported. That is a perfectly fair argument. However, we have to consider not only the rhetoric of the hon. Member for Sutton and

[Mr. Hutton]

Cheam, but his record in local government, where Liberal Democrat councils did not refuse to operate charging regimes. We must consider all the issues in the round.

Mr. Burstow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hutton: No, I will not.

The NHS plan sets out how the Government intend to rise to the challenges. It starts with a vision for improving the health and well-being of older people and of those who care for them. It goes on to spell out a comprehensive programme of service modernisation backed by an investment of £1.4 billion of additional spending by 2003-04. That new investment will fundamentally change the way in which our care system supports older people. In future, we want NHS and social care services to provide a wider range of more flexible care options for older people that will actively promote better health, encourage faster recovery from illness, support independence and avoid unnecessary institutional care or hospital admission.

New services will provide new choices and opportunities that will better meet the needs of older people and their carers. They will also help us to address the many criticisms that older people have made of the NHS and social services and to lay the foundations for a healthier older age. By 2004, that new investment will help an extra 130,000 people a year. By that year, there will be a 50 per cent. increase in the number of people benefiting from community equipment services that will help more people to stay at home safely for longer. Through additional home care support, 50,000 more older people will be enabled to live more independently at home. For many, the new services will prevent or delay admission into costly long-term care. The new intermediate care services will be free at the point of use, whether they involve residential or home-based care. We envisage that the services will typically last for six weeks.

If we are to succeed in refashioning those vital services, we need to ensure that standards of care are universally high and consistently observed. We want older people to have greater confidence in the ability of health and social services to meet their needs more effectively. We want them to have confidence that, in the future, the focus will be on maintaining their independence and preventing unnecessary ill health, and confidence that the care system will be there to support them properly when and where help is needed. We want them to have confidence that care agencies will treat them fairly and view their carers as equal partners. That is why we are doubling the carers special grant from £50 million this year to £100 million by 2003-04, allowing more carers to take a break from their caring responsibilities, and why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security recently announced a £500 million package of extra financial support for carers, which will benefit up to 300,000 carers over the next three years.

The national service framework will back up that investment and modernisation for older people, which will set new national standards for the care and treatment of older people, including those with mental health problems such as dementia.

The Care Standards Act 2000 provided for a new National Care Standards Commission, which will start work next year and operate to standards consistent with the national service framework. In creating a single National Care Standards Commission and broadening its role beyond regulation, the Government responded to the royal commission's unanimous call for a national care commission to take a strategic overview of long-term care to represent the interests of older people.

Those new standards will be sensible and realistic and care home providers will be given sufficient time to prepare for their introduction. Our main priority is to ensure that there is enough capacity across all care sectors, including residential care, to enable older people and their carers to receive the care and support that they need. We are working closely with the independent sector to ensure that that happens.

The NHS plan also commits substantial investment to develop services that will promote older people's independence and respond to an ageing population with more chronic disease. The system of care across the NHS and social services must work together much more effectively as getting older and frailer becomes more common. Partnership is one of the keys to success. I am sure that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam will agree that, all too often, older people find themselves in an accident and emergency department or a busy ward at their local hospital not always because they need to be there and not because there is no real alternative, but because there is simply nowhere else for them to go.

The investment that we are making in intermediate care will help to provide a new range of services, which can offer a new alternative. Intermediate care is about providing the right services in the right places and at the right time to meet patient needs—services as close to patients' homes as possible; services in patients' homes where that is appropriate; services that avoid, in some cases, the need for people to enter residential care; services that genuinely promote independence. None of those services will be able to develop if those resources are diverted—for example, to make more personal care free for some people who are charged for it as the hon. Gentleman suggests.

The hon. Gentleman spoke at length about free personal care. Let us be absolutely crystal clear about that. At present, most personal care is provided on a means-tested basis and three quarters of care home residents already receive some or all their personal care free. Those in greatest need of help with care costs receive that help. Of course, we could have chosen to spend the £1.4 billion that we are making available under the NHS plan on implementing the royal commission's recommendation that all personal care, as well as nursing care, should be free irrespective of a person's wealth. That would not have improved front-line services in any way, shape or form. I disagree with the hon. Gentleman strongly on that. Under his proposals, not one extra older person would receive any extra care or any additional support to remain independent for as long as possible.

Dr. Brand: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hutton: No.

Nor would the proposals of the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam benefit the least well off as seven out of 10 people in residential care already have all or some of their personal care paid for. Instead, his proposals would lock in place the existing range of often inadequate

services that have frequently been criticised by many older people. They would not allow us to develop a wider range of services much more effectively to meet the health and social care needs of older and disabled people.

Dr. Brand: The Minister clearly recognises that personal care is very much part of keeping someone at home, hence the teamwork of an integrated intermediate care package. If that would work for a short-term intervention under his new proposals, does he believe that lots more people could be kept at home by taking away the main barrier to them accepting help, which is usually personal care rather than nursing care—their fear of means-testing?

Mr. Hutton: I have tried to deal with that point, but it strikes me that the hon. Gentleman and his party have a simple choice. They have not made themselves clear, however. In response to the royal commission, we are making £1.4 billion worth of extra money available to improve long-term health and social care services for older people, including £360 million that will go to address the unfairness of the means test. As I understand it, his party wants all that and another £1 billion. That is the position of the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends. They have not said that tonight, but that is absolutely their bottom line.

The Liberal Democrats want to accept all our proposals and then say to the Government, "Can we have another £1 billion as well?" We have been round that course many, many times. All Labour Members and some Opposition Members will be aware of the argument that the Liberal Democrats have an uncanny ability to spend the same billion pounds in about 14 different directions, while saying to people, "We won't have to put up your taxes." Well, I have to say to the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam that he and his hon. Friends have to grow up on such issues in politics. It is all right to blame everyone else—they are good at that—but they have to take responsibility for their own decisions. He should say clearly that they want the £1.4 billion and another £1 billion. That, at least, would be progress. I suspect that that is their real position, although he did not say so. Perhaps the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) will make that clear later.

We are investing £360 million in a full year—by 2003–04—to make the funding of long-term care fairer. We shall extend free nursing care to all settings, and I shall discuss that in a moment. We shall take action to ease the burden of residential care costs. We shall act to prevent people from having to sell their homes against their wishes on admission to care or during their lifetime. We shall tackle the unacceptable variations in charges for home care.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) will be interested to hear that new guidance is being prepared on NHS continuing care responsibilities, which will help to deal with concerns being expressed about the needs of those with chronic illness.

People often feel rushed into selling their homes when they enter care. That adds to the stress of what is certain to be a difficult time. It can also remove the possibility of returning home if the situation improves. That is why, from April, for the first three months after admission to a care home, the value of a person's home will be disregarded from the means test. That will allow valuable time for the person and the family to take stock and keep their options open. A person who goes into care owning a house, but with few other assets, will save between £2,000 and £2,500 during the first three months of the stay and we estimate that about 30,000 older people will benefit from that change.

From October, councils will be given an additional £85 million over three years to encourage them to offer deferred payment arrangements for those entering care. That will mean that, following admission, people will not be forced to sell their homes during their lifetimes against their wishes. In addition, our proposals to extend free nursing care to all settings recognise the need to remove the major anomaly whereby people in nursing homes are charged for care from nurses while those in all other settings receive it free on the NHS.

Subject to the passage of the Health and Social Care Bill, which is before Parliament, from October everyone who needs the care of a registered nurse will have it paid for by the NHS. That will include registered nurse time spent on providing, planning, delegating or supervising and monitoring care and meeting the costs of specialist equipment used by those nurses.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire) *rose—*

Mr. Nicholls *rose—*

Mr. Hutton: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd).

Mr. Todd: My hon. Friend is making a powerful and cogent speech, but one thing has been lost on him. I know of no other example in the NHS of the definition of whether a service is free being based on whether the person involved is a registered nurse.

Mr. Hutton: I shall come to that, but I reassure my hon. Friend that that is precisely what the royal commission asked us to consider. In contrast with the points made by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam, we have in no way departed from what the royal commission said about nursing care.

Mr. Nicholls: I appreciate the Minister's dilemma and he appears to be doing his level best to address it, but surely it comes down to the fact that there is no watertight acceptable definition of the distinction between nursing and personal care. If he tries to base what he considers to be an improvement on the system of finding a workable watertight definition, either he or his successor will be dragged back to the Dispatch Box to justify that for as long as the Government are in office. Is not now the time to take a deep breath and say that both will have to be funded? Is not that where his logic will take him?

Mr. Hutton: That is an interesting argument from a Conservative Back Bencher. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman ought to discuss the proposal with the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), who sits on the Front Bench, as I understand that that is not the view of his party. I disagree with him, as does the royal commission, and he might like to refresh his memory by reading paragraph 6.26 of the report.

[Mr. Hutton]

Of course, the royal commission recommended free personal care—that was its main recommendation—but it made it clear that if we decided not to proceed, introducing free nursing care was none the less still feasible and practicable. The royal commission considered the issues carefully. On that one, it takes a different view from the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam. It believes, and I agree, that it is possible for the distinction between nursing and personal care to be made and made in the way that we propose in the Health and Social Care Bill.

The hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) has made a good point, but we should consider home care services. For example, community district nurses—NHS nurses—can arrive at the home of a frail older person to make decisions about what is necessary for that person's nursing care. Alongside that, social workers make assessments about what is personal care.

To the hon. Gentleman and those who say that it is impossible to make this distinction, I say that it is not. It happens and it can be made to work. I accept the wider point that the hon. Gentleman makes—that, ultimately, the argument about being unable to make a distinction is made by those who favour free personal care. However, it is a fundamentally dishonest argument because, as I said earlier, the argument about free universal personal care does not avoid those boundary issues and disputes coming to the surface. There would be just as many difficulties surrounding the definition of free personal care and the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam has tried to gloss over those. I do not believe that those boundary issues disappear simply by making all personal care free alongside nursing care.

The changes that we are making to free nursing care will save a person up to £5,000 of the annual fees for a year's stay in a nursing home. That means that residents in nursing homes will, in the future, be treated in the same way as people who are being cared for at home—with NHS services and equipment being provided according to need, not according to their ability to pay.

That major reform is long overdue. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam could not find it within himself to say anything positive about the reform. He shakes his head; he thinks that there is nothing positive about it. That speaks volumes about his attitude to this whole debate tonight. It is not principle that he is pursuing, but political point scoring—once a Liberal Democrat, always a Liberal Democrat. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] What I am trying to say is that leopards do not change their spots.

The assessment of an individual's current and future nursing care needs will be undertaken by NHS staff using a standard approach, which will ensure that people with the same level of need receive the same level of care. As I said to the hon. Member for Teignbridge, I do not believe that it is impossible to develop a fair system of assessing nursing needs. The royal commission accepted, at paragraph 6.26 of its report, that even if we rejected its recommendation on personal care, making nursing care free should still be pursued. That is what we intend to do. We are working with the Royal College of Nursing and others to ensure that the assessment process will be able to take into account the particular needs of individuals.

It is wrong to suggest, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam again tried to do, that the reforms will not be needs-led. They will be. No artificial limit or ceiling will be placed on how much nursing care a person needs. The hon. Gentleman expressed concern about how we have defined nursing care, implying that we have chosen a deliberately narrow concept of nursing for these purposes. That is absolutely not the case. The only suggested definition of nursing care was put forward in the minority report. We have taken that considerably further in clause 48 of the Health and Social Care Bill. It is very clear from the majority report that it, too, was concerned about people being charged for the services of a registered nurse. The hon. Gentleman should look at paragraph 6.22 if he has any doubts about that.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the Tory Opposition. It has all gone very quiet over there. They are the ones who devised the present unfair system of funding long-term care. They cut 40,000 beds from the NHS, many of them long-term care beds for the elderly. They charged people for their nursing care. They had 18 years to devise solutions, but failed spectacularly to do so. Their only suggestion was to extend long-term care insurance, which was rejected by the royal commission in one sentence as being

"complex and difficult to see where the benefits lay and to whom."

In our last debate on this subject on 2 December 1999, the hon. Members for Meriden and for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) mentioned the detailed policy work they were doing on long-term care. The hon. Member for Meriden said:

"We are working on our own policy for long-term care which will go much wider than the terms of reference given to the royal commission."—[*Official Report*, 2 December 1999; Vol. 340, c. 519.]

The Conservative research department provided a helpful briefing for its Back Benchers on 2 December, which said:

"Over the next few months the Party will develop new areas of policy which will be ready well before the next general election".

There is no sign of them so far, and no one should hold their breath. We heard from the hon. Member for Meriden one of the most disastrous attempts that I have ever heard from a Front-Bencher to explain her party's position. It would have left everyone who heard her remarks slightly the worse for wear. She did not explain her position. The one commitment that we have waited for from the Tory Opposition is a commitment to match our spending on social services. They have spectacularly failed to make that commitment. Anyone with an understanding of Tory social policy knows that, when they are looking around for cuts in public spending, they will punish those who use social services.

At the beginning of my remarks, I said that this debate was about choices. For us, the choices are about where best to invest the extra resources that are now becoming available to improve the health and well-being of older people.

Mr. Burstow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hutton: No. I have already given way twice to the hon. Gentleman.

It is not easy to strike the right balance between assuring standards of care, extending access to new services, promoting independence in old age and ensuring fairness in what people are asked to contribute and what the state itself should assume responsibility for. However, I strongly believe that, within the resources available to

us, we have made the right choices: to invest more in better front-line services that will give older people greater care and improved health, avoiding institutional care wherever possible, while making the funding of long-term care fairer at the same time; to give carers more support; and to get health and social services working more closely together. I do not believe that making personal care universally free would help us in achieving any of those objectives. In fact, it could be provided only at the expense of these more pressing objectives.

We are intent on making fundamental changes to health and social care services for older people, whose lives will be significantly better as a result of the decisions that we have taken.

I hope that my right hon. and hon. Friends will reject this motion tonight.

8.6 pm

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): It has been an odd evening because various alliances have formed and then dissolved. I suppose that I should feel vaguely flattered that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow), the Liberal Democrat spokesman, chose to use 80 per cent. of his speech to attack the Conservative party. I suppose that that is a veiled form of flattery.

I found myself in agreement with much of the Minister's speech. It was only towards the end of it that a partisan element crept in. Perhaps the House should not be surprised that it is occasionally possible for the official Opposition and the Government, who have a much stronger possibility of, and closer responsibility for, government than the Liberal Democrats have, to weigh up matters carefully and come to similar conclusions.

I certainly did not know that a Liberal Opposition day meant a day when the Government were hardly mentioned at all as a target of analysis. It was literally in the last minute of his speech that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam made some analysis of Government policy. Given the brevity and lightweight nature of his speech, I should have thought that some of it might have been devoted to analysing the policy of the Government of the day.

The Minister stole some of my best lines when he looked into the Liberal Democrats' record in local government, where they get a little closer to real power. I need not repeat the damning analysis of what in practice Liberal Democrats decide to do with limited resources when they get into a position where they are able to decide how to spend them.

Dr. Brand: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Spelman: No, I should like to make a little progress.

The important issue underlying this debate is that of funding care for the elderly. I remember saying, when we were debating a statement on the royal commission, that it is rather like a big hole in the ground around which the major parties are circling. The big issues are how to spend this kind of money and what are the wise decisions for the future.

We should not be surprised that there is a minority report within the royal commission report. It may be for the benefit of this debate and that of the Liberal Democrats who skirted over the note of dissent struck by Joel Joffe and David Lipsey if I repeat what those two people said. They state some important truths that should be read into the record of this debate. The dissenting note makes it clear that

"To make personal care free for all those who are assessed as needing it would"

aggravate the financial situation considerably. They continued:

"In essence, it would transfer initially at least £1.1 billion"—

it is a while since the royal commission reported, so we should use the Minister's figure of £1.4 billion, which is likely to be more accurate—

"rising to at least £6 billion in 2051 from the private to the public purse. This huge addition to the burden on public expenditure would not, however, increase spending on services for elderly people by a single penny."

The Minister is nodding: we agree on that analysis. The two continued:

"Because it would make personal care free for those who qualify for it, it would add to the demand for such care, imposing an additional cost on top of that driven by demographics."

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam disputes the demographic argument. I do not know his exact age, but I think he belongs to the generation that constitutes a considerable bulge. When he and I reach retirement age, we will put pressure on the system for the provision of services. If we have the good fortune to live to 100—which is not beyond the realms of possibility, given our increasing life expectancy—we will be one of the statistics in 2051 leading to the estimated cost of £6 billion. We are not talking about small sums of money, so we should not be surprised at the significant minority report.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I shall be dead by 2051, so I take a dispassionate view on this issue. My concern about the figures that the hon. Lady quotes from the minority report is that they assume that by 2051 we will be sticking to what I regard as expensive, outmoded, institutional models of care that other countries have moved away from. I am anxious to know what assumptions she is making. Perhaps she will clarify her earlier intervention, because it baffled me. What assumptions is she making about the future of institutional care? Will we be like Denmark and move away from care homes and nursing homes to support for people in the community or care with housing schemes?

Mrs. Spelman: For once I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, because it brings us on to a helpful point. Changes in society have led to the position that we are in today. Grandparents increasingly rarely live with their children. The hon. Gentleman was quick to condemn the previous Conservative Government. He said that it was entirely their responsibility that we were in this position, but that is factually not true. During the 18 years that the Conservatives were in government, there was a significant shift in our society. Job mobility increased, so people moved away from where their parents live. That is a simple social and cultural change.

I cannot stare into a crystal ball and tell the hon. Gentleman that in 2051—or even 2021, which is a bit more realistic—one of my three children will be prepared for me, as an old lady, to live in their home. They might be living anywhere on the planet. Job mobility and the nature of

[Mrs. Spelman]

business today make it difficult to assume that the clock will be rolled back to a time when grandparents once again live with their children, desirable though that may be in the family context. Therefore, we must consider the placement of a significant proportion of the elderly population in nursing or residential care when they need it.

All the health trends show that life expectancy has increased, and a deterioration in health comes towards the end of our lives. What used to be the end of our lives has been pushed back further, and the acuity of care in nursing homes has risen. People in nursing homes and residential homes are sicker than they were, but may not be in those homes for as long as they used to be because the level of care in the community to sustain the elderly until such time as they need that extra shelter of residential accommodation—

Mr. Hinchliffe: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Spelman: No, because I have dealt with the hon. Gentleman's point in detail.

This is an important issue, and it difficult to see how the figure in the minority report is an overestimate—quite the reverse. The £6 billion may prove to be an underestimate by that time. It is difficult for any of us to say accurately what that figure will be in 20 years' time. What we can say with more confidence is that such care will cost the state a great deal of money, and the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam gave no indication of where the Liberal Democrats would find that money. It has to be found, and any utterance about an extra penny on income tax providing the sums involved is unrealistic.

It is interesting to consider how this matter was approached in the Scottish Parliament. As confidently predicted, under devolution different models are emerging. The Scottish Parliament has chosen to go in a different direction. Some Labour Members have gone out on a limb and have supported taking a different direction. Now the Scottish Parliament must find where to make the savings to provide that care. The Liberal Democrats need to do that work, and should have done so before bringing this matter before the House.

It will not be easy to find £1.4 billion. Even if it can be found now, the consequences some way down the road in 2021 or 2051 would alarm any party with a responsible attitude to its role in government. In fairness, the Government have tried to do that. We should not ignore what the Prime Minister had to say on this matter. He said:

"We believe that the money would be better spent elsewhere in the national health service."—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2001; Vol. 362, c. 300.]

That was the position taken by the Minister, and we agree with it. The Government have chosen their priorities—that is their prerogative. We would also set our priorities if we were the Government, whereas the Liberal Democrats have abrogated their responsibility for setting priorities.

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Lady said that she agrees with the Government's response to the royal commission. An important element of that is the additional spending on intermediate care services, approximately half of which will come from social services spending. I understand that she will not match our social services spending, which is funded through the standard spending assessments. Will she give a commitment to match the rise in the social services SSAs that the Government have made?

Mrs. Spelman: I shall come on to that, if the Minister does not mind. I shall deal with it in some detail, rather than as a response to an intervention.

This is a Liberal Democrat Opposition day, so for their benefit we should bring to their attention matters that may alter their view, and perhaps make them do a 360 deg turn—who knows. The NHS Confederation has said clearly:

"We do not support making personal care free as this would consume a significant amount of additional resources without any noticeable improvement in the quality of services."

I suggest that the Liberal Democrats put that in their pipe and smoke it before they finalise their policy on this subject.

Behind this debate is the problem of how to make services for the elderly sustainable in the long term. We think that the Government, in their Health and Social Care Bill, could have done more to address the longer-term perspective. If the Government and the official Opposition are agreed that the Liberal Democrats are wrong and that the provision of free personal care in England is not the best use of NHS resources, we must find a way to deal with the state's inability to pay.

How do we encourage future generations to make provision for themselves and their loved ones? Not in the way the Liberal Democrats have suggested. If free personal care were extended to England, it would disincentivise those affected and their relatives from taking on that responsibility. It would also lead to disappointment. We are led to believe that free personal services are a panacea, but they are not. They are only a portion of what it costs to provide adequate services for the elderly. The accommodation either in nursing homes or in a residential setting is a significant part—if not the largest part—of the cost of providing care for the elderly.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): My hon. Friend will know of my long and deep interest in this subject. Does she agree that the problem arose for two reasons? First, there was the need to provide the elderly with better nursing and social care; secondly, over a period, Government dramatically reduced, by thousands, the number of geriatric beds. No one was asked whether they wanted that to happen. Government made a decision as a result of which many elderly people, whatever their position in life, feel that they are being unfairly treated.

What discussions has my hon. Friend had with groups representing the elderly, and how do those groups feel that the current injustice can be put right? I think that the Government have gone some way down the path, but as yet many elderly people do not consider the proposed solutions to be truly fair.

Mrs. Spelman: My hon. Friend's intervention is relevant, despite straying a little beyond the strict title of the debate.

As I am sure my hon. Friend recalls, a year ago those on the official Opposition Front Bench held an "age summit" with all charities concerned with the provision

of services for the elderly. It was interesting for us to hear what elderly people would like. Certainly, we heard that they had been led to believe that there would be cradle-to-grave provision, and had found that that was not the case in practice. We also heard, however, that they wanted dignity in old age, and we have a responsibility to try to provide that.

Those requirements must be weighed in the context of the Government's overall responsibility to decide the right priorities for health care, but one thing came over very strongly: people wanted to remain in their own homes for as long as possible, because their own homes tended to be full of memories of raising a family. To maintain them safely in their own homes, however, requires considerable support, and sometimes a difficult decision must be made, often involving medical staff. Although an elderly person would prefer to remain in his or her own home rather than going into institutional care, it may become unsafe for that person to do so.

It is precisely such sensitivities that my party is trying to take on board in crafting its own solution to the problem of long-term care, which we shall present before the election. Of course, if we had the Government's advantage of knowing when the election might be, we should be able to choose the moment much more judiciously.

My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) has reminded me of what Age Concern said to us at the age summit. The Liberal Democrat call for free personal care involves a terrible inconsistency. The provision of free personal care would leave other aspects of essential health care for elderly persons uncovered: chiropody and physiotherapy, for instance, might have to be paid for separately. Even necessities of later life such as incontinence pads are still charged for in nursing homes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) made a good point. It is sometimes very difficult to find free personal care, or free personal services. For an elderly person with incontinence problems, products such as incontinence pads are essential, and anyone who has had to pay for them will know that they are not cheap.

Moreover, the practice of GPs' charging for call-outs to nursing and residential homes is not covered by this definition. Where do we draw the line in defining what constitutes a personal service provided for an elderly person in care?

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): I listened with interest to the hon. Lady's response to what I considered to be a comprehensive and convincing speech by my hon. Friend the Minister. She and the House seem to accept that great progress has been made in Scotland. That is marvellous, as the House decided to devolve such matters to Scotland. What the hon. Lady has not yet done, however, is address—as my hon. Friend did—the issue of carers. Will she tell us what commitments her party gave in the consultations that she mentioned earlier to the millions of carers in this country?

Mrs. Spelman: With respect, I did not say that great progress had been made in Scotland. I said that Scottish Members of Parliament had chosen to go out on a limb and make a different decision; they would have to weigh up the financial consequences themselves, and establish where they would find the money to pay for a decision that they were free to make.

The role of carers is very important, and is catered for in our comprehensive policy on long-term care. I have already spoken for 20 minutes, and do not want to go into the issue in detail; suffice it to say that carers often bear the burden of providing personal services. Even those not covered by the present definition may have to wait for a registered nurse, but if a member of the family is involved the relative concerned will be more likely to provide personal services, because account must be taken of close family members.

The present definition is shot through with inconsistencies. The Royal College of Nursing is right to say that, owing to those inconsistencies, discrimination is likely. The example has been given of a demented patient who may not require personal services from a registered nurse—but is that patient to be discriminated against in favour of a person suffering from cancer because both happen to be in a health setting in which such services are provided by a registered nurse?

Mr. Burstow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Spelman: No, I am about to finish my speech.

There are terrible inconsistencies, which need to be resolved as the Government work out the practical implementation of their commitment to making free nursing care available.

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Spelman: No; I am about to finish my speech, and a number of Members wish to speak. This is, after all, a Liberal Democrat Opposition day, and I do not think that the Liberal Democrats would be too grateful if the Minister and the official Opposition spokesman took up most of the available time between them.

Let us return to the people who are at the end of the system, as it were. I have a 92-year-old father and an 88-year-old aunt, both in residential care. They had to use all their capital to pay for their nursing care. I, as a relative, had to explain why that was—why I, with a demanding job, could not care for them in my home. That is not an unusual situation: that is Britain today.

We need a fresh look at the way we care for the elderly in this country. The provision of free nursing care is like a sticking plaster over a substantial problem that needs to be resolved. It would be straying outside the framework of the debate to go into the whole question of why the care home industry is in crisis, why there are bedblockers in our hospitals, and why insufficient funding from central Government has forced local authorities to means-test and constrain elderly people who need services.

The terms of the debate were to look specifically at the Liberal Democrats' pledge, which will no doubt be in their election manifesto, to provide free personal care throughout England. If they want to put that in their manifesto, they will have to be able to say how on earth they will fund it. Nothing I have heard tonight gives any clue as to how they would realistically achieve that. A party that cannot realistically say how it intends to foot such a substantial bill is not fit to govern.

8.29 pm

Ms Ann Coffey (Stockport): I am no wiser about the Conservative party's policy now than I was 20 minutes ago.

The Liberal Democrat motion arises, I am sure, out of a genuine wish to consider again the recommendations of the Sutherland report on long-term care, which was published in March 1999, nearly two years ago. I am equally sure that the timing of the debate arises out of the Liberal Democrats' concern for elderly people, not from any opportunist motive on their part. After all, they keep telling us that they are the party committed to raising standards in public life and that the dividing line between them and the Tories is that they are not bandwagon politicians.

The report by the royal commission on long-term care comprehensively examined issues around providing services to support older people in both the community and residential care. The report was thought provoking, particularly in examining existing standards in both domiciliary and residential care, which vary considerably throughout the country.

The royal commission's main task was to look at the provision of care for the elderly at home and in residential care and to recommend how the cost of that care should be sustainably and affordably apportioned between public funds and individuals. "With Respect to Old Age: Long Term Care—Rights and Responsibilities" was the title of the report. I am sure that all of us would want to achieve the objective of dignity and respect for older people. How we treat older people today will determine how we as older people are treated tomorrow.

I welcome the implementation by the Government of the royal commission's recommendation to set up a national care commission, the introduction of the Care Standards Act 2000, which will improve standards of care, the increased investment in prevention and rehabilitation, and the introduction of free nursing care, which deals with a major injustice, where nursing care was free at home or in hospital, but not in nursing homes—a legacy of the previous Government.

Another major impact on improving services will be brought about by the closer co-operation between health and social services through section 31 agreements or new health and social care trusts. The delivery of services by different agencies with different priorities has been a major contributor to bureaucracy and to frustration among many elderly people and their families. It does not make sense to be assessed first for health care and then for social care by different people working in different agencies, often having no communication with each other.

Under the system in Stockport, a social worker based in casualty at Stepping Hill hospital will, when an elderly person is admitted to casualty, assess with medical and nursing staff the need for social care. The result is that the person goes home with a proper package of care that recognises that social and health care are inextricably linked and important for that person's recovery.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: The hon. Lady is making a rational speech. When elderly people have had a stroke and are discharged from hospital either back to their home or to a residential home, will physiotherapy be available? Is that a social care treatment, or a medical nursing care treatment? The one thing that worries me is the scarcity of physiotherapy, which can dramatically improve the quality of life of elderly people, whether they be in their own home or a residential or nursing home.

Ms Coffey: I am sure that, like me, the hon. Gentleman looks forward to continuing Government investment in the NHS, which will make the provision not only of health care but of associated services more widely available. As he will be aware, the legacy that the Government have to deal with is one of years of underfunding by the Government of which he was a member.

The royal commission accepted that care in old age must be a partnership between the individual and public funds. I am not convinced that its main recommendation to make personal care free and to continue means testing for other services, including cleaning, housework, laundry, shopping services, transport to day centres and sitting services, necessarily achieves fairness or justice in that partnership.

Fairness must take account of income. To each according to their need, from each according to their means, is the basis of our tax system and public spending. It should also form the basis of redistributing wealth. Everyone should share fairly in the wealth of the country, but in that fair share account must be taken of the individual's wealth and the share that they have already had, which has provided assets and savings for them in retirement and also for their children, who will inherit those assets.

The commission, supported by Liberal Democrat Members, proposes redistributing public money to those who already have private means. I cannot see the argument for social justice in that. It may be an emotionally attractive argument, and in certain Liberal Democrat constituencies it may even be a politically attractive argument, but it is not a just argument. Of course the state must take its fair share of responsibility for care of the elderly, especially for those who cannot provide for themselves, but it is also fair that some account be taken of the private means of the person concerned.

It is right that the state should provide free care in homes for the 70 per cent. of elderly people who have not had the advantage in their working lives of accumulating assets in the form of savings or income. In my local authority, it is about the same percentage for domiciliary care. It is absolutely right that no one should be denied a service that they need because they have no money for it.

The state also provides a non-means-tested, non-taxable benefit in the shape of the attendance allowance, which recognises the extra cost of disability in old age and therefore provides a basic benefit to those in need to help with the costs of care, regardless of income. The proposal supported by Liberal Democrat Members, to give free personal care, would not give one extra penny or provide one extra service for my less well-off constituents. Indeed, it would provide no extra services for those who were well off. Where is the social justice in that?

There may be legitimate arguments about what private assets and what income and capital should be taken into account in an individual's contribution to personal care. I am therefore pleased about the changes on that matter that my hon. Friend the Minister announced earlier. There has to be a fair partnership between the individual and the state in which people do not perceive that they are

unjustly disadvantaged for saving; in which options are available to people to plan for their financial future; and in which the state, in return, as part of that partnership, ensures that the care that individuals are offered in old age provides both dignity and respect, and the same quality of care for those who cannot afford to pay for their own care.

If we put on one side the arguments about whether universal provision in a society of unequal incomes is fair, the question becomes one of whether making personal care free would end injustices in provision. We have spent a long time arguing in the United Kingdom about the dividing lines between health and social care, for one is free and one is not, and the unfairnesses that are perceived to arise because of those definitions. However, how much more difficult are the dividing lines between personal care and non-personal care?

Under the commission's proposals, which are supported by Liberal Democrat Members, the provision of meals is a living cost and is therefore not free, whereas help with eating is personal care and is free. Where should we draw the line? If an elderly person needs personal help to eat, that is fairly straightforward—it is personal care. Let us suppose, however, that an elderly person needed more help than just the delivery and serving of a meal—for which they would be charged and which directly involved touching the person, which is the commission's definition of personal care. People may, for example, need propping up with a cushion, or, if they are blind, help with finding a plate or utensil; but otherwise they may be perfectly capable of eating by themselves. Are they receiving personal care or a service that one would expect from a meals on wheels delivery? Is it a mixture of both? If so, how much of it is chargeable?

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) described a system in America that entails metering and clocking on and off. He is simply transferring the problem of defining social and health care to that of defining personal and non-personal care. Staff in care homes will be clocking on regardless of whether care is regarded as personal and free or is not so regarded and is charged for.

I would not like to have to make such an assessment. I worked as a social worker for 20 years, and earlier in my career I did make assessments of the need for services. Assessments are not easy to make because the criteria are not simple or straightforward. It is difficult, not simple, to assess whether to provide personal care. I would also not like to have to explain to an elderly person, or to his or her relatives, the dividing line in the example that I have quoted. What would they say? The comment "this is ridiculous" comes to mind.

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Lady's comment about its being ridiculous is surely the very comment that elderly people will make to a nurse who assesses their nursing care needs and tells them that, on this occasion, a care assistant will undertake the task and that they will therefore have to pay.

Ms Coffey: The motion concerns a proposal that personal care should be free. The hon. Gentleman is simply transferring the difficulty of defining social care and health care to definitions of personal and non-personal care. He does not seem to understand that.

The definitions become even more difficult, as sitting services are excluded from personal care. If, during the sitting services, the person suddenly needs help with the toilet, does that turn into personal care? Also, we have not mentioned the definitions of "enabling and psychological support" from a "knowledgable and skilled professional" which the commission and the Liberal Democrats say should be free. That is personal care, but the work of a volunteer who is working for an agency with a blind person, but who is also providing psychological support, would not be defined as personal care; that would not be free. We are now in the realms of the wholly ridiculous.

Unfortunately, the royal commission was not a lot of help in unravelling this problem; it preferred to stick to the big picture. Nor have the Liberal Democrats been a lot of help. If they had tried a bit of unravelling, they might have come to the conclusion that such a system did not offer, after all, a logical, workable and above all just approach to the issue of funding. Such a system would be quickly bogged down in definitions which would be incomprehensible to the people who are being assessed, and it would be seen as unfair. Definitions would vary from authority to authority, as obtaining universally agreed definitions would be almost impossible. Discontent would be high, as people would see their neighbours getting something for free that they were having to pay for. That is not a good recipe for justice.

Nor am I sure how the funding for free personal care would work. Would local authorities total up the cost of the assessments of need and then submit the bill to the Government? If they did, it would be an extraordinary departure. I cannot imagine even the Liberal Democrats advocating that. Are they advocating something similar to what happens at the moment: an assessment of needs through the SSA, with local authorities having a sum to spend on personal care? I rather suspect that the result of all that would be an assessment judged not by service, but by affordability of service within the inevitable limitations.

The result could be that the services that my less well-off pensioners are now getting free would not be provided to them at all because of tighter criteria owing to an increased demand for a free service; whereas their better-off neighbours might get their personal care free, while buying extra services with the money that they have saved. Is that fair?

Dr. Brand: If the hon. Lady is so concerned about a social services budget closed to any extension to free personal care, is it her understanding that the nursing budget given to health authorities is to be open-ended? Will the Government's definition of nursing care not also have its restrictions?

Ms Coffey: I would have thought it self-evident that all budgets had restrictions. The debate here is about the setting of priorities within a given budget. As the Minister of State said earlier, if we decide to spend money on one area, we cannot spend it on another. However, I am glad that the Liberal Democrats have recognised that budgets are limited.

What will happen under the Liberal Democrat proposal to the attendance allowance, which benefits 1.3 million pensioners and is given to people to help them buy personal care? Is that to be abolished? Is there no longer to be any direct payment system? If personal care is to be free, the allowance becomes unnecessary. That would be extremely unpopular with my constituents, as the

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allowance gives them the freedom to make decisions about priorities in their own lives and to decide what care they need. It also enables them to pay for informal care from relatives and friends. I do not think that they will be too pleased to find out the Liberals are planning to deprive them of the allowance.

What would be the result of this cynical motion? The expectations of the public would not be fulfilled; their perception is that they would get for free what they now pay for. Try telling care home residents or their families that, contrary to their expectations, not all care in a home is personal care, that they will still be required to pay hotel charges and for some services, and that, if they stay there long enough, their capital will still be exhausted. The fact that some people feel that their houses as capital assets should not be included in any assessment of means will not be dealt with under the Liberal Democrat proposals for hotel and living charges.

The proposals in the motion include no extra investment in services for the elderly, which is what we need above all. We need year-on-year investment. Instead, we would get endless assessments, open to challenge, about what constitutes personal care. The only people who would marginally benefit are richer people.

A system that, in arriving at a fair partnership between the individual and public funding, takes into account the assets that people have accumulated is clearer and more transparent for those who are planning ahead than a system that relies on vague delineations of personal and non-personal care.

Instead of going down a road that is unfair and unworkable and has no basis in social justice, we should ensure that the money that the Government will continue to make available goes into improving the range and quality of domiciliary and residential care services and into making them more responsive to the needs of elderly people and their carers.

That is the ultimate fairness, because rich and poor will have access to equality of services in their old age. The dignity and respect that we accord old people is surely defined, above all, by that.

8.46 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): I thoroughly enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey). I was getting quite worried towards the end, because I thought that it would cause us both considerable embarrassment if I had to say that I accepted everything that she said. Luckily, she finally came to the heart of the matter, where there is clear disagreement between us—so let us state it, to reassure us both, and then move on.

I have a great deal of trouble with the idea that, because people have accumulated assets over a lifetime, they should be means-tested in their twilight years. People who have worked all their lives will have contributed in taxes, all the more so if they paid tax at the higher rate. Even with the higher rate tax inherited by the Government from their Conservative predecessors—the top rate is still effectively 50 per cent.—that is a substantial contribution for people of perhaps 85 or 90 to have made during their working lives. On that, if on nothing else, I disagree with the hon. Lady.

The debate has been useful in concentrating on an issue that comes up in all our constituencies. I deliberately said issue, rather than problem. Sometimes, when elderly people listen to these debates—I am thoroughly in favour of elderly people, because I fully intend to be one in due course—they ask why they are regarded as a problem, when in fact they are a success story.

The elderly—if they make it—are indeed a success story. Doing some research for another speech some time ago, I found that the male who was around at the age of 65 to claim the five-bob pension introduced by Lloyd George would, at the time of his birth, have had an actuarial life expectancy of somewhere in his late 40s. Today, people are living to ages unimaginable to our grandparents and great-grandparents. Once upon a time, people would draw their pension only if they lived 20 years beyond their actuarial life expectancy, but these days one can claim one's pension 20 years before it. We have to think through the implications. At times, that may mean some new thinking, which may be extremely expensive.

Even if, in part, I come to a conclusion not dissimilar to that of the Liberals, I hope that it will be accepted that I got there by a different route. I recognise cynicism when I see it. The Minister did an effective hatchet job, in simply doing what any young party worker will have done: anyone who has ever followed a Liberal canvasser down the road and said, "The chap who was in here just now—what did he say?" knows that the answer, in summary, is: anything that people wanted him to say.

Whatever view one may take of the Liberals' conclusions, let us not for one moment mislead ourselves, or let them mislead themselves, into thinking that they come to it from a point of principle. One does not get a point of principle from the political equivalent of what happens when one lifts up a flat stone. As kindly as we can, therefore, let us put the Liberals to one side.

Some members of my party, from what one might call the sado-monetarist wing, might ask how we can justify giving free nursing home care to someone who is very wealthy. What would be the point of allowing someone to preserve assets for their children? If they have the money, they should not be a burden to the state. I accept the logic of that argument to the hilt, but it is no longer accepted by those to whom it must be applied.

Something in excess of 50 years of socialised medicine lie behind us. We cannot put the clock back. People do not think it right that they should, in their twilight years, see the assets that they have built up—modest or otherwise—being used up for care in their old age. We can give them the fiscal logic, but they will not accept it. Eighteen years in the House have taught me that one can, to some extent, lead one's constituents over a five-year Parliament. However, when those for whom one is trying to care, in one's own way as a parliamentary representative, simply say that one is wrong, it is wise, for one's own salvation if nothing else, to listen to them. One may even think that they are right. Over and over, I hear from my constituents that the idea that their assets will have to be used up in their twilight years is not acceptable. We must move away from that idea.

I always enjoy debate with the Minister. He is not at his best when he is trying to be horrid. I, on the other hand, am at my best when trying to be horrid, so perhaps there is no problem. I appreciate his dilemma. To give

him his due, he is dealing with what may be the major part of the issue. Nursing care will be paid for, he says, and that will reassure some people, since it will account, probably, for the lion's share of the cost. The Minister is acting in a fiscally responsible way, saying that if he goes further it will cost a great deal of money. Full marks to him for that: it would indeed cost a great deal.

Ultimately, however, how can the Minister or his successors deal with this issue? He began to start snarling and trying to be horrid because, being an honest man, he realised where the weaker point of his argument lay. The definitions that he offered simply will not work. He need not take my word for that—indeed, I am certain that he would not. He quoted the royal commission at me, selectively, just as I could selectively quote it back at him. However, it may be more useful to consider the remarks of Claire Rayner, who works at the practical end of the issue. I do not mean to disparage the Minister by saying that; she simply knows more about the practical end than he or I do. Claire Rayner said:

"If you need someone to wash you, if you need someone to feed you, if you need"

help in using a lavatory,

"then you are ill. Nobody in good health would want a stranger to do it. It's only when you are so helpless that it is necessary that you need someone to do it, and if that isn't nursing then I don't know what is. Yet the government has decided in its wisdom that it is not and they are wrong."

Frankly, that sums it up: one need not be a humble country lawyer, as I am, to know the fun that can be had with definitions when we try to work out the difference between nursing and personal care. I am almost tempted to give the Minister the benefit of the doubt by saying: let us try to do that. Let us try to hone the definitions to create some rational way of deciding what is nursing and what personal care. However, I do not think that that will work. At some stage, some Minister will stand at the Dispatch Box—sooner rather than later, I suspect—trying to get to grips with the definition.

On the Scottish experience, I speak with all the insincerity I can command in saying that I sympathise with the Minister over the jam into which the Government have got themselves. The difficulty over this issue illustrates the way in which devolution is causing unfinished business. The Labour Administration in Scotland, presumably because they believed it right—and a case can be made—defended to the last ditch the idea that they would not make personal care free. They then realised, however, what happens when one lives in a ditch, and the sort of people with whom one must share one's principles. At that point, they suddenly decided to change their policy.

A remarkable situation will arise. Edinburgh, once the Athens of the north, is set to be the Florida of the north. A marvellous trade in elderly people will be carted over the border.

Mr. Tom Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Nicholls: I want to hear an interest being declared here, as I give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Clarke: I enjoy many of the hon. Gentleman's comments—especially those on the film industry. On Edinburgh, does he not agree that a consensus emerged in the Scottish Parliament and that it produced good policies? I am sure that he does not want to sound envious, so does he not accept the argument that we in the House should try to raise the standard of provision?

Mr. Nicholls: Bearing in mind the fact that the Labour party and the Liberal party are already in alliance in Scotland—I can see that the right hon. Gentleman hankers after a time when they can be allied in this place as well—I do not think that consensus emerged in Scotland; cop-out emerged. The Labour Administration took an honest view, although I do not agree with it, that that was not the right way to order their priorities. They then found that, if they did not do a deal with Liberal Members, they could not continue their Administration. I greatly respect the right hon. Gentleman and always enjoy debating with him. However, I do not think that such deals produce good government or good policy.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: My hon. Friend advances a strong and positive case. Does he not agree, however, that infirmity and dementia should be treated in the same way throughout the United Kingdom, even in its devolved areas? The taxpayers of the UK as a whole continue to pay for the vast majority of the resources used throughout the country—whether in England, in Scotland, which has its own Parliament, or in Wales and Northern Ireland with their Assemblies. When dealing with what are clearly illnesses—whether on the borderline of social or personal care, or medical care—is there not a need for justice to be perceived?

Mr. Nicholls: The honest answer is yes, I largely agree—except that sometimes we cannot put the clock back. Scotland has its own real Parliament; we cannot put that scrambled egg back into the eggshell. The Scottish Parliament cannot be unmade—it is real.

We must draw a harsher conclusion. If the Scots want to pursue that course, as clearly they do, there really is unfinished business. At present, the Barnett formula—I do not want to digress too much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but Barnett is about resources and that is what we are debating—ensures that Scotland receives disproportionately more money from the English taxpayer; indeed, it enshrines that. How long will the English taxpayer put up with that? If, ultimately, the Scots really do want to go their own way, they will have to raise their own revenue as well. However, I entirely agree with my hon. Friend that the matter will give rise to great bitterness and division.

The Minister expresses great confidence—or does his best to—that the definitions are workable. However, many of the organisations working in the field do not agree. Organisations that the Minister would usually be able to pray in aid are extremely concerned about what has happened in the light of the Scottish experience. I will not list them all, but in a press release issued after the Scottish debacle, Age Concern states:

"Of course we now have a vastly iniquitous situation with older people north of the border enjoying peace of mind when it comes to the costs of care, while in England and Wales older people will still be faced with a complex system which forces them to pay. A significant number of members of the Government and their parents will now enjoy a system which they are unwilling to extend to the rest of us."

That neatly sums up the dilemma. It is why I come to the following conclusion on the first limb of the problem: sooner or later, it will be realised that the definition does

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not work, so the state will have to pick up the tab. So far, so good—but that conclusion would make any Treasury Minister shudder.

The important point about the policy that the Conservatives have been developing—there is no secret about it—is that we are saying, in effect, that we cannot go on in such a way. That is why our policy is right. I pointed out that we have had socialised medicine for more than 50 years. People of my age assumed that we would be looked after from the cradle to the grave, but no one in the House could honestly tell our children that, in due course, at the end of their life, the state will be able to provide them with a standard of care or of residential care with which they would feel comfortable.

I have two children at university and one taking A-levels. I do not pretend for a moment that they can rely on the state's resources in their twilight years. The Conservative party has therefore rightly told young people, who still have ample time, to provide for their twilight years; it is an extremely good idea. We talk about having to pick up the tab now, but we are not talking about doing so for ever; we are saying that the state cannot now go back on the arrangement or understanding that it has entered into with people of a certain age. It would be completely unreasonable to ask hon. Members here today suddenly to make realistic arrangements for their nursing home care, but it should be possible to encourage young people to do so.

In the end, such matters come down to sheer practicalities. If we try to temper principle with definitions, that simply will not work—it will lead to no fate other than the grizzly fate of belonging to the Liberal Democrat party. In the end, it is better to face up to the fact that there are opportunities as well as problems and to say that, between us, we have bitten the bullet on nursing care. I suspect that, in early due course, we shall have to do the same thing on personal care as well.

9.1 pm

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): I welcome the debate, but I am disappointed that, although the Liberal Democrats initiated it, they have focused too narrowly on institutional care. That has been a weakness in the social policy of successive Governments. We have tended to determine our policies on long-term care according to the demands of the private institutional care sector. I was sad that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) referred to home closures. In many instances, home closures arise from effective alternative policies that enable people to remain independently in the community. I agree with much of what he said, but he focused on the wrong tack.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the mess that the Government are trying to clear up arises entirely and directly from the previous Conservative Government's policies on long-term care. I carefully listened to the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), who made some important points in interventions and in his speech. He said that Conservative policy is right. I listened to the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), who spoke for nearly half an hour, but I have not got a clue about the Conservative party's policy. I intend to send copies of her speech to the elderly people in my constituency who ask me about Government policy and the alternatives. If they can work out what the Conservatives stand for, they have obviously more insight into her thoughts and ideas than I have.

The current difficulties are the direct result of what happened during the previous Government's 18 years. First, they deliberately removed long-term care from the NHS, as the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), outlined. Some 40,000 beds, many of which were long-term care beds, were removed from the NHS. My constituency lost two hospitals that specifically offered long-term and intermediate care for elderly people. One of those hospitals has long been demolished, and the irony is that its site is now occupied by a private nursing home, where people pay for the care that was provided free in the original hospital. Under the previous Government, while free NHS long-term care was being run down, the private care nursing home market was being stimulated through huge public subsidies.

People forget that the private care home industry has been produced not simply by the market; the taxpayer has subsidised its expansion. When I covered community care for the then Opposition Front-Bench team, I calculated that between 1981, when the then Government decided to extend supplementary benefit to top-up fees in private care and nursing homes, and 1993, when they attempted to unravel the mess that community care had become, £10 billion of public funds was spent on pumping money into the creation and extension of the private home care market. That was nonsense. During that time I dealt with numerous individual cases and found that people desperately wanted a small amount of money to stay in their own homes and to remain independent, but they could not get it. Once they had made up their minds to give up the ghost and to go into institutional care, the public money flowed. The policy was absolute nonsense and resulted in the mess that we are trying to unravel now. The previous Government were prepared to support private institutional care but not the preventive alternatives that everyone needed.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Meriden has disappeared, but I heard her speech so I should not be surprised by that. I do not like talking about hon. Members when they are not present. It is a pity when they cannot remain to listen to the responses to their contributions. The hon. Lady referred to the horrendous costs that people like myself will cause for the state when we are ga-ga in a few years' time. However, her assumptions are based on the most expensive models. She is making all the mistakes that the previous Conservative Government made in their 18 years in power.

The consequence of the privatisation of care of the elderly that took place under the previous Government is that older people pay for care that they have already paid for and that they assumed would be free when they paid for it. As I pointed out to my hon. Friend the Minister, it is wrong in principle and profoundly unfair that people should find themselves in that position. In effect, they are paying twice.

A number of developments have taken place recently. I had a little bit to do with the royal commission, because the Labour party came up with the idea when I was the Opposition spokesman on community care. I claim no credit, because the idea came from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) in

about 1994. It was a sensible way to attempt to unravel the shambles that we had got into because of Conservative policy.

The Sutherland report made some sensible suggestions and, to be fair to the Government, they are implementing many of them. The one issue on which I differ from them is personal care. I thought that the definition of anything involving touch was a sensible way round the nonsense that we have debated for generations on what is nursing care and what is social care. That is an impossible distinction to make. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey), I worked in social services so I have experience of assessing people. I know that one cannot draw such a dividing line; it simply does not exist. It is wrong for us to attempt a definition.

The Sutherland report talked about free nursing consistent with that on offer outside in the community. It made sensible proposals on capital limits and property ownership and I welcome the fact that, through the national plan, the Government have acceded to the proposals on free nursing care, capital limits and property.

I was particularly interested in the idea of deferred payments that my hon. Friend the Minister mentioned. They are a sensible way of dealing with circumstances in which people in a care home do not know whether they want to remain there. They should not have just three or six months to make up their minds about giving up the home in which they lived most of their lives. That is intolerable. Deferred payments are a sensible alternative, and I commend the Government on that suggestion.

The issue about which I am most concerned is one that I mentioned in the debate on the Second Reading of the Health and Social Care Bill. Personal care is still to be means-tested. I understand the Government's point that, if they have to decide between offering preventive measures in the community or supporting people in their own homes and only one package of money is available, it makes sense to invest it in preventive measures. If that is the dilemma that they face, I support them in their decision. However, my concern is that it is impossible to offer a sensible distinction between nursing care and personal care.

The Government's definition that nursing care is anything that qualified nurses do will lead to a huge amount of contention and controversy. The definition is open to different and wide-ranging interpretations. I am worried about the pressure that will be placed on nursing staff to accede to requests to undertake functions that are not required of qualified nurses.

Dr. Brand: The hon. Gentleman is making a great deal of sense. Does he not agree that the Government's definition would undermine desirable team working between nurses and nursing assistants? They all have high status and do a proper job. However, once nursing actions are carried out by non-registered nurses and people are charged for them, those members of the teams will be treated as second-class citizens.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I agree that that problem will arise.

We must recognise the importance of holistic care. It makes no sense to carve up people's care. People cannot be helped to the toilet in the morning, only then to be told that their hair cannot be combed. I am worried by a further inconsistency in that respect. If the division between social and nursing care is to be pared down with regard to people in care homes, will the same principle apply in the national health service? Will people in long-term NHS beds be charged for the personal care element of their hospital care? We need a consistency that has not so far been evident.

I am critical of that aspect of Government policy, but I strongly welcome the £900 million that they are offering for intermediate care. That contrasts with the Tory tax cuts announced today. When people consider Conservative party policy and its promised tax cuts, which will attract elderly voters, they must think through the consequences: cuts in personal social services and more means-testing on care for older people.

I make a plea for us to think radically about preventive measures. I am worried that the debate has been far too concentrated on institutional and permanent care settings. I ask hon. Members to consider what sort of care they want when they can no longer care for themselves. Do they want to end up as my mother did, and sit locked up in a home full of incontinent, deranged people? Is that the best that we can do for elderly people? I want us to move away from such a model.

We now have the opportunities, through developments such as those in communications technology, to maintain elderly people in their homes. We should extend the care-link schemes that apply in so many areas and provide an instant response to requests for home adaptations. People should not have to wait six months to get a ramp, or encounter all the other such nonsense about which hon. Members occasionally hear. Housing-with-care schemes have been introduced in Denmark as an alternative to institutional care. Why cannot we use the equity that elderly people have in their houses to make available intensive care packages that allow them to remain in their homes? More investment is needed in day-care and warden schemes.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: The hon. Gentleman is, of course, the distinguished Chairman of the Select Committee on Health, which I, too, chaired for a limited time. Will he join me and other hon. Members in different political parties in making representations to the Government on expanding criteria relating to the personal and social medical conditions that qualify for free treatment? He made a good point: providing treatment and care today can prevent worse illness in future. If care is provided now, it can save the health service a great deal of money in due course. Will he join me in making an all-party representation on that issue?

Mr. Hinchliffe: There is more cross-party consensus on the issue to which the hon. Gentleman refers than on many others. Of course, I shall be happy to make appropriate representations. In my surgery on Friday evening, I spent the best part of an hour with a lady who was probably in her early 60s and whose husband has senile dementia. It was extremely difficult to try to distinguish between personal and nursing care in respect of her husband. The woman was dealing with a tragic situation. We must consider the practicalities of the Government's policy, and I shall certainly be happy to support any representations along the lines that he suggests.

Other hon. Members want to contribute, so I shall conclude my remarks shortly. I believe that the Government have taken many positive steps. I shall

[Mr. Hinchliffe]

support their amendment because I believe that they are heading in broadly the right direction. I am critical about the difficulty to which I have referred, but I hope that it will be resolved in a positive manner.

I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), will pick up my plea. To me, care of the elderly is essentially a matter of human rights. My human rights are about my independence and my ability to choose what sort of care I want. Care should not be given to me because the private market thinks that the best thing for me when I am ga-ga is to be incarcerated with a number of other ga-ga people in some sort of lock-up establishment. We can do better than that, and I have every confidence that the Government will do so. I wish them well in applying their thoughts to the royal commission recommendations, but I hope that we might go that little bit further in due course.

9.15 pm

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): I am pleased to be able to make a short contribution to what has been a good debate. It is a privilege and a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend, if I may call him that, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), a fellow Select Committee Chairman, whose distinguished knowledge has greatly added to the debate. He is absolutely right to say that we should not concentrate solely on residential and institutional care. Community and domiciliary care are an essential part of the package of measures that we must implement. He is right also to talk about the need for prevention. The Government have done a great deal about that, and I shall return to the matter in a moment.

The heartening thing for me is that, apart from the hon. Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey), who made a powerful speech, there are not many people who are intrinsically opposed to the principle of personal care provision. The hon. Lady was slightly unfair in accusing us of being cynical in initiating the debate at this time. You will know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we receive only three Opposition days a year, and we rightly gave a half-day to the Welsh nationalists. We do not control when we will get these opportunities, but our desire to have this debate was certainly driven by the importance that we attach to the subject.

Not enough consideration was given to the work done by Sir Stewart Sutherland and his royal commission. The report was a seminal contribution to the debate. Some might say that the Government's initial response was grudging. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) came up with the idea; it was right to pursue that idea, and the Government seemed to be absolutely committed to it. They then seemed to go very cool when the report was published, and we have had only one debate on the subject, in December 1999. The Liberal Democrats need therefore make no apologies for initiating this debate, which has been very good so far.

The Government are right to claim that they have made progress. Compared with the previous Government, they have made enormous progress. Our motion sets out substantial differences in the directions that we are taking, but ours is a perfectly proper position and we will argue our case eloquently, as the royal commission argued its case. We are right to support its recommendations. The Conservatives have a lot to answer for, and if I had more time at my disposal, I could expand that proposition almost infinitely. Like the hon. Member for Wakefield, I watched with dismay the evolution of policy under the stewardship of the previous Conservative Administration.

Having said that, I remember the Prime Minister, then the Leader of the Opposition, making a powerful speech in 1996 at the party conference before the last general election. He said that he was ashamed to live in a country where people had to sell their house to pay for their long-term care. That gave me a lift. I watched his speech on the television, and that was a powerful point well made. Like me, many people had their expectations raised by that statement by the head of the incoming Government and by the establishment of the royal commission. We were right to be disappointed that it took the Government almost as long to read and respond to the report as the royal commission had taken to write it.

The Minister of State, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), rightly ribbed us about past changes in Liberal Democrat policy. However, for me at least, the royal commission changed everything. There are six volumes of research evidence, and I did not read them all, but those that I read certainly demonstrated that the commission's work changed people's perspectives on this important subject.

The Government have not done enough to consider the options in detail and to debate them in the House. They took the line of least resistance and they split the difference. As I said, they have made progress, and it would be churlish to quibble about that, but they took fright at the amounts of money that they thought, wrongly, were involved. North of the border, research will continue between now and August into the implications and the delivery of the policy of paying for people's personal care. I am deeply disappointed that the Government took fright.

The royal commission showed that providing solutions on an individual basis was not viable. Individual solutions, whether through independent insurance or under other schemes, would not make the necessary provision. Sir Stewart rightly said that the only solution was to pull the risks and cover the costs through general taxation. That is the fairest, long-term solution.

Dan Norris (Wansdyke): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kirkwood: I am sorry, but I have no time. Other hon. Members want to speak and I am trying to be as quick as I can.

Sir Stewart's point is crucial, and I hope that hon. Members from all parties will consider it. The Government will struggle to deal with fairness in future if their policy continues in the same direction. We have had some exchanges about people's treatment and whether they consider it to be fair when compared with that of others.

Problems of definition will always exist. I respect the hon. Member for Stockport, who knows a great deal about social services from her professional experience. However, it diminished the argument to mention some of the issues that she raised. Boundary problems will always exist, and Sir Stewart Sutherland and the royal commission report recognised that. There are ways round the problem if we act in good faith and with good will.

If the Government's proposals are accepted, we will have a two-tier system. However good it is, it will be unstable in the long term. The Minister was wrong to say that the royal commission had devised the narrow definition of long-term care that he described. Dr. Chi Patel contributed to the minority report. I have talked to Sir Stewart and it is wrong to say that he had such a narrow definition in mind when he considered the proposition for gatekeeping.

If the Government considered the fact that the state already pays 75 per cent. of the costs, there is at least an argument for saying that, as pensioner provision improves in future and people retire with larger occupational pensions, the money available to pay hotel costs may generate more money than was perhaps anticipated five years ago when research for the royal commission report began. I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), will be able to deal with that point in her winding-up speech. Slide rules should be applied to some of the figures and an option for personal care sometime in future should be kept open. That is all I ask of the Government this evening. If they are prepared to consider that, I will be content with the results of our debate.

9.23 pm

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): I thank the previous two speakers for creating space for me to squeeze into before the winding-up speeches. The debate is important and I am happy to have the opportunity to contribute to it. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey) spoke eloquently about the way in which our treatment of older people is a sign of our society's values. It should reflect the way in which we expect to be treated when we are old.

I acknowledge the huge progress in the care of some of my older constituents in the past three or four years. When I was elected as a Member of Parliament, the first issue to hit me was delayed discharges. I remember the letters that I received, the tearful relatives and the patients, whom I visited in Wythenshawe hospital. It was dreadful for them to be trapped in an inappropriate setting. It also prevented others who desperately needed operations from being treated. It was demoralising for the staff because they were not able to give appropriate care in such a setting.

In August 1997, there were 200 delayed discharge patients in Manchester, and there was just £500 a week of new money with which to fund care packages and placements for them. I am pleased to say that, with better management, more cash from the Government and more partnership working, there is now between £6,000 and £7,000 a week of new money in the kitty, and there are only one or two delayed discharge patients. That is an immense step forward, and it has also been repeated in the Trafford area of my constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) always speaks passionately about the need for prevention in the care of the elderly, in terms of the prevention of the use of the residential care and hospital care options. I concur wholeheartedly with him on that. All our efforts should go into trying to prevent admissions into residential care and hospital care whenever possible. That means more neighbourliness and better care in the community. It also means good, professional social work care and nursing care in the community.

When people need to go into the hospital, as the majority of older people will at some stage, the care available needs to be of a high quality. When the treatment is over, the patient then needs to be placed appropriately in the right kind of setting. That might involve residential care or nursing care, but it is to be hoped that the patient will be back home sooner rather than later.

On that issue, I have some good news for my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield. The Southwold nursing home in my constituency would, in the past, have received patients from hospital who would have stayed there almost for ever. Now, it is sending one in three patients—even some who are quite dependent—home into their own community with a care package. That is an encouraging development in nursing care.

The main focus of the debate is the decision not to provide free personal care to all. It has been made clear from the debate that that is a serious and controversial issue. There are no perfect solutions to such questions. In politics, there are only priorities and hard choices, and I shall briefly cover some of them.

First, the initial cost of the proposal would be more than £1 billion, as my hon. Friend the Minister said. That is a similar investment to the one that the Government are making in the intermediate care package, which will provide 5,000 places by 2003. The first hard question to answer is whether we should provide existing services more cheaply for some, mainly better-off, people or fund new and extended provision for all. As has been said, we cannot spend the same money twice.

Secondly, the £1 billion cost would not remain at that level. The royal commission made it clear that by 2050, the figure would have risen to at least £6 billion. The second question is, therefore, whether such costs would be sustainable. Reference has been made to the negative impact of having a funding regime that would not be sustainable in the long run. That would be totally disruptive to the care of elderly people, and we should shun such an option.

Thirdly, expectations change. That powerful point was made by the authors of the note of dissent to the royal commission's report. Older people will not now accept the care packages that were on offer in the 1960s. Equally, older people in 2050 will not accept the kind of care packages that are available now. The third question, therefore, is whether we should risk putting a cap on quality and variety by enshrining into our system a principle that would never provide enough of the right kind of care in the long run.

The issue is controversial. Difficult choices have to be made, and there will undoubtedly be all kinds of teething problems with the provisions. I acknowledge and accept that there is now a new settlement between the individual and the state in relation to pensions and other matters. It is a settlement that protects the poorest as a first priority, which is just. It asks the better-off to make a bigger contribution, which is fair, and it guarantees quality for everyone, which we all expect. Those principles are reflected in the new arrangements for personal care, and I fully support them.

9.29 pm

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): It is a pleasure to participate in the debate, which has been useful to explore the issues involved and to identify where the political parties will position themselves in the run-in to the general election.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) said, the Liberal Democrats do not control the timetable for when we get the chance to raise matters on Opposition Supply days. Nevertheless, events in Scotland are, for Liberal Democrats, a cause for celebration. We celebrate the success of devolution, because those events represent devolution working, and working well, and the fact that people in Scotland will be able to use the long-term free personal care that the Scottish Executive and, in the end, all parties in the Scottish Parliament recognised that it was right to offer. That does not mean that we have to offer free personal care in England, but it does mean that those of us who believe in that have a duty to argue for it in England. That is what we are doing.

It is wrong for people such as the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), who is the Conservatives' key spokesman on these matters, to appear on television to say that it is an absolute scandal that different things will happen in Scotland and in England, only for it to creep out that that is their position as well. The Conservatives in Scotland believe in free personal care, but it has emerged in today's debate, as it has before, that the Conservatives at Westminster do not support it. Small wonder that the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who was bouncing up and down enthusiastically at the beginning of the debate, left the Chamber on hearing what his Front-Bench spokesman had to say. I am not surprised by his attitude because he would have been gravely disappointed to discover that that was the position.

Mr. Hinchliffe: Where is she?

Mr. Harvey: Where indeed is the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman)? She could have returned to listen to the conclusion of the debate.

The task for those of us in England who believe in free personal care is to campaign and argue for it, and that is what we are doing tonight. I shall address a few remarks to the Minister, who defended the Government's position and said that our proposals are not the right way forward in England.

On the demographic time bomb, my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) made a stout defence. As the Minister said, as time goes on there will be more people of retirement age and in their eighties, but it is equally true, as my hon. Friend pointed out, that the greater part of the expenditure on such care services occurs in the last six weeks of life. Unless the population is bound to expand in some unrecognisable way, the basic costs involved will remain broadly the same.

The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) said that, over time, the original estimate would, in cash terms, reach a sum six times that estimated by the royal commission. Of course it would. Sums increase as time goes on and inflation makes figures rise, but the estimate will remain broadly stable as a proportion of gross domestic product. The idea that there is a demographic time bomb and that we will not be able to afford our proposals was comprehensively dismissed by the royal commission, which went into those matters in great detail.

The Government say that they have introduced a comprehensive package of intermediate care and that, somehow, it is an alternative because in this world it is possible to do only one thing or the other—it is not possible to do both, nor should one have the ambition to do so. Let me make it perfectly clear that the Liberal Democrats support the new priority that the Government want to give to intermediate care. We welcomed that on the day that it was announced and we have welcomed it in the House since.

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), the Chairman of the Health Committee, was right to say that we do not want hon. Members to get into the cul-de-sac of thinking that all care has to be residential. The more intermediate, short-term care and longer-term care that we can offer to enable people to be cared for in their own homes, the better that will be for everybody concerned and for society as a whole. We welcome the Government's intermediate care package. We recognise, however, that free personal care involves expenditure over and above that. It certainly does not involve the original £1 billion that the royal commission estimated.

If one was to proceed on that basis, one would be assuming that the free nursing care that the Government are introducing would achieve nothing and that the intermediate care package itself would achieve nothing. Yet the Government's own brief about intermediate care specifies that one of their objectives is to reduce the number of people going into long-term residential care. The Government are clearly confident that that will succeed, and so are we. The cost of introducing a policy of free personal care falls as a result.

Dan Norris: Exactly how much will it cost for the additional strategy that the Liberal Democrats propose? How will they raise the money, given that one of their proposals is to have a higher rate of income tax for people earning more than £100,000 a year? I calculate that that has been spent 11 times over, given what the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) has said. Putting that to one side, how much will the proposal cost the taxpayer?

Mr. Harvey: If one starts with the original royal commission estimate and nets out of that what will be spent on nursing care, taking account of the extent to which intermediate care will relieve some of the pressure on that, the cost will be about £750 million a year. The hon. Gentleman refers to our separate policy of putting a 50p tax rate on incomes above £100,000. Let me point out that that would raise £3.5 billion in a year. He may have counted the money as being spent 11 times over, but even at that rate it can be spent almost five times over and it will pay for a great deal more than that. Nevertheless, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question.

Both the Minister and the hon. Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey) made some spurious arguments to the effect that it is impossible to draw up a definition of personal care. That is simply not true. The royal commission report had a good stab at doing so. As the hon. Member for Wakefield said, it used as its basic principle the fact that

the person being cared for had to be touched. If hon. Members think that that sounds vague, they should look at the report, which lists exactly what would be provided.

I am not saying that a trouble-free list can be drawn up, but it is nonsense to say that a definition cannot be made. Equally, it is nonsense to say that a distinction between nursing care and personal care cannot be made. That does not mean that no difficulties arise. In practice, it will prove very difficult. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam stressed in his speech, where the Government choose to draw the lines in establishing that definition is not what the royal commission had in mind in its report.

All those involved in this sector, including the Royal College of Nursing and the British Medical Association, in an announcement that it made yesterday, have arrived at the same conclusion: that the Government have opted for a mean and narrow definition. It is based not on the tasks that will be carried out or on the condition of the patient but, bizarrely, on who will carry out the care. It is a most unsatisfactory definition, which will cause many difficulties in practice. However, it is a definition, which proves that a definition can be made.

The Minister made a completely ludicrous point about the activities of the London borough of Sutton in the middle of the Thatcher regime. For goodness sake, a council trying to run its services in the middle of the Thatcher regime when some 85 per cent. of its budget was determined for it by the Government—*[Interruption.]* As if problems were not bad enough, Lady Olga Maitland was the local Member of Parliament. The Minister cannot suggest that the Liberal Democrats, in proposing an election manifesto, would try to do exactly the same as we did in the 1980s in the London borough of Sutton when Mrs. Thatcher was controlling the budget. The two are not remotely comparable. In any sane country, an organisation as big as a London borough would determine its own policies and raise its own taxes to pay for them. However, Britain does not work like that; everything has to be spoon fed from above. Matters have improved slightly over the years, but not an awful lot.

While we are on the subject of local government finance, the Minister was right to ask the Conservative party whether it would match Government spending on social services. It is worth taking a moment to look at what the Government are doing with social services funding. This year, all social services departments have budgets above the standard spending assessment. Despite that, as of last week they were collectively overspent by £205 million. The settlement for next year will be insufficient to cover repayment of the debt and to cope with the increased demand on social services.

The Government have estimated that their new four-year plan to end bed blocking will cost £900,000. Much of that will have to be paid for out of social services budgets, and no extra is provided for it in this year's budget. Therefore, there is a great gap, so the Conservatives should be able at least to match the Government's proposals. The hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) said that the whole thing comes down to funding. She was right when she said that there is a big hole, but she contrived to dig an even bigger hole and jumped into it. She said that the solution to the funding hole was not provided by the Government's proposals or by the Liberal Democrats' suggestion, because that would "disincentivise" people from making provision on their own account. When we sat on the edge of our seats waiting to hear her solution, there came absolutely nothing. We were told that the Conservative proposal would appear in due course, and we would have to contain ourselves.

It was all too much—or rather too little—for the hon. Member for Buckingham, who fled into the night. The hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) is made of stouter stuff. He told us what he thinks the policy should be. It was remarkably similar to the Liberal Democrat policy that we have enunciated this evening. It will be interesting to see whether, come the election, he stands on the Conservative or the Liberal Democrat policy.

Mr. Nicholls: I would not want the hon. Gentleman to go round the west country claiming that he and I are allies. If I came to a similar conclusion, it was because mine was based on principle.

Mr. Harvey: I thought that the bulk of the hon. Gentleman's rather intemperate remarks about the Liberal Democrats were based on the fact that his majority over the Liberal Democrat candidate at the last election was all of 281.

The hon. Member for Stockport irresponsibly set alarms bells ringing by suggesting that Liberal Democrats were arguing for the removal of existing attendance allowances. That is certainly not part of our policy, and it is not how we would propose to pay for these provisions.

The hon. Member for Teignbridge said that his argument was born out of principle. The royal commission went into this matter in great detail, and explored the principles involved. It considered the practical implications and the costings, and plotted those forward over a period of time. It made a recommendation, which we have supported consistently, and I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman does so, too. I listened to a couple of interventions from the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), and I got the impression that he also supported that recommendation as an issue of principle.

Liberal Democrats have argued this case in England and in Scotland because it is right in principle. It is completely unjust for someone suffering from a long-term, chronic condition, such as dementia or Parkinson's disease, who is in need of personal help with bathing, dressing, their toilet and other necessities, to have to pay for those services. By any common-sense, layman's definition such chronic conditions would ordinarily be viewed as a health problem. All those who have paid national insurance contributions have believed that they have been buying care from the cradle to the grave. It is an injustice and it is wrong in principle that they should be penalised and asked to pay for personal care.

I welcome the commitments made by the British Medical Association. It believes that the Government's definition of nursing care is too limited. Dr. Dearden, the chairman of its community care committee, said:

> "We are pressing politicians to make changes to the Bill so that free care includes personal care as well as nursing care. If someone is unable to wash themselves, use the bathroom or get dressed on their own because of their medical condition, we believe help with these basic things should be free of charge. If individuals have to pay for this increased level of personal care it is akin to a tax on being sick. This goes against the ethos of the NHS."

That is right, and that is why Liberal Democrats believe that personal care should, in principle, be free. We will argue that proudly and strongly at the forthcoming election.

9.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): This has been, mostly, a thoughtful and well-informed debate, and I congratulate those who have taken part. It has been a debate about the challenges we face, and the choices we have to make.

It is clear that we live in an ageing society. Many more people live longer: that is to be welcomed, but the challenge we face is to ensure that our health and social services meet the needs of older people. Older people want to lead healthy and independent lives; they do not want to be in institutions. As a Government, we need to find a fair way of funding long-term care that strikes the right balance—between what the state should provide and fund and what should be the responsibility of the individual, and ensuring that the money, when it is spent, provides better care.

The status quo was clearly unacceptable. We needed to expand services for the care of older people, we needed to make major new investment in those services and we needed to redesign services. We are doing just that. We are providing extra funds—an additional £900 million by 2003-04—for intermediate care and new services, and a further £360 million year on year to finance nursing care costs. We are thinking about expansion and redesign. That is why we have developed national service frameworks for older people, that is why we established the National Care Standards Commission and that is why we are developing intermediate care.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) rightly described the previous system as discredited and unfair, but I could not agree with much that he said subsequently, other than his expressed desire for a fair and sustainable system. I certainly do not agree with his analysis of the solution. Essentially, he said that he supported everything the Government were doing but wanted more. In a sense I would have been surprised if he had not said that, but it would have been helpful had he recognised that some considerable advances are being made.

I am still deeply puzzled by the contribution of the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman). She described the problem as a big black hole around which we were trying to navigate, and I sense that many of us are trying to navigate around a big black hole following her speech. In fact, she probably fell into the black hole, and we all know what happens when someone disappears into one: it is difficult to get out.

Not the least of the hon. Lady's problems is her continued refusal to clarify the Opposition's policy. She said that she wanted to clarify what her colleague the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) had said about personal care. The hon. Gentleman, however, gave no such confirmation. He said:

"I welcome the Government's decision to make all nursing care free".—[*Official Report*, 10 January 2001; Vol. 360, c. 1100.]

It appears that the hon. Lady herself is not terribly clear about what the policy is.

The hon. Lady offered no solution, other than saying, "We support what the Government are doing, until we come up with our own comprehensive policy." That is a policy that we were promised as long ago as December 1999, but we still have not heard anything. We wait with bated breath, but, given that social services are such a vital component, it would be helpful if, for a start, we could hear whether the Opposition will match NHS and social services funding.

Mrs. Spelman: I am sure that, as a professional politician, the Minister understands that tactically it was worth waiting to see whether the Government would have a knee-jerk reaction, as they did in Scotland.

Ms Stuart: Unlike the Liberals, who are now jumping on every bandwagon that comes their way, the Conservatives will sit on the fence to see which way the wind blows, and will then decide in which direction to jump. We all look forward to that.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey) on her thoughtful speech. She gave strong support to what the Government are doing. I particularly appreciate her support, which she gave not because of political allegiances but because of her experience of working on the ground. She acknowledged the difficulties with definition and that it was not straightforward, but she made it clear that no alternative was offered—someone who has worked on the ground recognised that that was the right way forward.

I was fascinated by the contribution of the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), who told us that his was a principled statement. If I understood the principled statement correctly, he was arguing along the lines not of justice but of the right of inheritance for the wealthier, and, if that did not work, insurance would be a way forward. In many ways, it did not add up.

I welcome what my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) said. He has tremendous experience and is a highly respected Chairman of the Select Committee on Health. He made a powerful point about the failure to invest in alternative provisions for care. He acknowledges the difficulties. We know that we have some differences, but he is broadly in support. Just because it is difficult to make that distinction does not mean that it is impossible.

My hon. Friend specifically requested that we move away from institutional settings and look radically at the matter, recognising people's human rights and supporting their right to live independently. I hope that, when he looks at what we have done, he will realise that we have taken that on board. I am grateful for his contribution.

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood)—as a former member of the Select Committee on Social Security, which he chairs, I almost called him my hon. Friend—suggests that what is happening in Scotland indicates a two-tier system. That is a fundamental misunderstanding of the driving force behind what we are doing. We decided to take that route in England because it delivers better care and addresses some of the inequalities of the previous arrangement.

Mr. Kirkwood: I was not making myself clear. I was talking about the two tiers between personal and nursing care, not between north and south. I apologise.

Ms Stuart: I am grateful for that intervention.

The hon. Gentleman welcomed the royal commission, but we rejected the proposal on personal care not because of cost, but to deliver better care. May I briefly come back to Scotland? Different solutions for funding will not

provide one extra nurse, one extra doctor or one extra provision north of the border, so it is not logical to conclude that there will be better care.

Mr. Donald Gorrie (Edinburgh, West): Does the Minister accept that all the six parties represented in the Scottish Parliament support the proposition and that all the people who gave evidence, who really know about the subject, to the Scottish Parliament's Committee all favoured the policy? Therefore, the policy is not as insane as she makes out.

Ms Stuart: I was not for one moment suggesting that. I am simply saying that that is a logical conclusion of devolution: different choices are made. The debate is about making choices, but I am still somewhat puzzled about why the Liberal Democrats support the proposal in Scotland, but have different views in Wales and are not sure about England. There may be some inconsistency there. *[Interruption.]* Hon. Members may not like it, but may I make a little progress?

My hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) described powerfully the changes that he has seen on the ground and the benefits to his constituents as a result of bringing in the new models of service, which deal with such things as delayed discharges. He has seen what home care packages are doing for people on the ground.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) made an interesting observation about what the debate was really all about: it was about political positioning. He made that clear. I am grateful for that honesty. I am delighted that he has put on the record his support for the royal commission because, in 1999, when we had the previous debate, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson would not be drawn on whether the Liberal Democrats supported it. Again, it was a case of sitting on the fence, seeing how it played and suddenly saying, "We fully support it."

The hon. Gentleman questioned the arguments about the demographic time bomb. There is a whole line of arguments to be made, but what he does not deal with is the fact that what we are putting forward is based not on cost, but on better services that provide a better response.

Extraordinarily, the hon. Gentleman questioned the £1 billion cost figure. Underlying his assertion that the change would not cost that sum was the good old Liberal Democrat approach of accepting everything that the Government are doing and our extra investment and asking for more. He said that the change would not cost £1 billion, but would be much cheaper, because of all the Government's action in intermediate care. That is the bottom line.

Mr. Harvey *indicated assent.*

Ms Stuart: I am glad that we have put that on record.

Nothing that we have heard today has shed any light on the Opposition's policies or on how they would fund them. It is very easy to make proposals without saying where the money will come from. Liberal Democrat Members say that extra tax on those making more than £100,000 would fund both their care proposals and their education proposals, but I would like to see the calculations. Liberal Democrat Members want more money, but they do not say where they will find it.

Conservative Members broadly agree with the Government and will probably do so until they have developed their own comprehensive policies. However, they have still not said whether they will match our vital social services funding. The Opposition might therefore find it helpful—I always try to be helpful—if I outline the real action that the Government have taken using real money, not sweet aspirations and empty words.

The NHS plan outlines a vision of health and well-being for older people and for those who care for them. I do not think that we have said enough today about carers. That vision is backed by real investment of an extra £1.4 billion by 2003-04. With that investment, we will promote better health, encourage faster recovery from illness, support independence, avoid the increasing institutionalisation of the elderly and deal with hospital admissions. We offer not only new choices and new opportunities, but the money necessary to realise those opportunities.

By 2004, the new investment will help an extra 130,000 people annually. By 2004, the number of people benefiting from community equipment services will increase by 50 per cent., helping people to stay at home safely for longer. Although all hon. Members want that outcome, we are actually achieving it. Not only will 50,000 people be able to live more independently at home, but we will support the carers.

Opposition Members asked the interesting question what will happen when we are 90 and our children have to look after us. I remind them that, by then, our children themselves may well be 70 and require support. We are therefore supporting carers by doubling the carers' special grant from £50 million to £100 million. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security has also announced a package worth £500 million to back up our words. That money will benefit 300,000 carers in the next three years. The national service framework will back up those investments and support older people with mental health problems and dementia sufferers.

Those measures were created to deal with the individual concerns of people whom we need to support. It is also essential that those services are reconfigured. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield said, simply doing more of the same is not a long-term strategy. We are therefore providing money to reconfigure services and to provide essential independence. We are extending free nursing care to all settings to promote independence.

It would have been gracious of the hon. Member for North Devon to acknowledge that some progress is being made, and that the Government will be preventing people from having to sell their homes against their wishes. As the Prime Minister said, such a situation is disgraceful. I wish that Opposition Members would even partly recognise that we are moving in the right direction. We are tackling unacceptable variations in charges for home care. We are also providing guidance on the NHS continued care responsibilities.

The Government are taking action to provide a fair and sustainable way forward. Opposition Members have a long way to go to convince anyone that they have any credible policy and funding options that anyone could accept. What we have heard today will convince no one, either in the Chamber or outside it. It has been an entirely missed opportunity.

[Ms Stuart]

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 41, Noes 271.

Division No. 104] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gidley, Sandra
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Andrew Stunell and
Mr. Donald Gorrie.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal[illegible]ey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert

Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Wray, James
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Graham Allen and
Mr. Ian Pearson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 270, Noes 41.

Division No. 105] **[10.13 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berrningham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad

Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Wray, James
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Ian Pearson and
Mr. Graham Allen.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gorrie, Donald
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Andrew Stunell and
Mr. Don Foster.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the NHS Plan's commitments to a care system founded on the principles of equity and fairness; welcomes the measures the Government has announced to reform the funding of long term care and to invest in new health and social care services for older people; notes that this matches the extra spending on long term care recommended by the Royal Commission; believes that the implementation of free nursing care on the basis of need and not ability to pay will bring an end to a major injustice affecting tens of thousands of older people in nursing homes; welcomes the new investment announced in the NHS Plan of £900 million annually by 2003–04 in new intermediate care services for older people; supports the priority the Government has rightly attached to improving front line services for older people; and calls on the Liberal Democrats to set out what services they would cut in order to fund their proposals.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

SUPREME COURT OF NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Maximum Number of Judges (Northern Ireland) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 11th December, be approved.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE

That the draft Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 16th January, be approved.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT

Ordered,

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 15th February, do adjourn till Monday 26th February 2001.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That, for the current Session of Parliament, Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 January],

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

LANGUAGE OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCEEDINGS

Motion made,

That—

(1) this House approves the First Report from the Procedure Committee, Session 2000-01 (HC 47); and

(2) the Resolution of 5th June 1996 on the Language of Parliamentary Proceedings be amended accordingly by inserting, after the word 'Wales,', the words 'and at Westminster in respect of Select Committees'.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Unsolicited Mail

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

10.25 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I am grateful to have this opportunity to raise the important matter of unsolicited mail. Members of political parties—that is most of us in the House—may have occasion to use unsolicited mail over the next few months, but I wish to refer to something that has a rather more malign intent than most of the material that is produced by political parties.

It may seem to most of us that 8 February will be an ordinary parliamentary day. We will discuss the Children's Commissioner for Wales Bill—which has its merits, but it is certainly nothing out of the ordinary. However, anyone in the position of my constituent, Mr. K. Bond of Castle Cary, who received a letter some weeks ago from an Eva Damus, clairvoyant, medium and astrologer, might take a much more serious view about the prospects for that day. That is the date on which Mrs. Eva Damus believes that she needs to undertake a grand mystic ceremony on behalf of Mr. Bond and the many thousands of other people to whom she has written. She must do that because those people are

"born under the disastrous influence of a very harmful lunar coil which has kept you imprisoned in a negative circle".

Curiously enough, that negative circle can be lifted by the application of a mere £20 to the account of Eva Damus and the placing of a few magnets around the home. It is curious that not only has she discovered that dark secret by extensive work on a person's birth and personality chart, but has managed to do so without knowing the date of birth of the person involved. One is requested to send that information with the £20 should one be foolish enough to respond to the request.

The subject would be funny if it were not so serious. Many people take the receipt of such a letter extremely seriously; they would consider it a genuine threat. The letters are all the more insidious because they are so carefully personalised. The recipient is named throughout the letter, and the letter's heading states:

"What I have just discovered about you has left me speechless."

It leaves me speechless that people can prey on vulnerable people in the way that the organisations that send out such letters do. Mr. Bond was absolutely right to draw this letter to my attention, and it was one of the reasons—if not the only one—why I sought this debate.

Once I had secured this debate, I was overwhelmed by colleagues who have told me that their constituents have received similar material through their letter boxes. To give one example, a letter from a constituent of my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) purports to be a payment validation for a sum of £200,000. It appears on an official looking form that is clearly designed to mimic a Government document; it looks very like a pension slip. It asks only for the recipient to send what it calls an actuation fee of £16. The money can be sent as cash, or by cheque or postal order. It is only when we turn over the document and read the small print that we realise that all that is on offer is a draw, albeit one with a £16 entry fee. Even if the letter is not a criminal deception, it is certainly a scam that it is intended to deceive and is something that we could do without.

[Mr. David Heath]

My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) gave me another bundle of letters this morning. By coincidence, she received the letters today from a constituent of hers, Mrs. Margaret Treacher, to whom they have been sent during the past week or so from places throughout the world. They come from Australia, Singapore, Canada and other places. Some of them appear to originate in Britain. All of them purportedly bear the good news that their recipient has won a cash prize, but they are junk mail that is designed to extract money under false pretences. If the letters do not ask for a cheque by return of post for so-called validation, they request that recipients ring a premium number that will keep them on the line for a number of minutes, very expensively, in order to receive a paltry prize such as a Biro. Curiously, some people seem to be identified as potential victims of such material and receive not one or two such requests, but dozens.

Other scams have been conducted through the post. A favourite is the letters originating in west Africa. They come principally from Nigeria and ask people for money to unlock supposed capital that would, they claim, otherwise be held in trust or in a west African company. They are, of course, nonsense and if one were foolish enough to send the money, it would never be seen again.

I believe that such scams are a serious problem for all our constituents and that the House and the Government would do well to deal with them. I have corresponded on the matter with the Post Office and with the Office of Fair Trading. The Post Office supports the mailing preference system and has what it calls the door-to-door scheme, which enables people to opt out of unwanted material by ensuring that it is taken by the postman. However, I believe that the Post Office could do a lot more to deal with letters that originate from outside this country, pass through the Mailsort system and often use London post office box numbers—a practice that appears to give them a vestige of respectability.

I am, however, disappointed by some of the responses that I have received. There is a clear suggestion that the marketing exercise in question is fairly profitable for the Post Office, and that it is not anxious to intervene if it can help it. Although Royal Mail accepts the need to deal with mailing that infringes legislation or advertising codes, it states in its letter to me that it

"would not be aware of this as we have no prior knowledge of the contents of mailings; we would instead rely on law enforcement agencies to bring such mailings to our attention."

Fair enough; I do not expect Royal Mail to be aware of the contents of every letter that passes through the mail system.

However, some of the mailings can be clearly identified from previous experience. What action is taken if such mail is identified or brought to Royal Mail's attention? It states:

"In such an instance we would of course stop the mailing, if we were able to do so."

However, it goes on to state that it would

"work with the overseas company to ensure that future mailings are acceptable to a UK audience."

It further states:

"In the unlikely event of a third such incident we would withdraw mailing discounts and use of a UK PO box from that company for a specified period of time."

I think that three strikes are a little too many before people are out in respect of the sort of letters to which I am referring. It is not unintentional infringement of advertising regulations but a deliberate attempt to deceive, and the Post Office should treat it seriously.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is aware of a leaflet published by Royal Mail, entitled "Fair Play. Making the most of competitions—a guide to winning", which has a photograph on the front of two young people who are enthusiastic about letters that they have received. Although the leaflet refers to the Advertising Standards Authority and the Office of Fair Trading in relation to scams, it tells the reader:

"How to get more of what you want",

saying:

"If you're fed up with hearing about how everyone is winning something these days except you, you may have to think about increasing your chances by upping the number of competitions that you enter."

That can be interpreted as clearly encouraging action that relates to some of the scams that the hon. Gentleman is describing.

Mr. Heath: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. I know that he has taken up the matter, most recently in the Whitsun Adjournment debate last year. I am amazed that Royal Mail's advice is couched in those terms. It is not appropriate, and I hope that the Minister will have something to say about that.

The Minister may also have something to say about whether it is possible to work within the international postal system to deal with these occurrences, because it clearly cannot be done entirely within the United Kingdom or the European Union, as many of the countries of origin are outside the EU. I wonder whether the Universal Postal Union, for example, could be a vehicle for at least discussing these matters and drawing up concordats with Commonwealth countries that are involved, if nowhere else.

The information that the Office of Fair Trading has sent me shows that it takes a rather more robust line. I applaud its press release last August which drew attention to the so-called psychic scam that I have mentioned. However, the legal apparatus within which the OFT works is also limited. There are the Control of Misleading Advertisement Regulations 1988, but if those are to be activated, there must be a complaint

"in connection with a trade, business, craft or profession in order to promote the supply or transfer of goods or services".

That is all right if the courts will accept that it is a trade or profession to try to defraud innocent members of the public, but otherwise it is a worrying limitation.

The OFT's great problem is getting court orders to act overseas. That is where the injunctions directive comes in. I understood that it was to have taken effect from 1 January, but it has not done so and there are still problems with it. That directive is crucial if we are to take effective action against such material, at least within the European Union. What has happened to that directive? Can it be extended beyond the EU, if and when it sees the light of day? How does the Minister expect it to be used?

The last legal sanction available is the Malicious Communications Act 1988, which makes it an offence to convey information that is known or believed to be false

with the intention to cause distress and anxiety. The material that I have mentioned is clearly false information that is intended to cause distress and anxiety with the purpose of extracting money from people. I should like the Minister to tell the House how many times that law has been used recently, and whether it will be used more extensively in future, as I hope it will.

This is a short debate and it is impossible to cover the whole subject, but I want to mention two other concerns before I ask the Minister to respond. The first concerns communications sent not by post but by fax. We are all victims of this. The fax machine goes off in the middle of the night and a fax emerges from an unknown source, which is a waste of paper and wakes one up, if one happens to have a fax machine in the house, to no good effect. That is a nuisance, rather than an attempt to extract money under false pretences such as those that I have described, but it is a costly nuisance. It is often used to support fallacious opinion polls of no statistical value. People sometimes feel constrained to answer those faxes on premium lines if they want to make their point.

Such faxes are often received by junior members of companies who feel obliged to respond, for example, to a request to maintain an entry in a non-existent directory. That is a common form of exploitation. What can be done about it?

My final point is about unsolicited e-mail, which is infamously known as spam. I applaud British internet service providers for taking the subject seriously. However, 30 per cent. of all e-mails are unsolicited, and research by Nortel suggests that tens of millions of pounds are wasted in the United Kingdom and Ireland on dealing with them. In America, it is estimated that 10 per cent. to 15 per cent. of internet service providers' disk space is filled with spam. If nothing else, that shows that spam and chips are not compatible. The issue should be tackled through international action.

We have a problem about which most hon. Members and, I am sure, the Government are aware. I have several questions to ask the Minister. How many prosecutions or court orders have been made in the past year or so to tackle the matter? When will the injunctions directive be operational so that jurisdiction can be extended throughout the European Union? Can Royal Mail take a more aggressive and more responsible stance on the abuse? Can international action be taken through the Universal Postal Union or any other organisation to achieve a concordat at least between Commonwealth countries and perhaps the wider community? Can the Government take effective action on nuisance faxes? Clearly, concerted international action needs to be taken, especially in conjunction with the American Administration, so that nuisances that clog up the e-mail and internet systems and are detrimental to businesses and private users throughout the world can be tackled. When can that be done?

I am grateful for the opportunity to make those points. I look forward with interest to the Minister's reply.

10.42 pm

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): I thank the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) for raising an important matter. He is right to say that many hon. Members have approached him and me about it. I share the anxiety of many people about mailings sent to British consumers which, in many cases, are designed to frighten them into parting with their money. I shall try to answer some of the hon. Gentleman's questions, although I could not write them all down fast enough.

More often than not, the mailings come from so-called clairvoyants who are based overseas. They allege that they have had a mystic revelation about the individual to whom they are writing. A common theme is that the author has an insight into potential problems that will affect consumers' well-being—either a threat from someone else or the fact that some unidentified bad luck will befall them. He or she offers to provide the solution to those difficulties in return for a payment. As the hon. Gentleman said, payments are typically of £20 or more. The Welsh Rugby Union paid a great deal more than £20 to try to avert identifiable bad luck. However, judging from the way Wales played last Saturday, it seems that the WRU might as well have paid £20 to Peter the Magician. The result would probably have been far better.

The approaches are clearly designed to prey on people's vulnerability and are, by definition, unacceptable. Another theme is that some good fortune awaits the recipient, whether through lottery winnings or some other life-enhancing event, and that the key to success is available at a price. I have seem many such letters in my postbag, from people rejoicing in such names as Eva du Maurier, Paula Zikorski and Peter the Magician. I know a Pete the chemist in Pontypridd, but he has five children and is clearly no magician.

From time to time, unfortunately, the mailings are sent to the deceased, which must surely throw considerable doubt on the psychic skills of their authors. The advice from the Office of Fair Trading, which I would commend to anyone who is concerned about the practices, is never to send money, and to pass the correspondence to the local trading standards department so that appropriate action can be taken. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will pass that suggestion on to his constituents.

The hon. Gentleman asked what action could be taken on behalf of consumers. Two pieces of legislation may be applicable: the Control of Misleading Advertisements Regulations 1988 and the Malicious Communications Act 1988. At present, action can be taken against operators based in this country by the Advertising Standards Authority or the Director General of Fair Trading using those two pieces of legislation.

The Advertising Standards Authority can also arrange for the investigation of overseas operators with the help of other members of the European Advertising Standards Alliance. The alliance has 28 members, including all the EU member states, and comprises the national bodies responsible for administering the states' self-regulation systems and codes of advertising practice, based on those put in place by International Chamber of Commerce principles. Recently the ASA, with the backing of Royal Mail, has begun intervening directly in complaints about mailings originating outside the alliance's sphere of operations, and has made encouraging progress. I hope that that provides some kind of an answer to the hon. Gentleman's questions on how many successful prosecutions or enforcements have been conducted.

We are also aiming for the earliest possible implementation of the European injunctions directive—we are almost there now—which will empower the

[Dr. Kim Howells]

Director General of Fair Trading to take cross-border action. The hon. Gentleman was keen on such action being taken, and I agree with him. The action will be taken in conjunction with counterparts across the European Union to impose "stop now" orders, which are an additional enforcement mechanism for use when the collective interests of consumers are threatened.

For operators based further afield, the Office of Fair Trading works closely with its counterparts in the 30 or so Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, through the international marketing supervision network. The member bodies have had some success in stopping some of the worst cases targeting UK consumers. I assure the House that I shall continue to monitor the matter with a view to reducing consumer detriment arising from these undesirable practices.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about Royal Mail and about his dissatisfaction with some of the efforts that it has made to try to deal with the delivery of unsolicited mail. Royal Mail is contractually obliged to deliver items posted at home or abroad, unless it is established that the contents contravene EU or UK laws. If a mailing breaches EU or UK regulations, Royal Mail can refuse to carry it, but it has to be notified first. The bodies or groups that can notify Royal Mail are the ASA, the police, trading standards officers and magistrates. That brings me back to a point I made earlier, when I suggested to the hon. Gentleman that, whenever such a case as this arises, it is imperative that notification is made to trading standards officers.

Mr. Heath: I understand that Royal Mail has to carry what it is given, unless there is a direction to the contrary. Surely, however, it must enter into some sort of contractual arrangement when it provides a PO box number. Given the hoops through which we all have to jump to get material distributed by Royal Mail, is there some control that Royal Mail could exercise when giving an organisation a PO box number?

Dr. Howells: Yes. I shall deal with that now. If any UK PO box is used illegally or for fraudulent purposes or if customers break the service terms and conditions, which they must sign, that PO box can be withdrawn. Once that happens, all subsequent mail addressed to the box is returned to sender. Royal Mail is not permitted to intercept or open mail that quotes or is addressed to a PO box, but if permission for the box is withdrawn, all mail sent to it is returned to sender. The majority of mailings from abroad conform with UK legislation and the British codes of advertising and sales promotion.

Mr. Barnes: For Royal Mail, that is not just a matter of PO box numbers. It also offers HQ code provision, which allows a HQ number and "Royal Mail" to be added to the front of an envelope. That contractual arrangement enables cheap delivery of post from all over the world to people in this country. Such scams are being operated under HQ code provision and surely action can be taken. Royal Mail should be shown what is in such envelopes. That would stop the arrangement for such companies.

Dr. Howells: That is a good point and I shall try to deal with it. Should a mailing infringe either legislation or advertising codes, Royal Mail would rely on law enforcement agencies to bring that mailing to its attention and stop it if able to do so. That is where those contractual obligations are so important. If a company was working within the law, but not complying with the British codes of advertising and sales promotion, Royal Mail would work with the overseas company to ensure that future mailings were acceptable to UK customers. Further failures to comply would result in withdrawal of both mailing discounts—as my hon. Friend said, boxes are cheaper in such circumstances—and the use of a UK PO box for a specified period. The problem can be approached from both those angles.

On the distance selling directive, some protection can be offered. The Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000 do not specifically implement article 10 of European directive 97/7 on the protection of consumers in respect of distance contracts, which of course relates to unsolicited commercial communications from a business to consumers by phone, fax, mail or e-mail. On phone and fax communications, implementation has already been achieved by means of the Telecommunications (Data Protection and Privacy) Regulations 1999.

I return to the point that I have made twice already about making sure that such incidents are notified to the authorities. All too often they are not. People receive mail and grumble about it, but do not take action. On mail and e-mail, my Department considers that the self-regulatory schemes that are in place provide a degree of necessary protection. That approach accords with article 11.4 of the directive, which provides for voluntary supervision by self-regulating bodies.

I return briefly to the important point that my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) made about Royal Mail's "Fair Play" leaflet, which he drew to my attention some months ago. Since then, my officials have discussed with Royal Mail whether the leaflet gives the most appropriate advice. I tend to agree with my hon. Friend—I do not think that it does. There is too much ambiguity and it leads people on, especially in view of the consequences for consumers of falling victim to the numerous scams in operation.

Unsolicited direct marketing faxes are banned under the Telecommunications (Data Protection and Privacy) Regulations 1999, unless the individual has given prior consent. For the purposes of the regulations, the term "individual" refers to both private individuals and sole traders anywhere in the United Kingdom as well as the partnerships in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We could add MPs to that, because we probably receive as many of those communications as any firm.

The regulations introduced an opt-out scheme primarily for corporate subscribers who do not want to receive unsolicited direct marketing faxes. The Direct Marketing Association was appointed by the Office of Telecommunications to run the opt-out scheme, which is called the fax preference service. Under the regulations, no one can send a direct marketing fax—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at five minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 6 February 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Herceptin

1. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What representations he has received on the prescribing of herceptin for the treatment of breast cancer; and if he will make a statement. [147327]

The Minister for Public Health (Yvette Cooper): We have received representations, including that from the hon. Lady on behalf of her constituent, on this matter. Herceptin was licensed in August 2000, and we are keen to ensure that it is used appropriately across the national health service. We are also keen to prevent a postcode lottery for care. That is why we have referred the drug to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, which expects to issue its report in June.

Miss McIntosh: Does the Minister agree that it has been proven that herceptin can extend life? Does she also accept that it is apparently much more widely available in the south-east of England than in the north, and in particular north Yorkshire? My constituent, Eileen Quigley, was told that she could have the drug if she was prepared to pay for it. Does the Minister accept that the Government have failed my constituent, and that they must now bring forward the date by which the drug will be registered and accepted by NICE for use?

Yvette Cooper: The drug was licensed in August. We are concerned about the postcode lottery for care in relation to a number of cancer drugs, which is why we have rapidly referred them to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. We also did that with taxanes, and 5,000 women are now receiving treatment that they would not have received had we continued with the policies of the previous Government, who promoted a postcode lottery for care by promoting an internal market.

The case of the hon. Lady's constituent was originally raised by the patient's partner, and the trust has not yet received the patient's consent to release the details, although it has pursued that matter several times. Once consent is received, I shall be happy to pursue that patient's case.

It was the Conservative Government who promoted the postcode lottery for care by promoting the internal market. That is why we established the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to deal with such drugs as rapidly as they come on to the market, and to provide national guidance so that we have a truly national health service.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): I thank my hon. Friend for her reply. We have real confidence that NICE will make an appropriate decision on the issue. Does she accept that the major breast cancer charities, including Breakthrough Breast Cancer, have made representations about herceptin because it is the one drug known not to have side effects and to be beneficial in cases involving metastases, and for patients for whom all else has failed?

Yvette Cooper: I am aware of the representations that my hon. Friend mentions, and we have referred the drug to NICE for those reasons. I cannot pre-empt the guidance that the institute will give, but we have referred cancer drugs to it as a priority because of our concern about the matter. In the past it has often taken a long time for effective licensed drugs to be used routinely in the NHS; that is why this drug was referred to NICE even before it was licensed. We look forward to receiving a report speedily, so that all patients can be reassured that they are getting the best treatment, and the treatment that they need.

Cancer Services

2. **Mr. David Chaytor** (Bury, North): If he will make a statement on the Government's progress on improvements in services to patients suffering from cancer. [147328]

3. **Mr. Eric Martlew** (Carlisle): If he will make a statement on the Government's progress on improvements in services to patients suffering from cancer. [147329]

7. **Helen Jackson** (Sheffield, Hillsborough): If he will make a statement about the development of cancer services in the NHS. [147335]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): After decades of neglect, cancer services are receiving record levels of extra investment. Tens of thousands of cancer patients who are urgently referred to hospitals by their GPs are now being seen within two weeks. By the end of this year, patients with acute leukaemia or testicular cancer, and children with cancer, will have a maximum wait of one month from urgent referral to treatment.

Mr. Chaytor: That news will be welcome to my constituents in Bury, North. The importance of the hospice movement for palliative care for cancer sufferers must not be overlooked in the new approach to cancer treatment. I pay tribute to the staff and volunteers of the Bury hospice. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that the hospice movement will get its fair share of the new investment going into the national health service?

Mr. Milburn: I know that my hon. Friend has a close working relationship with his local hospices. It is important to note that across the piece—in prevention,

treatment and palliative care—we are investing appropriate sums of money to provide cancer patients with the treatment and care that they need.

My hon. Friend is right; for years hospices have relied on charitable and voluntary fund-raising endeavours. I pay tribute to all those involved. The national health service has never matched the contributions from voluntary and charitable donations, but that is about to change. As a result of the extra investment now going into cancer services—particularly into palliative care—the national health service will be matching the amounts raised voluntarily to invest in hospices and the palliative care movement within three to four years.

Mr. Martlew: May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the Eden Valley hospice in my constituency, which has a tremendous reputation and full support from the community? It has recently decided to employ a consultant specialist in medical care to improve care in the hospice and take it out into the community. What my right hon. Friend has said is good news for the hospice because there will be extra resources, but may I bring him back to another aspect of our cancer care policies—regional centres of excellence? People in constituencies such as mine in Cumbria realise that we are a long way from the centre and we need a place such as Newcastle—I am sure that it will be Newcastle—where our constituents can go to receive the finest cancer treatment anywhere in the country. I hope that he will confirm that.

Mr. Milburn: I hesitate to confirm the idea of Newcastle, or Sunderland—or even Carlisle—but my hon. Friend's general point is right. We must make sure that the best treatment is available to the maximum number of cancer patients. As he is aware, we recently announced extra funding for stomach cancer services, because stomach cancer kills so many people every year and, regrettably, the interventions generally come too late.

We also need to concentrate the expertise in the national health service better, and make it available in specialist regional centres. The Government are investing a record amount of extra money in cancer services, but although the Conservative party, too, now says that cancer services are a priority, it is a pity that the Government in which the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) served did not earmark a single penny piece of extra investment for cancer treatment. That explains precisely why, in today's NHS, including our cancer services, there are the following problems: too few doctors, too few nurses, and not enough modern equipment.

We are putting that right by investing extra money, which we can do because of the choices that we have made—for economic stability and more investment in public services. All that is put at risk by the policies of the Conservative party, which would return us to stop-go economics and cuts in public services.

Helen Jackson: Sheffield health authority is absolutely clear about the fact that the combination of the Government's setting access targets and providing extra resources and investment has enabled it to develop its breast cancer centre at the Royal Hallamshire hospital, which means that nobody in the Sheffield area has to wait more than two weeks for rapid access to a specialist. The Government's insistence on access targets is important and welcome, but do we not have to keep providing resources to enable health authorities to put treatment for other types of cancer at the top of their list and to receive the investment necessary to develop it?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is right.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): What a surprise.

Mr. Milburn: She is right and, invariably, the hon. Gentleman is wrong. There are no surprises there.

My hon. Friend is right because, as she and other hon. Members throughout the House know, the NHS needs not what it had in the past—peaks of investment followed by cuts—but sustained investment over time. That is precisely what is happening under this Government. This year, for example, we shall invest an extra £280 million in cancer services. That will rise to an extra £570 million by 2003-04, precisely because of the choices we have made and the priorities we have set. The NHS is a priority, and within that, cancer services are a priority.

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): As chairman of the all-party hospice group, I welcome any additional funding for palliative care, especially the £50 million by 2004 allocated in the NHS cancer plan. Will the Secretary of State tell the House when those funds will become available and how they will be distributed? Will he also confirm that they will be allocated not just to NHS units, but to independent hospices?

Mr. Milburn: That is a very important point and the hon. Lady is absolutely right. Palliative care services inside and outside the NHS are excellent and, as she knows, many hospices have been established because of massive fund-raising endeavours by a few individuals, and I pay tribute to them. She is also right to say that some hospices are under financial pressure, and she will be aware that some health authorities have made extra cash available. She should also be aware that part of the £50 million extra for hospices and palliative care that I announced in September will come on stream not in 2004, but from this April.

Over three or four years, we shall build up the investment from the NHS that goes to adult hospices—and, it is important to add, to children's hospices. By 2004 there will be matched funding from the NHS and from voluntary and charitable fund-raising endeavours; we have never been in that position before.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Following on from the questions asked by the hon. Members for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) and for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew), rather than the speech by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson), may I emphasise the importance to regional cancer centres of having not just good treatment facilities, such as exist at Mount Vernon hospital, but both exceptional research capabilities and hospices, both of which also exist at Mount Vernon? That combination is surely second to none, and should recommend itself to the Secretary of State. Does he agree?

Mr. Milburn: I certainly agree that we need to increase our efforts in cancer research. That holds the key to some

of the advances that we all want to be made for cancer patients. This country has a good track record, but much more needs to be done.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, I recently announced that for the first time we shall have a single cancer research institute, which will, I hope, harness the best of British science to provide the best of British expertise and the best for British patients. That is what we want to do, and we will do it on the basis of the extra investment that we are making.

With respect, the question for the hon. Gentleman is this: if he thinks cancer treatment is such a priority, why does he back policies that involve cuts in public spending? Why does he back policies involving, for instance, cutting lottery funding for cancer services? That is the Opposition's policy. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members deny it, but that is what their spokesman on culture, media and sport said in 1998. He said that the money that we were putting into the national health service should come not from the lottery, but from general taxation. That spokesman, or one of the Conservative Front-Bench team here now, must answer one of two questions. First, if the money is to come from general taxation rather than lottery funding, where specifically will it come from? Secondly, if the Opposition are not prepared to adopt that option, which programmes will be cut?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before I call another Member, may I say this to Ministers? First, attacks on the Opposition are not really what I am looking for. *[Interruption.]* Order. Ministers are there to account for their Departments. Secondly, we must have brief questions and also brief answers.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): Mr. Harvey-Hills, a consultant urologist, recently wrote to his chief executive about the cancellation of cancer services at St Peter's hospital. He wrote:

"You were fully aware of three other patients of mine who were admitted for major cancer surgery (after a three months wait) only to be cancelled three times each, within thirty minutes of being called to the theatre."

I am sure Members agree that that was unacceptable, and it is bad enough in itself, but Mr. Harvey-Hills went on to say:

"These are but three examples of a long-standing problem. One year ago I was put under pressure by the management to treat non-urgent longwaiting patients instead of patients with cancer".

Is there not something fundamentally flawed about a system that refuses to treat the sickest patients first? Is there not a questionable moral basis for a system that puts the targets of politicians before the needs of patients, as happened in this case, in this hospital, under this Government?

Mr. Milburn: That was a good speech, but it does not reflect the reality of the national health service.

I shall certainly do everything in my power to resist the temptation to attack the hon. Gentleman, Mr. Speaker. As for his attack on the Government, we have made two things absolutely clear: clinical priorities, and the sickest patients, come first. What is more, unlike the previous Government, we have put our money where our mouth is. If the hon. Gentleman is so concerned about cancer and heart services, why, under the Government in which he served, was not a penny piece earmarked for modernisation and investment in those services?

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): The extra money provided in the recent allocation of funds is welcome in areas such as Halton, which for various reasons has the highest cancer rates in the country. Hospices have an important role in the care of cancer patients, particularly those who are terminally ill, and staff do tremendous work in that respect. When extra funds are allocated for hospices and palliative care, should it not be recognised that areas such as Halton—unlike other parts of the country that are not similarly deprived and poor—cannot raise large amounts of money? I hope that my right hon. Friend will take account of that fact.

Mr. Milburn: I am aware of that. As my hon. Friend knows, there is concern in the hospice and palliative care movement because there is a lottery for care in those services too. Hospices have sprung up in various parts of the country, but have not necessarily best matched need. One important action that we have to take—we have asked health authorities to take it now—is to engage with local hospices and with those who are thinking of establishing local hospices to ensure that those services fit the local community's needs. Ultimately, the extra resources that we are putting in will not only help to provide better hospice services, but gear those services better to the areas with the highest need.

Hospital-acquired Infections

4. **Mr. Peter Lilley** (Hitchin and Harpenden): If he will make it his policy to require national health service trust hospitals to report rates of hospital-acquired infections on a common basis. [147331]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): Yes. Last September, the Government announced that from April 2001, it will be compulsory for all acute NHS trusts to report bloodstream infections caused by methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus. That information will be published from 2002, and is the first stage in improving the reporting of hospital-acquired infection across the NHS. The next phase will monitor infections in patients undergoing hip and knee replacement surgery, and those who develop hospital-acquired infections after discharge.

Mr. Lilley: I am glad to hear that that is in train, because it certainly does not happen now in the hospitals surrounding my constituency. Is the Minister aware that the concerns that are growing most among the public are those about ward cleanliness and infections acquired on wards? Will he confirm that, in addition to making available information on infection rates in each hospital, Ministers will transfer to ward sisters the authority to hold to account those who clean their specific wards?

Mr. Hutton: I do not quite know how to tell the right hon. Gentleman this, but we have already announced precisely that policy. I wonder whether, while he is on the subject, he has ever reflected on the success of compulsory competitive tendering in improving the

cleanliness of hospitals. I remind him that we have made £31 million available this year, and another £30 million will be made available next year, to improve cleanliness across the NHS. It is clear that good infection control policies and a proper emphasis on cleanliness should be at the heart of good hospital management. Under this Government, they will be.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Will my hon. Friend have a look at Adjournment debates held as far back as 1995 on methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus, in which clear warnings were given about fatal cases? I do not remember the previous Government taking any action on the issue, and the present Government are to be congratulated on the work being done now. Will my right hon. Friend also investigate the action that has been taken in the Netherlands? There are fewer cases in that entire country than there are in individual hospitals in this country. The Netherlands' success is the result of years of the type of painstaking work that we are doing now. Ministers should accept congratulations on their work—but they should keep in mind the enormous number of avoidable deaths that are occurring throughout the health service.

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, and for bringing those matters to our attention. He is right to say that the issue affects every health care system in the world. If we are to find solutions to the issue in the United Kingdom, it is clearly necessary to examine successful practice in other countries, and we shall certainly do that. My hon. Friend will be aware that in January, the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), announced that another £200 million would be made available to the NHS to improve sterilisation and decontamination of facilities. That, too, will make a significant contribution to dealing with the problem.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): Under this Government, the number of deaths directly attributed to hospital-acquired infections has increased to a record 5,000. What possible excuse can be given in this day and age to a family who have lost a relative who went into hospital for a minor procedure but never came out? What review have the Government conducted of antibiotic policy, to stem the increase in antibiotic-resistant infection?

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Lady asks about the incidence of hospital-acquired infection. The simple answer is that we will be able to understand the situation only because we will now be collecting the proper data. I am bearing your strictures in mind, Mr. Speaker, but the Conservative party had 18 years to put the right data collection system in place, and it spectacularly failed to do so.

It is important to develop solutions to the problem, and we have implemented a series of actions that will help. Decisions will be informed by the best available evidence, and the data collection systems that we are putting in place will allow that to happen. That must be the basis on which all good public policy ultimately rests.

Hospital Waiting Lists

5. **Mr. Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury): On how many occasions in the last three years he has changed the methodology for compiling hospital waiting lists; and if he will make a statement. [147333]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): None.

Mr. Robertson: Why, therefore, did my constituent Mr. Clive Currie receive a letter from the local hospital dated 30 December last year telling him that his appointment six months later had to be cancelled because of an urgent requirement for appointments? Why did the same letter tell him that he would not be offered another appointment more than a month before the date for such an appointment fell due? Is that not a case of keeping people off the waiting list—and does it not coincide with the possible date of a general election?

Mr. Milburn: The problem with the hon. Gentleman's follow-up question is that he had not listened to my answer to his original question. I shall be glad to look into the complaint, although I am aware of the strictures placed on me by you, Mr. Speaker, and by Opposition Front-Bench Members, who keep telling me that the last thing I should be doing is interfering in individual patient complaints or in the running of the health service locally. However, the hon. Gentleman has made a representation to me, and I shall be happy to look into the matter.

My main point is that under this Government there have been no changes in the way in which we compile the waiting list statistics. The methods are exactly the same as those used under the previous Government. There are 120,000 fewer people on waiting lists now than when we came to power. More patients are being treated because this Government are investing more money.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): On the day that the number of people on waiting lists has risen—and with NHS managers seeking to respond to the incentives offered by his waiting list initiative, and to the targets that it imposes—will the Secretary of State say how many patients have been removed from waiting lists for non-clinical reasons?

Mr. Milburn: I should be happy to send the hon. Gentleman a note about that, if that would be helpful. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] Amazingly enough, I do not have the figure in front of me.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his Front-Bench duties. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] As we can hear, he is deeply popular with Labour Members. I wonder what the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) has done to deserve him.

On waiting lists, the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) told the House on 8 March last year that the problem in the NHS was that

"some people are not waiting long enough."—[*Official Report*, 8 March 2000; Vol. 345, c. 1054.]

That was not his only pearl of wisdom. Two years ago, he told the House that the best treatment for the condition of teenage pregnancy was "education and self-discipline". He went on to ask the Minister with responsibility for public health whether the condition might not be better treated by adding "something to the water". That is the sort of pearl of wisdom that we can look forward to from the hon. Gentleman.

Angela Smith (Basildon): While my right hon. Friend is looking at waiting lists, will he also consider the

reasons why some patients remain on those lists? I draw his attention to the tragic death of a young woman in my area, who died after waiting for two years for organs for a transplant operation. We have discovered that one of the reasons for such long waits is that many people do not carry donor cards, because the regulations were changed in 1994. The cards are no longer sent out automatically to GPs and surgeons. People have to apply for donor cards, and many do not do so. In the light of recent developments, will my right hon. Friend examine this matter urgently and reinstate the system in which donor cards are sent out automatically?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. As she knows, I shall be visiting a hospital in Basildon tomorrow.

On organ donation, I will gladly look into my hon. Friend's specific point about changes in the regulations in 1994. A huge number of people in the country—about 8 million—already carry organ donor cards. That is about 14 per cent. of the population. It is very important that they do so, and it is also important that we do all we can to encourage even more people to carry cards, because organ donation plays such an important part in advances in medical research and treatment. Before too long, I will be holding a meeting with patients organisations, doctors and others to see what we can do to ensure that the advantages of organ donation are made clear to the majority of the British people.

Mr. Andy King (Rugby and Kenilworth): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the difference between the Labour and Conservative parties is that we are seriously trying to deal with waiting lists, while their answer is to cut waiting lists drastically by forcing everyone to take out private health insurance?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is right—that is the position of those on the Conservative Front Bench, including the shadow Home Secretary, the shadow Chancellor and the Leader of the Opposition. It is not the position of the Government—nor, indeed, that of the British Medical Association.

I draw my hon. Friend's attention to a report that the BMA has published today on how best to fund our health care system. Considering the sort of policy for private health insurance that the Conservatives advocate, it concludes that

"a tax relief scheme would result in a net loss of funds to the public sector. It would also be regressive, as those who could not afford private insurance even with tax relief would in effect be subsidising those who could afford it."

That is absolutely right. The report goes on to say that such a policy

"is unlikely to be popular with the public as it provides access to health care on the basis of ability to pay."

That, too, is right. This Government—this party—believe that clinical need, not ability to pay, is the driving force behind our health care system. That is precisely the point that we will be defending at the next election.

Beta Interferon

6. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): When he will announce the findings of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence with respect to beta interferon. [147334]

8. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): When he will announce the findings of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence with respect to beta interferon. [147336]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): The National Institute for Clinical Excellence has extended the time scale for its appraisal of beta interferon and glatiramer acetate to commission further economic modelling. NICE will review the outcome of the new modelling in the summer, and unless there are further appeals, it expects to issue its guidance by November.

Mr. Winterton: I ask this question as president of the Macclesfield branch of the Multiple Sclerosis Society. Is the Minister aware that it is 18 months to the day since NICE was given the task of appraising beta interferon and disease-modifying drugs such as copaxone in the treatment of multiple sclerosis? Is he really saying to me, and to the rest of the House, that it is tolerable that some of the 85,000 people who suffer from MS should not be able to get the drug that will give them a better quality of life today, when this drug's effectiveness is already proven and it is licensed in many other countries?

Mr. Denham: As the hon. Gentleman will know, under the policies introduced by the previous Government there was a wide disparity in the availability of beta interferon, precisely because there was not agreement and consensus about its clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness. That is why it was so essential to refer it to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, which has put a great deal of work into this important appraisal.

Before Christmas, the chief executive of NICE put out a press release in which he said:

"We have looked at carefully at these models and whilst it is clear that considerable effort has been put into their development, detailed examination has raised a number of issues that the institute's Appraisal Committee, using the information available, has been unable to resolve. The evidence relating to the cost-effectiveness of these medicines is critically important in this appraisal."

These have to be decisions for NICE, and it is right that NICE should take care to get such important decisions right. In its judgment, it needed extra economic modelling, and that is what it has decided to do.

Mr. Bercow: Given the frustrating delay that has already occurred and to which my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) has referred, will the Minister go a bit further and confirm that November 2001 will be a firm deadline and not a rough aspiration? How many people does the right hon. Gentleman estimate will be untreatable by November 2001 who could be successfully treated now? Finally, will he explain why copaxone is, in effect, being treated as an interferon for the purposes of NICE's study and appraisal, even though it is chemically and pharmacologically different, has been successfully tested over eight years and has reduced relapses by 70 per cent?

Mr. Denham: It is important to stress that we have not stopped, banned or prevented the prescribing of beta interferon. The guidance made available to the NHS in

the mid-1990s is still in place and should still be being followed by health authorities throughout the country. The question is about resolving doubts and uncertainties about clinically and cost-effective treatments.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the November date that I mentioned earlier. That is the date towards which NICE is working, but as he will understand, NICE has to follow proper legal process. Timing can be affected by whether, for example, appeals or even legal challenges are mounted at any stage. However, November is the date towards which the institute is currently working.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there are three MS syndromes? Evidence already exists to show that beta interferon is very successful in treating the relapsing-remitting syndrome at least. Several of my constituents need beta interferon and cannot get hold of it because we are waiting for the NICE decision. Is it not unacceptable that NICE is extending the time for that decision? Could not the institute at least make a decision on the treatment of the relapsing-remitting syndrome?

Mr. Denham: We have to accept the judgment reached by NICE. As constituency MPs, we all receive representations from constituents, clinicians and others about this drug. With all due respect, I very much doubt that anyone in the House has spent the same time and effort as NICE on detailed consideration of the range of evidence that has been presented. It is precisely because the institute does not believe that the evidence resolves those important questions that it has decided to commission new economic modelling. That is NICE's decision, since we entrusted it with a choice about how to handle these matters. The institute's decision suggests that the issues are not as clear-cut as we would all like them to be.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): As the chairman of the all-party multiple sclerosis group, may I say that it is a welcome development that NICE is starting to listen to MS sufferers—having changed its initial view that it was minded not to recommend the prescription of beta interferon to those who were said to be able to benefit from it? In the period until NICE makes its recommendation—it is to be hoped by November at the latest—what extra investment are the Government making in neurological services throughout the country? As well as the postcode prescribing of beta interferon, we have to contend with the fact that neurological services are extremely patchy from one region to another.

Mr. Denham: On the two points raised by my hon. Friend, it would be wrong to speculate on reasons other than those given by NICE as to why it is commissioning extra economic modelling. NICE would say that it has always tried to understand—especially through the Multiple Sclerosis Society—the opinions and experiences of MS sufferers.

My hon. Friend makes an important point about wider neurological services. Everyone would accept that even for MS, and certainly for other conditions, other forms of care and support are important; sometimes, they may be the only forms that are important. The extra investment now going into the NHS gives it the capacity to plan improvements in services in ways that have not been available in the past and that would be threatened if our current investment plans were curtailed—for example, by a different Government in future.

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): Although I regret the delay, may I at least express the hope that NICE's willingness to consider a new methodology holds out the possibility that it will reach a favourable verdict on beta interferon?

What reassurance can the Minister give to patients waiting for a verdict, either on beta interferon or on herceptin, about which we heard earlier, that, when it issues the guidelines, NICE will indeed prove to have been the answer to the postcode lottery, as the Minister for Public Health claimed again today? Are the Government not concerned that, even where NICE guidelines have been issued, local health authorities are still choosing to ignore them? Is he aware that patients in Wiltshire are living with a health authority that will not implement the guidelines on Alzheimer's; that those in certain parts of Devon will not be able to get relenza; and that Hillingdon—the largest primary care trust—has decided to ignore NICE guidelines on cardiac care?

If NICE is to be the answer to the postcode lottery, what steps do the Government propose to take to ensure that, when the guidelines are issued, patients throughout the country can benefit from such treatments?

Mr. Denham: It would be wrong not to recognise, or to cast doubt over, the very significant achievements that NICE has made in tackling postcode prescribing—on taxanes for the treatment of breast cancer, on the use of stents in heart surgery, on the introduction of glycoprotein inhibitors for acute coronary heart syndromes and on the significant recent announcements about Alzheimer's drugs. All those achievements will bring thousands and thousands of extra people into treatment who were not being treated under the system of postcode prescribing. Indeed, independent judges have suggested that, overall, NICE's work is undoubtedly leading to an increase, rather than a decrease, in NHS expenditure on the treatments and drugs that have been referred to it. All health authorities and all parts of the NHS have to take full account of NICE guidance in reaching their decisions. I would simply say that, with the investment that we are putting into the NHS, finance cannot be given as a reason for not implementing NICE guidance.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the introduction of guidelines under the previous Government did not provide equal treatment throughout the country and that it is vital that NICE does not just a quick job but a comprehensive one, so that we can get rid of the inequalities that now exist and so that people, no matter where they are, can truly benefit from a national health service rather than a postcode one?

Mr. Denham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He and I remember that the introduction of the policy of postcode prescribing by the Conservative party was a cynical political device that enabled them to say, "It's nothing to do with us" whenever something went wrong in the NHS. I am proud that we have had the courage to set up the National Institute for Clinical Excellence.

It sometimes leads to difficult situations and dilemmas for Ministers, but we have created an institution that will tackle postcode prescribing.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Will the Minister tell the House whether the new modelling that NICE is seeking to put in place will allow it to take account of wider economic and social costs and benefits rather than just the economic costs and benefits to the NHS? Does he not think that that should have been the basis from the outset on which NICE appraisals were conducted? Will he consider reopening appraisals that have already been completed on the basis of that narrow definition alone?

Mr. Denham: The appraisal approach taken by NICE has been set out very clearly. NICE will directly take into account the impact on NHS and personal social services budgets, but it is open to NICE to take into account a wider range of factors and it is open to those who submit evidence to include evidence on a wider range of factors. One of the things I welcome about the way in which NICE is undertaking the current exercise is the open and transparent way in which it is seeking to commission the new economic model. The way in which it intends to do that is set out in a consultation letter issued on 25 January, which has been on the NICE website since 29 January.

Social Services Funding

9. **Mr. Tony Colman** (Putney): If he will make a statement on the growth of social services funding. [147337]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): The resources provided for social services by central Government have increased substantially since 1997 and will continue to grow in real terms over the next three years. Last year, the level of resources provided for social services increased in real terms by 3.8 per cent. They increased by a further 3.5 per cent. this year and will continue to rise by, on average, a further 3.4 per cent. per annum over the next three years. In 2001-02, we will be providing almost £10 billion for social services.

Mr. Colman: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply and congratulate him and his colleagues on that massive increase in funding for social services. However, would he join me in condemning the proposals from the Tory party for the massive cuts in social services spending that are part of its £16 billion of cuts? In my borough of Wandsworth, that would lead either to a huge increase in council tax or—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The question is out of order; I do not think the Minister need reply.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am sure that the Minister agrees that the partnership with the private sector in providing care home beds and nursing home beds is one to be welcomed. Has he received representations from social services departments pointing out that they cannot afford to pay the going rate for fees and are cutting the rates that are being paid? Beds are being closed in Dorset and across the United Kingdom. Will the Minister consider urgently the rates that are being offered to homes, so that people can be looked after properly and according to the standards that the Government have set?

Mr. Hutton: We have substantially increased resources for social services in every part of the country. However, the rate at which care—and particularly residential care—is commissioned is determined by precisely the local authorities that the hon. Gentleman identified. It has not been the policy of this or any previous Government to intervene directly and to set the commissioning rates for such care. We certainly do not intend to do that.

The hon. Gentleman is right. We are considering the current position carefully and our priority is to maintain capacity in all the various care sectors that are important. However, I point out to the hon. Gentleman that—as surely as night follows day—there is no doubt whatever that, if the Conservative party were returned to office, it would cut social services spending.

Mrs. Lorna Fitzsimons (Rochdale): Since my hon. Friend received our delegation, has he been aware of the success of the investment that was announced before Christmas for social services in Rochdale and especially for the long-term placement of elderly people who need to go into care homes? Will he also consider favourably the pilot that we shall present to him of a co-operative model and a co-operative commission which will take care homes into the next wave for the 21st century and ensure that we meet the care needs of more of the elderly in my constituency?

Mr. Hutton: I congratulate the NHS and the local authority in Rochdale, which have worked hard in recent months to reduce the problem of bed blocking. We have set out in the NHS plan our proposals for dealing with that issue over the next few years. We certainly welcome innovative solutions proposed either by local authorities or the NHS further to reduce the problem of bed blocking. We shall consider with interest any further proposals that come from Rochdale.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) referred to the unevenness of funding. Is the Minister aware of how the combination of the squeeze on funds for Kent social services and the heavy-handed approach of East Kent health authority to the regulation of nursing homes has led to the loss of 191 beds net in East Kent in just 12 months? That has created a bed-blocking crisis in our hospitals, which reached the point a fortnight ago where a 97-year-old woman had to wait two nights in casualty for a bed.

Mr. Hutton: I do not dispute the fact that there are pressures on the care home sector in Kent; that is obvious and is a matter of record. I hope, however, that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that, as a result of the announcements that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health made just before Christmas and as a result of the actions of the Government, Kent will have another £2.5 million added to its adult social services budget. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman's protestations will ring completely hollow and sound superficial until and unless the Conservative party accepts that it will match our spending on social services. To date, it has not done that.

NHS Operations

10. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas** (Harrow, West): What steps he is taking to expand the capacity of the NHS to carry out more operations. [147338]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): We are expanding the capacity of the national health service by providing extra beds, extra staff and extra hospitals. We are providing the biggest NHS funding boost for a generation—a growth of one third in real terms between 1999 and 2004. Our partnerships with the private sector will also ensure that even more NHS patients are treated and get the benefit of that extra investment.

Mr. Thomas: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent reply. Is she aware that a revamped and modernised Northwood and Pinner community hospital to meet the intermediate care needs of Harrow patients is crucial to expanding local NHS capacity in my area? Will she consider visiting Harrow to discuss with local GPs how we can accelerate that process? Furthermore, while she is considering that reasonable request, will she try to discover, through the usual channels, whether there is a chance of the Leader of the Opposition making a series of visits to Harrow as part of my re-election campaign?

Ms Stuart: I am always open to reasonable invitations, but I find it difficult enough to deal with my own diary and would not for one moment want to assume responsibility for anyone else's—even if it did belong to the Leader of the Opposition.

I accept my hon. Friend's point about expanding the system. There have been more intermediate care and quicker discharges this winter under the Harrow and Brent health systems. We should not forget that in 1996–97, my hon. Friend's health authority received a cash increase of only 3.2 per cent. I am sure he is delighted that in 2000–01, it received the unprecedented increase of 8.6 per cent. As for his very special pleading on behalf of the hospital in his area, I heard what he said and I shall pass it on through the usual channels.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): What is the real cause of the hold-up in operations—the failure to have proper nursing planning so that the right staff are in post, the lack of intensive care beds, the problem of sterilised instruments or the bed blocking caused by the fact that not enough people are being released into social care homes?

Ms Stuart: The real problem is a combination of under-investment in the past 20 years and a cut both in general beds and in training places—investment, staff and hospitals have all been involved. In addition, there has been the problem of re-engineering systems. Before Conservative Members get too excited, they should never forget that they cut general and acute beds by 60,000 between 1979 and 1997 and that we will create an extra 7,000 by 2004. We are expanding the whole service, unlike the Conservatives who cut it consistently on every front.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): I congratulate my hon. Friend on approving a scheme at North Staffordshire hospital which will create two additional operating theatres, six high-dependency units and 28 ward beds to meet the expansion of surgical cases. Does she agree, however, that the fundamental problem for further expansion to meet surgical provision is that the hospital is on a split site and is mainly housed in Victorian buildings? Can she give an idea of when the Department may reach a decision on the next phase of the capital development programme so that we can look forward to having a 21st-century hospital on a single site?

Ms Stuart: We have announced some 100 major hospital schemes over the next 10 years, 38 of which have been given the go-ahead. I am acutely aware of my hon. Friend's concerns and I know that he has talked to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. As a constituency MP, I am in a similar position, and I very much hope that an announcement can be made by the end of the month. It is important to remember that the expansion of capacity did not happen under the Tories, who spent £30 million on consultation fees as part of the private finance initiative but did not manage to build a single hospital.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): Will the Minister comment on the facilitation of increased numbers of transplant operations? A series of measures were proposed in Westminster Hall in December 1999 to help to increase the number of organs available for transplants, including putting a donor registration form in the electoral communication that must be sent by law. The Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), gave a commitment to consider the proposals made by both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. What evaluation was made of those proposals and why has nothing been done?

Ms Stuart: I do not have the answers to the hon. Gentleman's specific questions, but I shall be happy to get back to him with details. I recently took part in an Adjournment debate on organ transplantation, in which I made it clear that, in 1990, when the Tory Government set up the regional centres, they were working on the assumption that the number of organs would steadily increase. Fortunately, however, we have reduced the number of car accidents and seen a great fall in the numbers, particularly of young people, dying from stroke. As a result, there has been a reduction in the number of available organs, but we are working together to increase organ donation.

Health Improvement (Young Men)

12. **Ms Hazel Blears** (Salford): What action he is taking to improve the health of young men. [147340]

The Minister for Public Health (Yvette Cooper): We are concerned about the problems facing young men. The Health Development Agency is currently examining what measures are most effective in improving the health of men, particularly young men, and we fund the CALM—campaign against living miserably—helpline, which is aimed at dealing with depression in young men and preventing them from committing suicide.

Ms Blears: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that reply. I am sure that she is aware that the figures for suicide and undetermined injury in young men are

approximately four times greater than those for young women. It seems that we have a widespread problem of young men suffering depression and unhappiness, which clearly affects their health. I draw my hon. Friend's attention to a project in Salford called "Let's get serious". We have employed young men with a background of severe social problems to act as mentors to other young men in the community. That is working: their health is improving; they are getting clean of drugs; they are managing for the first time in their lives to make a positive contribution to the community. The project is very high risk because it is about trusting people with convictions and those who have been in deep trouble, yet the health action zone has had the courage to invest in those young men.

Will my hon. Friend assure me that in our national health service of the future, we will have the confidence to take risks and to invest in innovative, imaginative and creative projects that really do make a difference to people?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right about the programme in the Manchester, Salford and Trafford health action zone. I know that the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), visited the project and was extremely impressed by its work. There is other impressive work concerning young men, particularly in many of the health action zones. We are keen to learn lessons from those innovative projects and spread them nationwide, and that is exactly what the Health Development Agency is doing. Clearly, we need to meet the serious health needs of young men suffering from social exclusion.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): Is the Minister aware that more and more young men and women are turning to complementary and alternative medicine, such as homeopathy and herbal remedies, to improve their health, very often because they are worried about antibiotics? What will she do to end the postcode lottery in complementary care throughout the nation, whereby most people cannot get such care at all on the health service, but a few, in some locations, can?

Yvette Cooper: I know that the hon. Gentleman has tried on several questions to ask about complementary medicine, although I would not necessarily have expected him to raise the matter on this question. He knows that we are considering the House of Lords Select Committee report on complementary medicine, and I would be happy to meet him to discuss its proposals.

Renal Services

13. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): What recent representations he has received on treatment for kidney patients. [147341]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): We have received a number of representations, including a report from the Kidney Alliance entitled "Towards Equity and Excellence in Renal Services", which is aimed at supporting health authorities and NHS trusts in the development of services for kidney patients. Of course, the NHS plan included a commitment to provide 450 new and replacement haemodialysis stations to treat another 1,850 kidney patients and provide better treatment for a further 1,200 existing patients by 2004.

Mr. Pike: I am glad that my right hon. Friend has read the excellent document produced last month by the Kidney Alliance, which deals with the need for additional renal facilities. He will know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State opened the extension to the kidney unit at the Royal Preston hospital just before the end of the year. We welcome that, but we need additional satellite facilities in north-east Lancashire, perhaps in Burnley.

Mr. Denham: I acknowledge my hon. Friend's role in this issue, in which he takes an active interest. I acknowledge also the work of the Kidney Alliance, and especially that of its chairman, Mr. Austin Donohue. The alliance's report proposed seven national service standards. We have welcomed it as a useful tool for commissioners and trusts in the commissioning of services for kidney patients.

My hon. Friend has called for further investment in the region part of which he represents to develop dialysis services. I can confirm that the north-west will be receiving about £1.25 million of new capital in the coming year. That will increase the number of haemodialysis stations in the region.

Points of Order

3.30 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. As the House of Commons (Removal of Clergy Disqualification) Bill may not be exactly the most pressing problem facing the nation, has there been any request, and is there time, for some discussion on the riots that took place over lunchtime outside the British embassy in Tripoli, involving tear gas, and the ominous consequences of the Lockerbie judgment? Have you had any request from the Foreign Office for such a discussion, or is the disqualification of the clergy much more urgent?

Mr. Speaker: I have received no representations from the Foreign Office.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You will recall that four weeks ago I raised on a point of order the overlong responses of Ministers at Question Time. You gave a timely reminder to Ministers and Back Benchers to shorten their questions and answers, which you again gave today. May I invite you to study the *Hansard* report of the Question Time just past, which I think will strengthen my view—I know it is shared by hon. Members on both sides of the House—that long ministerial answers cut the time that Back Benchers on both sides of the House have to ask legitimate questions? I accept that on one or two occasions today some supplementary questions were also rather long.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is a regular attender at Question Time. He knows that I have appealed to Ministers for short answers. I have appealed also to Back-Bench Members for short questions. I believe that I should be able to reach as many as possible of those hon. Members who have taken the bother to go to the Table Office to table a question and ballot for the Order Paper.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Your strictures to the Government on releasing information first to the House seem again to be being ignored. On Thursday, a question was tabled for answer about employment agency regulations. From 7 am, there were reports on the BBC about what was going to happen with regard to the regulations. I spent all of Thursday trying to get that information from the Vote Office, without success. The Library was able to take the information off the net for me.

I have gone to the Vote Office again—we are now into Tuesday—but it does not have the draft statutory instruments which were announced by the Government via the BBC first thing in the morning, and then placed on the Order Paper at perhaps 3.30 pm. We still do not have the information. Will you look into the matter, Mr. Speaker, and ensure that the Ministers who are responsible apologise yet again to the House and say yet again that they will not release information to the BBC before it is available to Members?

Mr. Speaker: I will investigate the hon. Gentleman's complaint.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I greatly support the ruling that you gave a moment ago. I would have had the next question but for lengthy ministerial answers. Will you consider naming Ministers who respond with particularly long answers so that they receive a ticket, rather like a ticket that is given by a football referee?

Mr. Speaker: I will not go into that. However, it is nice to get support, particularly from the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I should be grateful for your guidance. We all recognise and accept that you are not responsible for what Ministers say. However, will you confirm that Ministers should attempt directly to answer the question that is posed? Is it not unacceptable that when one of my constituents urgently requires an answer and an explanation from the Government about their policy on copaxone, the Minister of State, Department of Health, the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), deliberately and flagrantly refused to deal with the matter?

Mr. Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Analysis of Costs and Benefits (European Union)

3.35 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish a Parliamentary Commission to investigate and report regularly to Parliament, at intervals to be determined by Parliament, on the costs and the benefits of the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union.

May I say what a pleasure it is to see the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), in his seat, listening to me today? I hope that he will take on board some of the points that I intend to make.

The Bill is about one thing only: knowledge. We want to find out whether being a member of the European Union is a net cost or net benefit; whether, on balance, this country benefits from inward investment or whether it costs us billions of pounds. Unfortunately, secrecy shrouds the facts. My Bill would establish a parliamentary commission that would cut through that secrecy. It would then be up to Parliament to act on the facts as it thought fit. We simply do not know whether EU membership is costing billions of pounds, but if it turned out that it was, that money could otherwise be spent on pensions, health care, schools and investment to ensure that our industry remains strong.

Of course, I recognise that there is far more to our membership of the EU than money alone. There is the political facet, too. However, my Bill does not deal with that or questions of sovereignty; it deals simply with the fiscal issues. Are we benefiting or are we losing out? It seems an incredible irony that everyone does those analyses except the British Government. The Institute of Directors produced an analysis, which was published some months ago, called "EU Membership—What's the Bottom Line?" The institute's calculation was interesting. It stated:

"The current net cost of membership is £15 billion per annum and may be as high as £25 billion—around £1,000 for every household in the country."

The institute took into account the benefits of the EU budget, the common agricultural policy, customs union, the single market, the EU social model and EU-related foreign direct investment, which have a benefit for the UK economy. The institute reckoned—although my point is that we just do not know—that that benefit was outweighed by the costs of the EU budget, the CAP and the EU social body. We do not know what will happen in future when the EU is enlarged.

More ironic still, while the British Government refuse to conduct such a cost-benefit analysis, the United States Government have. I confess that I have not read their weighty document and, judging by the quizzical look of the Minister of State, it seems that he has not read it either. It was published in August 2000, is called "The Impact on the United States Economy of Including the United Kingdom in a Free Trade Agreement with the United States, Canada and Mexico", and was produced for the US Senate and the US State Department.

That document examined the matter from the US point of view. Global Britain gave a brief synopsis of it, and said that the "comprehensive and exhaustive study" produced by the US International Trade Commission

"is based on complex computer modelling of country-by-country and sector-by-sector trade flows."

They—the United States Government—reckoned that the United Kingdom derives no economic benefit from being in the EU, compared with not being in the EU. Admittedly, the United States looks at the matter from the US point of view. I should like the United Kingdom Government to look at it from the British point of view.

The US Government came to another interesting conclusion:

"If the UK joined NAFTA, she would be better off leaving the EU completely, rather than retaining the present Single Market arrangements."

The document went on to state:

"This is because leaving the EU completely, with the Continentals having to export to the UK over an average tariff wall equivalent to the present Common External Tariff, and vice versa, cuts the UK deficit with the EU, stimulating UK domestic output"—

that is according to the US Government—

"in mining",

which would interest the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), and

"iron and steel",

which should interest many, many hon. Members on the Labour Benches, although one hon. Member is laughing and giggling continuously.

The Bill is intended not to make a judgment about the European Union, but to provide the facts about our membership. The conclusions that I have read out are those of the US Government. I want our Government and our officials to produce their own conclusions.

The Bill deals with knowledge that should be in the public domain. At present such knowledge seems to be a secret, either because the Government have conducted a cost-benefit analysis and are keeping the results secret, or because, as I suspect, the Government have conducted no such analysis.

The Opposition want to remain in Europe, but we do not want to be run by Europe. The costs of the exercise must be known; they cannot remain a secret indefinitely. The Bill would put the information in the public domain. If we benefit overall financially from EU membership, that is well and good, and we need to concentrate only on matters of sovereignty.

However, if there is a net financial cost, we must not only argue our case more rigorously and renegotiate for the retention of our national sovereignty, but we will have even greater cause to fight for a reform of the crippling common agricultural policy and directives that do so much damage to British manufacturing industry. The Bill would simply make public the costs or the benefits—nothing more, nothing less.

3.43 pm

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): I oppose the Bill. I have great admiration and respect for the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) and for the forthright way in which he expresses his views. The House has listened to his arguments with interest.

The last time that we had a similar parliamentary commission was in 1890, when there was a debate about whether the French would attack Britain. The commission proposed by the hon. Gentleman is of the same order.

[Mr. Stuart Bell]

The hon. Gentleman asks what benefit we derive from being in the European Union. The benefit is obvious to all those who are engaged in trade: 57 or 58 per cent. of our exports go to the European continental shelf. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) says, "So what?" If he were in a manufacturing industry or a service industry selling to Europe, he would not be shouting, "So what?" He would be very grateful for the jobs and the work that had been created.

With 57 or 58 per cent. of our exports going to the European continental shelf, it would be extremely unwise for us to call for an analysis of the costs and benefits. The hon. Member for Lichfield suggests that other benefits are not self-evident. There are diplomatic benefits. We are part of Europe; we are members of all the Councils of Europe; someone in Palestine who wanted to discuss matters or to seek support would approach the European Union. In the United States, the first question asked by the George W. Bush Administration was, "With whom must we deal in Europe?" They will have asked how many telephones they have to pick up in order to debate diplomatic issues, but they want one debate, which can be conducted with the European Union, through one person.

The European Union enables Britain to debate and to exert diplomatic influence. As the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) said many years ago, we gave up none of our sovereignty when we joined the European Union. We shared and pooled it. We joined with our traditional enemies—France and Germany—to be sure that the wars that occurred during 100 years of conflict could never happen again.

The hon. Member for Lichfield made an eloquent proposition, but when I listen to the comments of some Conservative Back Benchers, I wonder how much of a little England we can become and how far removed we can be from the reality of the world in which we live. Clearly, that world is one of the European Union. Membership has a cost benefit, through improved trade, and a diplomatic benefit. There is also a greater overall benefit in historical terms. For all those reasons, I oppose the Bill, however well intentioned it is and however well the hon. Gentleman argued for it. This House of Commons, which represents this nation, should look the facts and history in the face. It should understand that our destiny is Europe and that the days of hon. Members who say that Europe is cut off by fog are over. The only fog that we see in the House is on the Opposition Benches.

Question put, pursuant to Standing Order No. 23 (Motions for leave to bring in Bills and nomination of Select Committees at commencement of public business), and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Michael Fabricant, Mr. John Wilkinson, Mr. Patrick Nicholls, Mr. Christopher Gill, Mr. John Townend and Mr. Crispin Blunt.

Analysis of Costs and Benefits (European Union)

Mr. Michael Fabricant accordingly presented a Bill to establish a Parliamentary Commission to investigate and report regularly to Parliament, at intervals to be determined by Parliament, on the costs and the benefits of the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 20 July, and to be printed [Bill 39].

Orders of the Day

House of Commons (Removal of Clergy Disqualification) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

3.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This is a small Bill, but it is not unimportant. Put simply, it allows serving and former ministers of religion to become Members of Parliament, where some of them were previously disqualified. It continues the disqualification of any bishops who sit in the other place as Lords Spiritual.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): The Minister says that the Bill does not apply to any bishops who sit in the other place. However, does it apply to bishops who do not sit in the House of Lords but are on the rota eventually to end up there?

Mr. O'Brien: Providing that bishops are not Lords Spiritual, the Bill will apply to them and they will be able to stand for Parliament if their Church permits them to do so.

From time to time, this place has a chance to do something that sends a message that we are just a bit better then we once were. The Bill provides such a chance.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I am extremely interested in that statement, not least because I am always happy when the House of Commons proves that it is better than people think. Where has the need for the Bill arisen? What evidence exists to show that vast numbers of priests and clergy of various Churches are fighting their way on to candidates' lists?

Mr. O'Brien: I shall explain the current need for the measure; I hope that I can do that to my hon. Friend's satisfaction.

The Government believe that the current position on clergy disqualification is archaic. It stems from earlier bigoted, anti-Catholic legislation. If a person wishes to stand for Parliament, the electorate should decide whether he or she should become a Member of Parliament.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I shall give way for the last time on this occasion—*[Interruption.]* I shall give way later after making some progress.

Mr. Key: I cannot let the Minister get away with the comment that the earlier legislation was bigoted. He does not understand Church history. The measures were based not on bigotry against the Roman Catholic Church but on maintaining the Church in England and of England.

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman may hold that view; others may beg to differ. Without digressing into a history lesson, I must tell the hon. Gentleman that there was anti-Catholic legislation, which was repealed. The Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829 was enacted to allow Daniel O'Connell to take his seat. He had been elected to represent County Clare, but was unable to take his seat because he was a Catholic.

Some ministers of religion are debarred from being Members of Parliament through the House of Commons (Clergy Disqualification) Act 1801, and others by section 9 of the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829. The Bill will repeal the 1801 Act, the relevant section of the 1829 Act, and several other provisions, which will become redundant.

Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims and other religious groups, including most nonconformist denominations, whose arrangements for ordaining ministers do not involve ordination by a bishop, are not affected by current legislation or the new Bill.

The House of Commons (Clergy Disqualification) Act 1801 prevents Church of England clergy from becoming Members of Parliament. However, former priests can divest themselves of their clerical responsibilities through a procedure in the Clerical Disabilities Act 1870. If the electorate so decide, they can then take a seat in Parliament.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I shall make some progress and then give way to my hon. Friend.

No such procedure is available to ordained clergy of other episcopal Churches. If a Catholic priest wishes to give up his ministry, temporarily or permanently, and stand for Parliament, he is unable to take a seat if elected. He cannot apply to the equivalent of the Clerical Disabilities Act 1870 and is likely to be debarred by the 1801 and 1829 statutes.

Most hon. Members are aware of the case of Mr. David Cairns, a former Catholic priest, who intends to stand as the Labour candidate for Greenock and Inverclyde at the next general election. If elected, he could be prevented from taking his seat in the House.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): That is what it is all about.

Mr. O'Brien: The right hon. Gentleman is right. *[Interruption.]* The Bill will remove old, prejudiced provisions from the statute book—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) must give the Minister a hearing.

Mr. O'Brien: The Bill will remove provisions that prevent a person who has been elected from taking a seat in the House of Commons. If the right hon. Gentleman wishes to retain legislation that prevents someone who is

[Mr. O'Brien]

no longer a practising Catholic priest from being a parliamentary candidate and taking his seat, he must argue his case.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Will my hon. Friend allow me to intervene on that point?

Mr. O'Brien: If my hon. Friend will allow me, I want to make progress. Perhaps I shall then give way to one or two hon. Members.

The case of David Cairns has exposed the manifest absurdity of the present law. I hope that the House will agree that it is right that this matter should be attended to in the run-up to a general election, whenever that falls. A change in the law is relevant at such a time, and I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will deal with the matter sympathetically. I hope that they would do so whatever party David Cairns proposed to stand for.

Those who say that the Bill should not be passed are, in effect, saying that this man should not stand because he has been a priest. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) says from a sedentary position that he might object because Mr. Cairns is a Labour candidate. He is entitled to that rather prejudiced view, but he must be very open about it, and it is entirely a matter for him. I suggest that the present legislation is archaic and should not be on the statute book.

The case of David Cairns is clearly the reason for the Bill.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: Mr. Speaker, I have said that I shall not give way at this point.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Minister has made it clear that he will not give way.

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful to you, Mr. Speaker.

At the time of the Queen's Speech, we thought that it might be possible to make the change without the need for a Bill. Legal advice now suggests that that is not the case, so the Bill is needed.

We could have concluded that the matter was not a priority, but that would have been to accept that David Cairns could not stand. Perhaps Labour could have found another candidate, but our only reason for doing so would have been the fact that the law prohibited David Cairns from standing. The law is wrong. The Catholic Church accepts that it should be changed and so do other Churches.

We cannot begin this century with a law based on the attitudes of two centuries ago or more. We are here because the issue confronts us now. The timing may not be convenient, but the issue is a genuine one and I do not believe that the House wants to acquiesce in any kind of bigotry or unacceptable, archaic legislation by omission.

In September 1998, the Home Affairs Committee on electoral law and administration recommended, at paragraph 127, volume 1, that

"all restrictions on ministers of religion standing for, and serving as, Members of Parliament be removed; the exception would be in respect of all serving bishops of the Church of England who, for so long as places are reserved for the senior bishops in the House of Lords, should remain ineligible to serve as Members of the Commons."

The Government broadly share that view, and I shall come to the second part of the recommendation about bishops in more detail in a moment.

In June 1999, my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) introduced a private Member's Bill that would have rectified the position. The Bill had cross-party support, but failed to make any progress on Second Reading. The Government were sympathetic, but wanted to consult the Churches before changing the law. They subsequently consulted the Church of England, the Church of Ireland, the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Churches in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. All were content for the restrictions to be removed.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I have said that I want to make some progress. I shall give way in due course if need be.

It is already open to ministers of the Church of Wales, which is disestablished, to become Members of Parliament by virtue of the Welsh Church Act 1914, which overrides the 1801 Act.

Needless to say, the Government do not envisage a queue of members of the clergy pressing to become Members of Parliament. In the case of serving ministers or priests, that should be a matter between the Churches and the individuals concerned. As I said earlier, it is for the individual to decide whether to stand and for the electorate to determine whether he or she should sit in this House.

The Government believe that there should be no bar in public law to prevent members of the clergy from becoming MPs. However, it will be for Churches and their clergy to consider whether a member of the clergy can carry out his or her pastoral responsibilities effectively and properly while also sitting as an MP. I understand, for example, that the Pope does not accept serving priests being active in public office or in party politics, so we are unlikely to see serving priests, who carry out the mass, standing as MPs.

Why not introduce legislation simply to put Catholic priests on a similar footing to Church of England clergy and allow them to divest themselves of their clerical responsibilities? There are two answers to that question. First, I would expect Parliament to consider carefully whether it has the right to legislate on matters of doctrine or discipline in the Catholic Church, even if indirectly.

My understanding is that the Catholic Church considers that once a priest has been ordained, he remains a priest all his life, even if he no longer practises as one. Section 9 of the 1829 Act is simply a hangover from the days when the participation of Roman Catholics in public life was rejected. Today, the House can opt to get rid of that

anachronism and leave the Roman Catholic Church to run its own affairs rather than try to regulate and legislate on the relationship between the Church and its priests.

The second reason not to put Catholic priests on the same basis as Church of England clergy rests on a 1951 Privy Council case. In Re MacManaway, the Privy Council decided that the 1801 Act disqualified not only persons ordained in the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, but all persons ordained by a bishop in accordance with either the order of the Church of England or other forms of episcopal ordination. In the particular case of Rev. James G. MacManaway, that included ordination in the Church of Ireland. Thus, in broad terms, any clergy ordained by a bishop are subject to the disqualification whereas clergy and ministers of religion not ordained by a bishop are not subject to the disqualification. Current restrictions, therefore, go wider than Roman Catholic clergy.

Mr. Bercow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I promised to give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman). This might be a suitable moment to do so.

Dr. Godman: I am exceedingly grateful to the Minister. Am I right to think that the Bill extends to the Welsh Assembly, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Scottish Parliament? I have no doubt that all Members of the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament and the overwhelming majority of Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly would support it, but can I take it that discussions have taken place with the Executives of those legislatures?

Mr. O'Brien: The Executives will be aware of the provisions, but my hon. Friend is wrong to suggest that they will apply to the Assemblies and the Scottish Parliament as they are already enacted in the devolution legislation. For example, there is no prohibition on a Roman Catholic priest becoming a Member of either the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly.

Mr. Bercow: The Minister has fairly referred to the 1801 and 1829 Acts, but is he aware that it has been suggested by at least one eminent authority that to answer the question, "Can a priest sit in the House of Commons?", reference to no fewer than nine pieces of legislation dating back to the 16th century is required? I feel sure that the Minister is intimately familiar with each of the other seven and wonder whether he can enlighten the House.

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman would not expect me to set out my great familiarity, of which I am sure he is well aware, with the other ancient and archaic pieces of legislation. Perhaps some are not so archaic; we shall have to wait and see. Parliamentary counsel have assured me that introducing a Bill referring to the 1801 and 1829 Acts will enable us to achieve the purpose that I hope the hon. Gentleman will endorse in due course. He nods; I am glad that he will do so.

Mr. Winnick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way because I have to go to a meeting. Is he aware that I was a member of the Home Affairs Committee that produced the report that he mentioned? I hope that the Bill will be passed because, in a parliamentary democracy, people should not be disqualified from sitting in the House of Commons for religious or any other reasons. Surely that is the essence of what we are trying to achieve. Ours, I hope, is an all-inclusive parliamentary democracy, so such a measure should have been introduced a long time ago. There is no reason for anyone to want to oppose the Bill.

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend is entirely right, and I commend him for his part in ensuring that these matters were brought to the House's attention.

There is always pressure on parliamentary time, and there are always many Bills that Ministers and others want the House to debate. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) mentioned seven earlier pieces of legislation, and at some stage Members may wish to raise issues relating to those. The question for us, however, is this: at what point do we need to deal with these matters?

It is true that the case of David Cairns is pressing. I do not dispute that he is seeking to stand as a Labour candidate, and others may try to take party political advantage of that; but, in all sincerity, I do not think that Members should wish to prejudice any member of any political party who wished to stand—they should ensure that no such person is blocked by an old piece of legislation. Indeed, I hope that no legislation would prevent someone wishing to stand as a Scottish National party candidate from at least being tested by the electorate. I suspect, however, that, once tested by the electorate, such a candidate would be rejected by the electorate.

Mr. McLoughlin: The Minister has clearly relaxed into his speech. He described the Bill as a tidying-up measure that is necessary in view of a general election which, as we well know, could take place in the next 14 months. Can he tell us—bearing in mind the competence of the Home Office, which we all admire—when he expects postal vote forms to be available so that people can exercise their votes?

Mr. O'Brien: I very much hope that they will be ready on 16 February. I am not sure how that relates to the Bill, but I am sure that David Cairns—if, indeed, he is able to stand for Parliament—will be pleased to hear about it.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Will the Minister confirm that Mr. David Cairns, whom no one bears any ill will, must have known the law before he applied for selection to his local Labour party?

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman says that Mr. Cairns must have known the law. In fact, the law is very complex. We have been looking at it over the past few months.

The hon. Gentleman may well ask why, if we knew about this matter then, we did not include it in the Queen's Speech. At that stage, we were not sure how its provisions would operate. We are dealing with the interrelationship between the way in which Catholic Church canon law operates and the way in which legislation passed by this Parliament operates. One of the questions is, "At what point does a person cease to be a priest?" That person

[Mr. O'Brien]

may continue to be a priest under the canon law of the Catholic Church, but does that necessarily mean that he will continue to be a priest under this legislation? Unfortunately, the existing legislation is somewhat ambiguous in that regard.

As the hon. Gentleman will see if he consults section 9 of the 1829 Act, it appears to suggest that acceptance that a person has conducted a mass constitutes recognition that that person is a priest. That appears to be an on-going recognition—a recognition that the person continues to be a priest. The issue is not entirely clear, however. We cannot allow a situation whereby, if David Cairns stood and the people chose to elect him, an old piece of legislation which I suspect no one would seriously support—I should be surprised if anyone did, but let us wait and see—prevented him from taking his seat.

The case has presented us with a dilemma. We considered it until Christmas, by which time it was clear to me that we needed primary legislation. We therefore presented the Bill at the first opportunity.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): Should my hon. Friend not sound altogether more enthusiastic about the fact that priests and former priests are queueing up to stand as Labour candidates and support the Labour party? Is not the pique displayed by Conservative Members caused by the fact that although they used to pride themselves on being described as the Church of England at prayer, they have long since lost the support of all the Churches in the country?

Mr. O'Brien: I am waiting to hear whether the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) thinks that the Catholic Church and other Churches are likely to support her position. It is interesting, however, that she, I and you, Mr. Speaker, all belong to the denomination dealt with in previous legislation which sought to prevent Catholic priests from becoming members of this place. The new legislation perhaps indicates how much this place has changed and how much our society has improved. Indeed—if I may be obsequious now in the hope of craving your indulgence later—we are all very pleased to see you in the Chair, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: Will it be a sensible intervention?

Mr. Fabricant: Yes, as always. The Minister kindly sat on the Treasury Bench while I was doing my cost-benefit analysis. Subsequently, he has talked about the number of priests who wish to become hon. Members. However, has he made an analysis of the number of former Labour Members who may wish to become priests?

Mr. O'Brien: I should have known.

I should like to deal with the Home Affairs Committee's recommendations on bishops. There are about 40 Church of England bishops who could qualify to sit in the other place as Lords Spiritual. At any one time, only 26 are summoned to be Lords Spiritual. The Government's view is that it is those bishops who should be disqualified from House of Commons membership, as they already have a "voice" in Parliament.

I should perhaps add that if that number were to change as a result of proposals for reform of the other place, the number of bishops who were disqualified would change. However, the general principle would not be affected. The Committee's recommendation was to continue the prohibition on all bishops from the House of Commons. Although it must be unlikely that bishops would wish to become Members of Parliament while they perform their duties as bishops, the Government feel that it is right to lessen the statutory restrictions and to allow anyone who wishes to stand as a Member of Parliament—except for bishops who have a voice in the legislative procedures, the Lords Spiritual—to do so.

There is no bar to clergy or bishops being elected to the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly or the National Assembly for Wales, and the House will recall that it accepted those arrangements when the devolution legislation was passed. Nor is there any bar on clergy or bishops being elected as local councillors or mayors. That has worked perfectly well and there has been no backlash, no abuse and no discord in those arrangements. The Westminster position is increasingly anomalous, but the Bill helps to rectify that anomaly.

I hope I have shown that the Bill will be useful in removing some archaic and unnecessary restrictions. I also hope that the House will agree that it is a worthwhile and an uncontroversial measure.

Mr. Forth: No.

Mr. O'Brien: The right hon. Gentleman again says that he does not think that the Bill is uncontroversial. We have introduced the Bill because someone who happens to be a Labour candidate would be disqualified without it. I do not think that any hon. Member, including the right hon. Gentleman, really thinks that there is a reason other than party partisanship to maintain such an exclusion. I therefore hope that I can count on his support, which I would value.

Mr. Bercow: I can tell the Minister and the wider public who have an interest in the matter that there will be a free vote on the measure for Members of the official Opposition. Can he assure us that the matter is the subject of a free vote for Labour Members, too; or are they, as usual, the old robots being whipped into line?

Mr. O'Brien: I do not think that there would be the slightest problem with people voting for the legislation; I would be surprised if there were. I have not discussed with the Whips whether there will be a free vote, and I am not sure that it will particularly matter. We shall have to wait and see whether anyone feels that he or she really wants to vote against the measure. I will listen with care to the debate, and at the end I may be able to give a more considered response to the hon. Gentleman.

The disqualification provisions no longer perform a useful function, if they ever did. It is time that they were swept away and the relevant legislation was repealed.

I commend the Bill to the House.

4.15 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I hope that the debate will remain good natured, but I found rather arrogant the Minister's assumption that there could be no possible opposition to the Bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) has pointed out already, the Opposition are making this a free vote because we acknowledge that issues of conscience are involved, and people may have extremely strong views in both directions.

That is exemplified by the opinions of the shadow Home Office team. I am not ecstatic about the Bill, whereas my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham is extremely enthusiastic. However, I am not so arrogant as to imagine that there cannot be two views, so I rather regret the tone of the last part of the Minister's speech.

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend pointed out that the Bill could—and, indeed, should—arouse issues of conscience, but does she agree that constitutional issues might also be involved? The Bill touches on the composition of this House, and that cannot be unrelated to the composition of another place. Do not profound constitutional issues flow directly from the Bill?

Miss Widdecombe: Indeed, and if my right hon. Friend had restrained himself for only a few seconds he would have heard me come to exactly that point. I began with the question of conscience because I thought that the end of the Minister's speech rather dismissed it as unimportant.

My right hon. Friend will be glad to hear that I do not believe that we should dismiss too lightly the Bill's constitutional implications. For hundreds of years—and not merely since the reformation—the politics of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland were dominated by questions of religion. As late as the 20th century, Parliament passed legislation, such as the Welsh Church Act 1914, that dealt with religion. There is an on-going debate today about whether the Church of England should be disestablished. In many ways, to many communities in the United Kingdom, questions of religion are no less relevant today than they were decades, or hundreds of years, ago.

I believe that a priest's vocation is lifelong. Speaking personally, and as one of the three Roman Catholic Members mentioned by the Minister, I would not want a priest to give up his vocation to enter this place, or to mix duties in the House with those in what I consider to be a consecrated office. A priest's office is very precious and spiritual, and it is different from that of a Member of Parliament. I cannot believe that the Minister, who is of the same persuasion as I, does not recognise that that view is held forcefully by quite a large number of people.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The right hon. Lady will have noted that I said in my speech that the Pope takes the view—as, I believe, does the Church of England—that practising priests and clergy should not be active in public life or in a political party.

Miss Widdecombe: That is so, and we must take that opinion into account when considering these matters. I do not believe that being a Member of Parliament is compatible with the priestly vocation. Like the priesthood, it involves a huge commitment, both in this Chamber and outside. I do not believe that a Member of Parliament could represent constituents adequately while continuing to serve as a full-time priest, or that a priest could administer to his flock adequately while undertaking duties as a full-time Member of Parliament.

I come now to the detail of what is a short but extremely important Bill. A point that may be explored in Committee has been touched on already, and I suspect that it will arise again. It has to do with the position of the more junior Anglican diocesan bishops who are not currently Lords Spiritual.

As I read it, the Bill will allow those bishops to sit in this House. I note that the Select Committee on Home Affairs stated in paragraph 127 of its fourth report of 1997–98 that

"the exception would be in respect of all serving bishops in the Church of England who, for so long as places are reserved for their senior bishops in the House of Lords, should remain ineligible to serve as Members of the Commons."

If I have read the Bill correctly, the Minister is not following that recommendation, but is allowing all Church of England bishops who are not currently eligible for membership of the House of Lords to be eligible for membership of this place. The Select Committee had reason, rather than prejudice, when it recommended that all serving bishops in the Church of England should be disqualified.

Not all Anglican bishops, as the Select Committee recommended, but only those who sit as Lords Spiritual in the House of Lords will be exempted under the Bill. What would happen if, through death or retirement, a member of this House succeeded to one of the seats reserved for senior Anglican bishops in the other place? I presume that a by-election would have to be held. What consideration has the Minister given to that question?

It would be useful for the Committee of the whole House to consider whether it would still be appropriate to disqualify all Anglican bishops, as the Select Committee recommended. The Anglican episcopacy is already well represented in another place—it is, at any rate, represented in another place. I simply pose this question: should junior Anglican bishops be constitutionally allowed to sit in this House when senior Anglican bishops already have seats explicitly reserved for them in another place?

I am not particularly puzzled about why we are considering the Bill now. However, is it not rather odd that the Minister should have prayed in aid the Select Committee report of 1997-98, which is nearly three years old? Since then, there have been two pieces of legislation on electoral matters in which this issue could have been encompassed if the case were as utterly unanswerable and unarguable as the Minister suggested. I refer to the Representation of the People Act 2000 and the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000—but, however unanswerable and unarguable Ministers apparently thought the case, this issue was not included in either Act.

Mr. Fabricant: Is my right hon. Friend surprised to learn, as I have just learned, that whereas we have a one-line Whip for a Bill that we regard as a matter of

[Mr. Fabricant]

conscience—and which I will be supporting—the Government are pushing the Bill through, at this late stage, on a three-line Whip?

Miss Widdecombe: I am not surprised, but I am disappointed. I congratulate my hon. Friend on knowing more than the Minister, who had not a clue about what his usual channels were proposing with regard to a free vote.

I am disappointed because traditionally in this House, Church matters have been subject to a free vote. I remember the very lively debate on the ordination of women as priests. That was subject to a free vote. Other debates, perhaps less lively, on the ordination of divorced persons as clergy and several other Church issues have been subject to a free vote. I am not surprised, because this is a very dictatorial Government, but I am disappointed.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): Before the right hon. Lady moves on from her very interesting point about suffragan bishops, does she seriously believe that the Church of England would appoint a suffragan bishop who was a full-time Member of this House to a diocesan bishopric? If not—as is almost certainly the case—that bishop would have no chance of becoming a Member of the other place anyway.

Miss Widdecombe: The hon. Gentleman has a great deal more faith than I do in what the Church of England might or might not do. I have no idea whether it would make such an appointment, but our duty is not to second guess the judgments of others; it is to try to establish a coherent set of rules that will cause as few problems as possible.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): May I suggest to the right hon. Lady that one of the differences between a whipped vote on this issue and free votes on the other issues that she cites is that, on those issues, we were receiving measures from the Church of England for consideration? We were not initiating those measures. On such occasions, we usually have a free vote. May I also suggest that, if we were to have a free vote on this matter, it would make no difference to Labour support for the measure?

Miss Widdecombe: I usually have a huge amount of respect for the right hon. Gentleman. I was expecting an extremely difficult intervention from him, but that piece of sophistry is rather disappointing. He suggests that if Church business is initiated by the Government, conscience does not come into play and a three-line Whip can be imposed, whereas if the measure originates from the Church, the matter is entirely different. That is a piece of reasoning to which the right hon. Gentleman would normally award delta double minus if he were in his usual form.

Mr. Field *rose—*

Miss Widdecombe: The right hon. Gentleman is not in his usual form, so I ask him to sit still for a bit and regain it. Perhaps later on, when he has thought about the ludicrous proposition that he has just made, I might be happy to take a further intervention.

As to the right hon. Gentleman's second point—that a free vote would make no difference—if we applied that logic to issues of conscience, we would be whipped on some that were extremely serious, and he would be the first to decry the practice. We know why the measure is being whipped: because this constitutional business is not being undertaken on its own merits, but for a particular Labour candidate in a particular constituency.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): The right hon. Lady is certainly in excellent form; I congratulate her on that. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) made the point that synodical and Government legislation are dealt with differently. The right hon. Lady is right to point out that we could have a vote of conscience on Government legislation. However, is she really telling the House that a slight change in our electoral law to permit clergy, or others, to stand for Parliament is a matter of conscience?

Mr. Forth: The change is for a Labour party candidate.

Mr. Bell: The right hon. Gentleman intervenes more often from a sedentary position than he ever does standing up. He knows full well that the measure has nothing to do with an individual parliamentary candidate; it meets a long-standing Labour obligation to rectify the constitution and rid it of a small anomaly.

Miss Widdecombe: The hon. Gentleman renders beautifully to Caesar, but he is not wholly convincing. The change is not small; it is major. I do not say that just because a provision has been on the statute book for a long time, it can never be overturned, but the measure overturns a long-standing law. It is not a slight change; it is one that will mean a great deal to many people.

Before that long series of interventions—some clever and some not so clever—I was saying that—

Mr. Fallon: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for taking one more intervention; I am not sure in which category she would place it.

My right hon. Friend refers to timing. Although the Bill might well favour Mr. David Cairns, does she agree that, as it is being introduced so late in this Parliament, it also discriminates against people who might have wanted to pursue a parliamentary route but who did not offer themselves for selection by either party? Such measures should be introduced on an all-party basis at the beginning of a Parliament, rather than at its tail end.

Miss Widdecombe: I am extremely sympathetic to my hon. Friend's point—in other circumstances, the Minister would be sympathetic too. It is undeniable that, during the course of this Parliament, opportunities have arisen for the introduction of the measure at a stage when more than one particular candidate could have benefited. However, the point is theoretical; we shall never know whether there would have been other candidates. For the reasons that I outlined, I hope not. We will never know whether others—perhaps from other parties or, perhaps, from the Labour party—might have benefited from the measure, but we know that the opportunities were there.

Before that long series of interventions, I was saying that the Representation of the People Act 2000 and the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000

could have provided an opportunity to introduce such a measure. There was a Select Committee report, and a very distinguished one at that. I might not agree with all its detail, but it was well thought out and properly presented. However, it has not been acted upon, so the Bill cannot be described as a tidying-up measure.

Indeed, the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) reminded the Government about the matter when she introduced the House of Commons Disqualification (Amendment) Bill under the ten-minute rule in June 1999, before both the Acts to which I refer were even published. So despite the fact that there has been a Select Committee report, a ten-minute Bill and two Acts, the Government did not think it worth while to introduce this very important measure until a particular prospective parliamentary Labour candidate needed to take advantage of it.

The Minister's determination to introduce what he ignored for four years is now so great that there is a three-line Whip and a rushed Bill has been introduced right at the end of this Parliament. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) has said, the Bill will probably benefit only one person. I agree that if such a measure has to be introduced, it should be done on an all-party basis either at the beginning of a Parliament or at the end of a Parliament, but to take effect after the next one, rather than being done only to ensure that an individual—however worthy he may or may not be—can stand for election.

Although my views on such matters differ from those of many other hon. Members, I recognise that an anomaly exists and that there is a case to be made, but it is being made in entirely the wrong context and in too rushed and too cursory a fashion. Therefore, I am afraid that I shall not be able to support the Bill. That is not a party position; Conservative Members, unlike Labour Members, are perfectly free to take their own line, but I find intriguing the possibility of a priest in holy orders—which demand poverty, chastity and obedience—functioning in the House, but strange things happen.

Mr. Forth: I may wish to develop this theme if I am fortunate enough to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My right hon. Friend mentions obedience. In this context, would she care to elaborate on obedience to whom? Is not it perfectly possible that if the Bill were unfortunately passed and an ordained priest were duly elected, there could be a very serious and real conflict of loyalty between obedience to the Caesars of the House and perhaps to other authorities elsewhere?

Miss Widdecombe: Clashes between God and Caesar are not unknown to those of us who take such matters seriously. I think that my right hon. Friend was hinting at the fact—we shall probably hear a lot later—that he believes that people of my persuasion are somehow dominated by some interesting European power, rather than by the monarch and Parliament. That is not so. I find intriguing the possibility that a priest with those vows should function here, but strange things happen. Perhaps the strangest thing of all is that issues of Church and state are being determined by the self-interest of an obscure prospective parliamentary candidate for the Labour party in Greenock and Inverclyde.

4.34 pm

Ms Joan Ryan (Enfield, North): Unlike some Members, I welcome the Bill as it will remove what are essentially discriminatory and outdated disqualifications from becoming a Member of Parliament. The Bill attempts to correct some of the inconsistencies in our complex electoral law. Although it will introduce only modest reform, it forms part of a wider debate that includes issues of fairness, choice and the changed relationship today between the Churches and the state.

When my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh)—[HON. MEMBERS: "Where is she?"] I shall come to that point. When my hon. Friend introduced a ten-minute Bill to end the disqualification on the clergy taking a place in the House, she concluded by saying:

> "Fundamentally, the rationale behind those antique statutes passed away a very long time ago, and those statutes have no place in the parliamentary electoral law of our multicultural society, with its community of religious faiths, as we prepare to enter the 21st century."—[*Official Report*, 16 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 394.]

If this Bill is seen through successfully, the first election of the 21st century will not be marred by the continuation of those discriminatory statutes. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all the work that she has done on this issue, but I am afraid that she cannot be with us today.

We cannot expect to promote a fair and more equal society—a tolerant, multi-faith and multicultural society—when we continue to draw distinctions on religious grounds with regard to eligibility to sit in the House. The Bill will remove the majority of those distinctions and, therefore, will be an addition to the democracy within our system. It is essentially about equal rights—the equal rights of our citizens to sit in the House. I see this as a matter not of conscience—I understand why some see it that way—but of equal rights.

It is clearly undemocratic that a potential candidate for election could, first, be selected by his or her party and, secondly and more important, receive a mandate from the electorate, but be unable to take up the seat because of restrictions embedded in complex electoral law.

The leading constitutional expert, Professor Robert Blackburn, has said that this aspect of the law is

> "incoherent, illogical and virtually impossible for anyone except a legal expert to discover."

The existing arrangement has become a barrier to the provision of equal rights and, as such, responsibility for removing it lies with the House.

Mr. Forth: The hon. Lady said that the candidate had been properly selected but, presumably, the local party organisation either knew or would have been advised that a legal obstacle would prevent that candidate, if elected, from taking his seat in the House. I presume that it went ahead with the selection on that basis. Was that not irresponsible of the local party and the individual himself?

Ms Ryan: The Labour party selects candidates on the basis of equal rights in the party. I am suggesting that candidates should be able to put themselves before the electorate on exactly the same basis.

Dr. Godman: I hope to elaborate on this point if I catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I want to make

[Dr. Godman]

it clear that the local party in Greenock and Inverclyde did not behave irresponsibly. I can give my hon. Friend my word on that.

Ms Ryan: I accept that word.

We have a pressing responsibility. A case in which the electorate granted an electoral candidate the right to sit in the House, only for him to have that right denied, has already occurred in the MacManaway case and could have occurred again when Bruce Kent stood in 1992. We should not wait for such an unacceptable case to occur again before we decide to reform the law, although I accept the point that we have had other opportunities to do that.

One of the basic duties of the House is to serve our citizens—to protect their rights and to protect and enhance democracy. As soon as we know that a piece of legislation inhibits equal rights—in this case, there are numerous such pieces—we should act to change or remove it. We should not wait until an individual is placed in a position where he or she cannot take up a seat when elected, and we are forced to remove the disqualification in those circumstances.

Given the amount of time that the legislation has been in force—on the whole, unnecessarily so—it would be difficult to claim that we are taking a lead in the matter. We at least have the opportunity to jump before we are pushed, and this debate on removing the disqualification is taking place not a minute too soon.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Lady emphasises that the matter has been a festering sore for a long time. I hope she will accept that considered study of the historical background is entirely appropriate on whatever side of the argument one happens to sit. What assessment has she made of the report of the Select Committee on Clergy Disqualification in the 1952-53 Session?

Ms Ryan: I have considered the history. It is because of that and my view of equal rights that I am pleased that the Government have introduced the Bill.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Ryan: No, I should like to make progress.

Discovering the history of the disqualifications is not for the weak hearted. The intrepid researcher has to begin somewhat earlier than the 1950s, around the 1670s, and plough through numerous conflicting statutes, common law and Privy Council decisions, taking in the constitutional conflict of the MacManaway case, the possible conflict caused by Bruce Kent's decision to stand for election and the problems that may arise in the near future.

The conclusion of such research is that some clergy are able to stand for Parliament, but others are not; some clergy are able to resign their orders to stand, but others are not; certain Christian clergy are disqualified from sitting in the House by statutory provision, but ministers of other religious faiths are eligible; the imam and the rabbi—should their religious organisations agree—could take up a seat in the House, but a Roman Catholic minister would be disqualified from doing so.

The matter has been further complicated by a later decision by the Privy Council, which meant that those clergy who are episcopally ordained are subject to disqualification, whereas nonconformists are not. Although the Clergy Disqualification Act 1870 contains a provision that enables clergy of the Church of England to renounce their position so that they are free to stand for election and take up their seat in the House after six months, there is no parallel procedure for the clergy of other religions.

However, I would not seek such a parallel procedure because it would only make some people less unequal than they are now. If a parallel procedure were introduced, all those people who are episcopally ordained—whether Roman Catholic or Church of England—could renounce their positions and take up a seat after six months, but they would still suffer inequality in relation to ministers who are not episcopally ordained and who could take up their seats with no requirement to renounce their position and wait six months.

We can conclude that the present framework is inconsistent and discriminatory, deriving from multiple sources over different periods of time. The reasons for the prohibitions have long since lapsed or become irrelevant and, as such, can no longer be justified. Roman Catholic priests are no longer thought of negatively by the state and Anglican clergy no longer represent the fourth estate to the realm. The context in which the decision to implement such restrictions was first taken is no longer relevant in modern society.

The lack of clarity in the law is made more incomprehensible by the fact that there is no relation between the active engagement of a minister and his eligibility for Parliament. An active nonconformist minister could stand in a constituency where his church is situated and where many of the electors are of the same belief, but a retired episcopally ordained priest who had changed his personal beliefs and had no adherence would be disqualified from taking up a seat. It is clear, then, that it would be too simplistic to say that those who wish to take up seats in the House should simply resign their orders.

That is especially pertinent for Roman Catholic ministers. The Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829 states:

> "No person in holy orders in the Church of Rome shall be capable of being elected to serve in Parliament as a Member of the House of Commons."

It is that definition of holy orders that causes conflict. It can be argued under ecclesiastical law that, once a Roman Catholic priest has been ordained, he will remain in holy orders whether or not he remains active. The law does not, therefore, recognise the status of ex-Catholic priests, so the current arrangements effectively conspire to prevent them from ever taking up their seats, if they are elected. Why should the state legally prevent some ministers from making a choice about their career, while other clergy are free to do so? A civil servant can resign and choose to enter politics, while the existing electoral law prevents some members of the clergy from doing the same.

It is of course reasonable to argue that there is a deal of tension between the role of a Member of Parliament and that of a practising minister of religion. Whether or not it is desirable for members of the clergy to stand for Parliament is a separate question for debate. However,

such decisions are matters not for legislation but for the custom of individual faiths or ecclesiastical law. The Bill would officially make the eligibility of the clergy of all religions to sit in this House a matter for the Churches and other religious organisations involved.

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): Does my hon. Friend agree that if someone has been ordained as a priest but, no matter how deeply held his views, feels unable to continue as a priest, the House and its Members have no right to prevent him from pursuing another career, if he wishes to do so?

Miss Widdecombe: Priesthood is a vocation, not a career.

Ms Ryan: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) says that this is a matter of vocation. The point is that it is not a matter for us, and it is a question of equal rights. However someone's career, occupation or vocation is defined, legislation should not prevent that person from entering the House.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: As I understand it, the hon. Lady is arguing for the Bill on the basis of equal rights for different religions. Does she hold the same argument on the established Church of England? Would she argue for disestablishment?

Ms Ryan: I thought that I had made myself clear: I am arguing for the removal of the disqualification of clergy; I am not discussing the disestablishment of the Church of England.

There are no grounds for continuing to distinguish between the clergy of different religions in this matter. Whether or not ministers of any religious groups should be able to be elected to the House is a matter of choice for the electorate and the parties and religious groups involved, not a matter for legislation. This disqualification does not exist in the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament, local government or the European Parliament; those bodies have not had to consider a Bill such as this.

The relationship between the various Churches and the state has changed immeasurably since the first discriminatory measures were introduced, and it is now time to reform them. Reform must be based on equal rights for all citizens, be they ministers of religion, ex-ministers of religion or, indeed, not ministers at all. The playing field must be level. We cannot have legislation that lays down different rules for different religious organisations. That is a matter not for the House but for the organisations themselves.

The implementation of the Human Rights Act 1998 makes these changes even more timely. Existing electoral law could be deemed to be a breach of the convention on human rights on several counts. Article 14 of the convention refers to religious discrimination; article 9 refers to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; and article 11 to freedom of assembly and association. Article 3 of the first protocol sets out the right to free elections. It is important that we act to remove clerical disabilities in relation to membership of the House before a situation arises where our human rights record is called into question.

The Bill will help to clarify—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am being disrupted by chatter from both sides of the House. I wish it would cease. I want to listen to the hon. Lady.

Ms Ryan: The Bill will help to clarify the relationship between the state and religious groups in this area of electoral law, and will remove some of the complex arrangements for which the state has legislated that create inequality rather than ensure equal rights. Far from interfering in matters that should be left to the discretion of individual religious leaders, the Bill will enable exactly that to happen. It will reduce the influence of the state to some degree.

The Bill is a modest measure. There are many other issues that we should debate, many of which have been raised by Opposition Members from an sedentary position. However, the Bill can achieve an important reform of equal rights. I commend its Second Reading.

4.51 pm

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): One of the delights of being a Member of Parliament is that we have the opportunity to explore rare legal and historical byways from time to time, and this is one of those occasions. Perhaps I should start by declaring that I do not have an interest. When volunteers were called for, I was a little slower than others in taking one pace backwards.

The topic is arcane in the extreme. As a nonconformist—as a Baptist and now a member of the Methodist church—I am not affected by the proposed exemption or legislation, unlike previous speakers who claim so to be. I believe not in the ordained priesthood but in the priesthood of all believers. It would create a problem for the Chamber if that belief were applied in the sense of the Privy Council's decision of 1951. I do not hold with bishops, and to save an intervention from a Conservative Member, it is my party's policy that the Church of England should be disestablished, as the Church in Wales and elsewhere has already been.

I approach the issue from a direction that is diagonally different from those who have already spoken.

Mr. Bercow: Even diametrically different.

Mr. Stunell: It might be diametrically different, but I think that it is more diagonally, and I chose my words carefully.

Fortunately, all Members are equal, although some are more equal than others. I suspect that the reality is that we all recognise that we are faced with legislation that has long outgrown any purpose or value that it had.

If we go back to 1801—we are repealing the House of Commons (Clergy Disqualification) Act 1801, among other measures—legislation was introduced because a Church of England priest won an election for Old Sarum. That was when the issue arose. The 1801 legislation was

[Mr. Stunell]

the product of a specific electorial event to decide whether the Rev. Horne Tooke—a name to conjure with, if ever there was—should take his place in the House.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Stunell: Why not? The opportunity to repeat that name is always to be welcomed.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, at that time, there was not an established party system, as there is now. Does he realise that when the 1801 Act took its place on the statute book, there would not have been a three-line Whip? Is he as surprised as I am that the issue before us, which is primarily one of conscience, is subject to a three-line Whip on the Government Benches, whereas on the official Opposition Benches it is subject to a one-line Whip?

Mr. Stunell: I may have a slight advantage over the hon. Gentleman in age and experience, so I am not at all surprised.

The Bill attempts to look back only 172 years, since when there has been mess, delay and dither on the issue. Fifty-one years ago, Rev. MacManaway—another name to conjure with—created yet another opportunity for the House to look seriously at the situation. There was much detailed thought, but the opportunity to take action and reform matters was thrown away. Three years ago, the Select Committee on Home Affairs had another go and made recommendations.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) made some potent points about why on earth those matters were not considered in electoral legislation that has come before the House since then. However, the fact that opportunities have been missed in the past does not mean that we should fail to take them now. The Home Affairs Committee report stated that there is

"a picture almost totally lacking in consistency or, in modern terms, any rational basis. Restrictions apply only to Christian ministers and not those of any other faith. They differ between Anglican priests, Roman Catholic priests and non-conformist clergy. And the position differs in England, Scotland and Wales."

One might have understood the position if Church of England clergy were not permitted to offer themselves for election to the House. After all, bishops have a route into the House of Lords. Extraordinarily, however, the Clerical Disabilities Act 1870 permits them to relinquish and make their way into the House in certain circumstances. On the other hand, Roman Catholic priests, orthodox priests and Church of Scotland ministers who have no route into the House of Lords cannot seek relief or get excused. Retired orthodox priests cannot offer themselves, but imams, shamans and rabbis certainly can. Presbyterians in England are in a different position from those in Scotland, and retired Anglican vicars in Wales are in a different position from those in England.

The situation is a hotchpotch. Perhaps the most extraordinary thing is that, contrary to what the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald said, it is not the case that former Roman Catholic priests cannot offer themselves to the House. They can, if they have been defrocked. Defrocked priests can offer themselves, but those who have merely retired cannot.

Mr. Forth: They know what to do about that.

Mr. Stunell: The right hon. Gentleman would have to go through several stages if he wanted to enter the House via that route. However, that is a matter for him.

The House already has ordained Members—obviously not ordained by bishops, or they would not be here. However, I hope that provides some answer to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, who asked whether it is appropriate to mix those two careers.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The hon. Gentleman confirmed the difference between the Church of Scotland and the Church of England. Church of Scotland ministers are not ordained by bishops; they are members of an established church. That is the issue.

Mr. Stunell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his informed intervention.

I want to make the general point that it is unusual to hear Conservative Front-Bench Members make the case that those who come into the House should have only one job. It is very much the norm for Conservative Members to have two jobs in Opposition; when challenged, they always claim that that brings advantages to the House. I wonder whether the work load and demands involved in being a Queen's Counsel differ greatly from those of a priest. Certainly, the profession is better paid, but the work load and demands are not very different.

I want to put it clearly on the record that Liberal Democrat Members certainly want an end to the anomalies that the existing legislation creates. We want to end the outdated religious discrimination that underlies it, and the Bill delivers that, albeit late in the day. It is, in principle, right, and we shall support it on Second Reading.

Mr. Bercow: Earlier, I made the point that, for Conservative Members, this is a free vote. I asked whether it was for Government Members and, eventually, it became clear that it was not. Is it a free vote for free-thinking Liberal Democrat Members?

Mr. Stunell: I was about to say that for the Liberal Democrats, every vote is a free vote.

The question that the Government have not answered, and which they must answer, is whether the measure is at the top of their list of priority reforms for this Parliament. I remind the Minister that the second stage of Lords reform, the introduction of legislation for the devolution of regions in England and a referendum on proportional representation are outstanding. Those all appeared in the Labour manifesto, but the removal of clergy disqualification certainly did not.

There must be more than a suspicion that, whereas progress on those matters has been slow because the Government fear the loss of influence and of power, the Bill has been accelerated because it is in the interests of their candidate in Greenock and Inverclyde. It is a pity that such a modest and long overdue reform is tainted

with Government self-interest. It would be nice, just for once, to see reform that was exactly that—reform—rather than it turning out to be expedience dressed up as virtue.

I seek an assurance from the Minister. Should the unthinkable happen and the Bill not make progress in this parliamentary Session, would he still see it as an urgent priority in the next Parliament, when his party's pressing need for it will have evaporated? The test of reformers is that they are ready to reform, even when it is not solely in their own interest.

We wish the Bill well; it is long overdue. The pity is that it is tarnished by its cynical timing and its opportunistic intentions.

5.1 pm

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): I am grateful for the opportunity to follow the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), who said that, as the provision has been on the statute book since 1801, we have dithered in removing it. That is probably true, although it sits ill with the view that the Bill is being rushed through Parliament for the benefit of a particular prospective parliamentary candidate.

I was interested in the intervention of the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), who makes some fine interventions on the Floor of the House. He said that in 1801, we did not have the party system. At that time, there was the Napoleonic throne and William Pitt was Prime Minister. Macaulay stated in his "History of England" that the system of parties began in 1843. As this is a wide-ranging debate, I throw in that insignificant and irrelevant piece of information.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Bell: I await the Exocet missile that will come from the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow).

Mr. Bercow: Not at all. It is always a pleasure to joust, in the friendliest way, with the hon. Gentleman. My question is simple. Why was the measure non-urgent after 197 years of the anomaly, and why has it become spectacularly urgent after 200 years?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful for that intervention, to which I am able to respond. I imagine that the reason behind the Government's thinking, to which my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary referred, was that the legislation has the support of the Church of England, the Church of Scotland, the Church of Ireland, the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales, and the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland and Ireland. That being the case, the legislation is appropriate for the statute book.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. He is right. As I said, a private Member's Bill was introduced. The Government did not support it at that stage because we wanted to consult the Churches. We have now consulted them and they have indicated their support. Moreover, a particular case has presented itself and, if we did not change the law now, someone whom the people might wish to elect would be prevented from standing.

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention and for referring to the case of a particular individual. As the House likes its history lessons, we can go back to the case of Charles Bradlaugh, who was regularly elected and would not swear the oath on the Bible, but wished to affirm and could not do so. It was many years before that anomaly was removed from the statute book.

I speak as the Second Church Estates Commissioner. The Church of England welcomes the Government's intention to legislate to remove the disqualification, except in the case of Lords Spiritual.

The Bill responds to a long-standing wish of the General Synod and of other Churches. We have had some debate on whether bishops who are not yet Lords Spiritual should be permitted to become Members of the House, and it has been asked whether such a practice will cause a great number of by-elections. I am reminded of a Dean Inge phrase that was liked by Winston Churchill:

"I've had a great many worries, most of which never happened."

Some of the scenarios about which hon. Members have heard today are not likely to happen during most of our parliamentary lives.

However, questions have been asked about Lords Spiritual and I know that the Church of England has expressed concern about factual language and draftsmanship points. Most of those concerns relate to paragraph 8 of the explanatory notes on the Bill. The Church of England is considering the matter with the aid of our legal adviser and we are seeking to iron out rucks in the Bill—a process that will, of course, improve it.

I do not wish to detain the House—

Mr. Bercow: Go on.

Mr. Bell: Notwithstanding the hon. Gentleman's encouragement, I shall conclude my remarks. The Church of England supports the Bill and wishes it well on Second Reading and in Committee. We hope that it will be safely launched on to the statute book.

5.6 pm

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): I shall vote tonight on the ecclesiastical issues that are raised by the Bill, rather than on the party political ones. As a matter of principle, I shall delight in voting against the guillotine that the Government are imposing.

I do not oppose the Bill. We are assured that the Church of England and other Churches were consulted and are content. I should like to declare an interest, as my late father was a Lord Spiritual, or, more technically, a Lord of Parliament—as opposed to a life peer—during his tenure of the See of Truro. A short while ago, during the passage of other legislation, hon. Members discussed the interesting question whether the time had come for them to record in the Register of Members' Interests their religion and denomination. That is an intriguing possibility, as such a practice would clear the air in relation not only to the matters under discussion, but to similar ones.

The Government are seeking to change the law for the worst possible reasons. The Under-Secretary just managed not to say that the history of the measure started in 1997, but we almost heard him make such a remark. He did not go far back in time, but I shall go much further in deploying my arguments. The introduction of the Bill is

[Mr. Robert Key]

in the interests of the Labour party and of one man who wants to stand as a Labour parliamentary candidate in the forthcoming election. I do not know Mr. David Cairns and I hold nothing against him personally. I merely point out that, when the previous Government changed the law a few years ago in the interests of one of our colleagues, that person was ejected by his electors at the ensuing general election in 1997.

I understand that Mr. Cairns served as a Roman Catholic priest. Thus, unlike Church of England priests, he cannot draw up a certificate of relinquishment under the Clerical Disabilities Act 1870. Such a certificate would ensure that he relinquished not his holy orders, but the exercise of them. The Under-Secretary will wish that he had remembered that point. It is not that priests stop being ministers under the 1870 Act, but merely that they relinquish the exercise of their holy orders. As a Roman Catholic, Mr. Cairns has had to obey the Roman Catholic Code of Canon Law 1983. Paragraph 3 of canon 285 of that code forbids clerics from assuming public office whenever it means sharing in the exercise of civil power. That is what the Roman Catholic Church says.

However, the Government are today inviting us to repeal the whole of the House of Commons (Clergy Disqualification) Act 1801 and parts of the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829, the Clerical Disabilities Act 1870, the Welsh Church Act 1914, the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975 and the Representation of the People Act 1983. We are tinkering, but on a grand scale, and we must pause to remind ourselves why we are doing so. I say "we" not only as a communicant and practising member of the Church of England, but as a Member of Parliament, which itself has been interwoven for hundreds of years with the Church in England.

The Bill is part of a process of removing civil disabilities on the ground of religion that goes back at least to the 1780s and attempts to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts. Those attempts concerned the emancipation of Roman Catholics, notably the 5.5 million Roman Catholics in Ireland who came within the jurisdiction of Parliament in 1800 and 1801. That pattern of reformation continued as the Church of England functioned throughout the 18th and early 19th century as the religious embodiment of the state. Church and state belonged to each other, and the Church was expected to embody and express the religious aspirations of our nation. The repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 and the Catholic Emancipation Act 1829 brought an end to the absolute primacy of the English Church. I stress that it is not only the Church of England but the English Church.

I want to acknowledge the help that I received in sharpening my ecclesiastical history from the staff of Sarum college in my constituency and especially the Very Rev. John Moses, the Dean of St. Paul's. I commend his excellent book "A Broad and Living Way" to those who wish to get more involved in that esoteric subject.

How relevant is the subject to the House? Some of my hon. Friends have said that the Bill has been introduced because it is expedient for the Government before a general election, that not many people are interested in it, and that it has a low priority. I have tried to ascertain the Bill's relevance and the state of belief in this country.

The 17th report of "British Social Attitudes" was published last year. The table for church membership in Britain shows that 46 per cent. of the population declare that they are Christian; 10 per cent. declare that they are of another religion, and 44 per cent. claim to be of no religion. Those statistics are interesting because the trendy talk nowadays suggests that religion is for a tiny minority. The table for church attendance shows that 45 per cent. of the people of this country claim that they go to church, although 13 per cent. say that they go once a week. A little more than 54 per cent. say that they never go to church.

Do people believe in God? According to the report, 77 per cent. of the people who were polled in 1998 said that they did. Forty-eight per cent. said that they believed in God now and that they always had. Only 13 per cent. said that they did not believe in God now and never had. Again, those statistics are interesting for the doubters.

The Bill may be perceived as unfinished business and further ad-hocery. However, it is characteristic of the way in which the Churches have reformed throughout the years. In the 19th century, the process of disengaging Church and state was piecemeal and pragmatic, like the Bill. The establishment principle was qualified but not abandoned. It should not be abandoned in the 21st century.

For 200 years, the British Government have sought religious neutrality for our state. I shall cite some examples: the removal of restrictions on ground of religion for election to Parliament and public office; the abolition of the powers of church courts; the abolition of compulsory Church rates; the secularisation of the ancient universities; the introduction of civil marriages; the provision of public burial grounds and municipal cemeteries; and the establishment of civil parishes.

Another interesting move was made in the Church of England (Worship and Doctrine) Measure 1974. The redoubtable Enoch Powell spoke passionately in the debate. On the comprehensive nature of the Church of England, he said:

> "It was because the liturgy and the articles of religion, being part of the law of the land, were so difficult to alter, were so near as possible to being permanencies, that in age after age successive waves of thought and religious feeling were nevertheless able to find a place within the Church of England and within its unity."—[*Official Report*, 4 December 1974; Vol. 882, c. 1673.]

Section 6 of the Measure states:

> "Section 3 of the Submission of the Clergy Act 1533 (which provides that no Canons shall be contrary to the Royal Prerogative or the customs, laws or statutes of this realm) shall not apply to any rule of ecclesiastical law relating to any matter for which provision may be made by Canon in pursuance of this Measure."

In other words, we must go back a very long time—way beyond 1921 or even 1801—when we are asked to revise these issues.

In spite of all that, because the Church of England is the English Church, and because of the nature of the reformation settlement and the responsibilities attached to establishment—which the Church of England should trumpet with much greater confidence—the Church of England has an outreach throughout the land unequalled by any other religion, Church or sect.

The Bishop of Durham said in a debate on the Wakeham report in the House of Lords:

> "The presence of bishops in Parliament can point to an abiding validity of the Christian tradition to public doctrine and ethical norms. It is the national ministry of the Church of England 'by law

established' that makes this role possible. Through the dioceses and parishes, through a small army of clergy and licensed lay ministers, through church schools and chaplaincies to many kinds of institutions, the Church of England has a vast constituency of pastoral contact which extends far beyond the core of committed churchgoers. The expression 'national church' is not an anachronism."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 610, c. 932.]

The English Church has, therefore, no cause to feel threatened by the Bill. It should, however, wake up and remember why it is the Church "by law established".

Mr. Bercow: I have listened to my hon. Friend's historical exegesis with interest and respect. I have also noted what he said about church attendances, which I found slightly more surprising. Will he confirm that he is not suggesting that the somewhat better church attendance figures than I had imagined are either an argument for the Bill or against it?

Mr. Key: The figures are an important matter of background information. Some people have suggested that it is a waste of time for Parliament to consider this matter, and that the people outside are not interested. The figures that I have quoted—they are not my figures—prove my point.

The Venerable Bede wrote, in his "Historiam Gentis Anglorum Ecclesiasticum", that there was, in the sixth century, an awareness of England and of the English without parallel in other parts of Europe, and that the English nation was the child of the Church. The Church gave its authority to kingship, to law and to the unity of the nation. It provided the King's chief office-holders and was, effectively, the civil service. The state granted the Church privileges and gave it land and money.

England was never part of the holy Roman empire. The Normans drew England closer to the papacy, but still the English Church fought for independence. The Magna Carta of 1215 asserted:

"ut ecclesia Anglicana libera sit."

That means: thus the English Church will be free.

In 1392, King Richard II stated in statute 16—the statute of praemunire:

"The Crown of England, which has always been so free and independent as not to have any earthly sovereign but to be immediately subject to God in all things touching the prerogatives of royalty and the said Crown, should be made subject to the Pope and the laws and statutes of the realm defeated and set aside by him at pleasure, to the utter destruction of the sovereignty of our Lord the King, his crown and royalty, and his whole kingdom. God forbid."

That was too much for the Pope, and Richard II withdrew it on pain of excommunication. However, it was an expression of the independence of the English Church that eventually bore fruit in the reformation statutes of the 1530s.

School history teaches us—or probably does not, under this philistine Government—that the Tudor reformation was about Henry VIII's desire to get a divorce from Catherine of Aragon. It was about far more than that. It was about the extent of papal involvement in English life, the relation of the papacy to the Crown, and the meaning of sovereignty in a nation state.

Henry VIII's reformation Parliament of November 1529 set in train a process that took until Elizabeth I's Parliament of 1559 to establish the monarchy as defender of the faith, and—in the Act of Supremacy 1559—as

"the only supreme governor of this realm as well in all spiritual and ecclesiastical things or causes as temporal."

Against the background of that and all the strife and struggle that followed the reformation, I wish Mr. David Cairns no ill, but as the House debates the Bill on Second Reading it is well for us to remember that the English Church and state are two facets of one society, inextricably bound together in this nation and both much stronger for it.

Mr. Stuart Bell: The hon. Gentleman has given us an interesting recital of historical background that brings us to the concept of Church and state. In the same mould, does he accept that during the 19th century, between Gladstone and Disraeli, the argument about Church and state and the established Church rippled on throughout? It will continue to ripple on, but will the hon. Gentleman confirm that if one disentangles Church and state, the monarchy itself comes into focus? Whether we have a republic or a monarchy is the next issue to be dealt with.

Mr. Key: That will no doubt occupy those who sit on these Benches in a thousand years. I am sad that some hon. Members have not recognised the interweaving of Church and state in this country, which makes it wholly different from any other nation in the world bar none, particularly our continental neighbours. In 1920, the French Church was disestablished.

Mr. Bell: It was 1903.

Mr. Key: I was several years out, which is terrible, but that intervention makes the point that the French Church was disestablished. Only this weekend, I happened to be in old Catholic Munich for a security conference. As we looked at the two onions of the Marienkirche, a French academic laughed about the fact that no one ever goes to church in France, saying that it was a load of mumbo-jumbo. I thought, "Well, that's just a bit different."

Mr. Forth: I am slightly puzzled, I must confess, given my hon. Friend's analysis of the relationship between Church and state and the continued presence of Church of England bishops in a House of Parliament as of right, that he still seems to think that we are able legitimately to legislate as the Bill suggests without giving proper consideration or reconsideration to the related matters of Church and state and the presence of bishops in the other place. How can he suggest that?

Mr. Key: If I considered such matters in detail, I dare say that I would be ruled out of order. However, I would be happy to explore them because I know that, under the Wakeham proposals, the number of Church of England bishops in the other place would be reduced from 26 to 16. That I regret, but the quid pro quo is that there would be more appointees from other Churches and other religions. I have no difficulty with that. When I was a Minister, I established the Inner Cities Religious Council with a number of distinguished theologians and the Bishop of Leicester, Tom Butler, who is now Bishop of Southwark. Were I allowed to, I should have considered

[Mr. Key]

that important development under the terms of the Bill. I would be happy for a wider discussion along such lines to take place.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way because my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) has a legitimate grievance about which, I might add, he chuntered furiously to me earlier. Does my hon. Friend agree that one reason for the problem arising—we do not seem to be dealing with interrelated issues in an orderly fashion—is that the Government have engaged in a disgraceful go-slow on reform of the composition of the other place?

Mr. Key: Yes, of course. My hon. Friend is right. If I appear to take a rather long-term view, I make no apology for that. The seat that I represent, Salisbury, sent its first Members to the House in 1260. We in Salisbury tend to think long. We also find it important to take in our stride reforms that have taken place over those many hundreds of years. There is an historical continuity about this place and about our country.

I shall not be surprised if we give the Bill a Second Reading, but I am very surprised that the Government have chosen to rush it through just before a general election, without blushing. It is heroically appalling that they should hurry to the House to legislate so that one of their own party's candidates can stand for election in a few weeks. Nevertheless, that is entirely in character with the way in which the House, over many centuries, has dealt with such issues, the difference being perhaps that 300 or 400 years ago, someone would have been burnt at the stake. I have no intention to vote for that tonight.

5.25 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Listening to the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key), I could well imagine him conducting a Church of England service in a church in deepest Salisbury. I have to say that I have heard livelier debates at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in Edinburgh. Listening to some of the interventions, I came close to thinking that I should perhaps make a personal statement, given that we are dealing with my would-be successor, Mr. David Cairns.

I welcome the Bill, which is of great interest to those whom I have the honour to represent. Incidentally—as you well know, Mr. Deputy Speaker—my constituency is Greenock and Inverclyde, and not, as some hon. Members insist on pronouncing it, "Grennock" and Inverclyde.

Let me say in response to a couple of interventions from the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) that I played no part whatever in the selection of my successor. I kept myself at a great distance, feeling that that was the honourable thing to do. Obviously, like every other Member, I tell the truth in this place, so I will say that I wanted to be succeeded by a woman with good, honourable, old-Labour qualifications, but that was not to be.

Let me also say—I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, North (Ms Ryan) for giving me the opportunity—that at no time did members of my party behave in a deplorable or underhand way in selecting Mr. Cairns to represent Greenock and Inverclyde, if he is successful. If I may borrow a term from industrial relations legislation to respond to a sedentary intervention from the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), it could be said that they were in a condition of justifiable ignorance anent this anomaly. Anyway, I hope that the Bill is passed.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Godman: I will in a moment.

My earlier question to my hon. Friend the Minister about the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly was badly phrased. The Bill brings us into line with the sensible legislation that established those legislatures: the Government of Wales Act 1998, the Scotland Act 1998—I played a large part in the passage of that Bill, along with the late Donald Dewar, who took it through the House in his inimitable style and with his wonderful elegance—and the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

May I refer the Minister to paragraph 14 of the explanatory notes? It states, among other things:

"Each of the four statutes—the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1978, the Government of Wales Act 1998, the Scotland Act 1998 and the Northern Ireland Act 1998—presently provide that a person who is disqualified from membership of the House of Commons other than by the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975 is also disqualified from the legislative body in question. This would disqualify clergymen because they are disqualified from the Commons by the Acts of 1801 and 1829 mentioned above. In order that such clergymen can sit in these legislatures each of those four statutes goes on to provide expressly that a person who is ordained or who is a minister of any religious denomination is not disqualified from membership of that legislative body. It will no longer be necessary to make that express statement as regards the entitlement of clergy to be members of those bodies."

Mr. Bercow: A moment ago, the hon. Gentleman said that the Greenock and Inverclyde constituency Labour party was in a state of justifiable ignorance. It is important to emphasise that, whether it was acting in ignorance or knowingly, it certainly was not acting illegally. The absurdity of the current situation is that it is legal for an individual such as Mr. Cairns to stand as a prospective parliamentary candidate—there is nothing illegal about that—but illegal for him to take his seat. It is important to make that clear.

Dr. Godman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I know that he will accept my word that members of the Greenock and Inverclyde constituency Labour party acted in good faith.

Were the Bill not to be passed but Mr. Cairns to be elected by the Greenock and Inverclyde constituency, an important issue might arise to be addressed in a judicial review at the Court of Session in Scotland. I think that if those two events were to happen, there could be an infringement of human rights. However, as the House knows, I am not a lawyer and I never desired to become one, so I may not be entirely correct on that point. Nevertheless, I believe that no one should be denied membership of this place, the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly or the Welsh Assembly on the ground of ordination or of being a minister of a certain religious denomination.

Like the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), I look forward to the disestablishment of the Church of England. I also welcome the point made by the hon.

Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) on the Church of Scotland. The principal representative of that denomination is of course the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, who is chosen annually.

Paragraph 8 of the explanatory notes mentions Lords Spiritual and the 26 archbishops and bishops who sit in another place. If we are to continue with that place—one of my abiding regrets as a Member of Parliament is that we have not abolished it and replaced it with a senate—I believe that leaders of other Churches and religions should be entitled to sit, as the bishops do, as Lords of Parliament. Some of the other religious leaders might regard sitting next door as a somewhat doubtful privilege, but if the Archbishops of Canterbury and of York can do so, why cannot the Moderator of the Church of Scotland and Cardinal Thomas Winning?

I know that the Church of England is sympathetic to widening the ecclesiastical membership of the other place. However, I also appreciate that there are complicated elements to the issue that will have to be addressed. I hope that that happens in the next Parliament.

Paragraph 9 of the explanatory notes states that the Churches were consulted on the proposals and

"are content for the statutory disqualifications to be removed."

It therefore seems that the Bill has the approval, although perhaps qualified approval, of the Churches concerned.

What will happen, however, if a person should decide to give up and return to his or her Church? As the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) said, the traditional view of both Catholics and Anglicans is that holy orders cannot be relinquished, and that although one can renounce the exercise of one's orders, one is ordained for life. The right hon. Lady is of course a recent convert to Catholicism. Perhaps I should say that although I am a lapsed Catholic, I maintain a very keen and paternal interest in Catholic Church matters.

As the Minister and the hon. Member for Salisbury said, there is a question whether, even if the Bill is enacted, a Catholic priest who is in "good standing"—I think that that is how it is described in Catholic canon law—can serve as a Member of Parliament. The hon. Gentleman mentioned paragraph 3 of canon 285 in the Roman Catholic code of canon law 1983. It states:

"Clerics are forbidden to assume pubic office whenever it means sharing in the exercise of civil power."

That is unequivocal, and at first glance it suggests that a Catholic priest cannot in principle hold political office other than in the obvious and special case of an office in the Curia. However, Catholic priests have held senior political positions. One example is the first President of Haiti, who took that office after the fall of the Duvalier family. I assume that he had a special dispensation from the Vatican.

Would a priest who wanted to stand as a candidate for election to this House while retaining his good standing with his church need a dispensation from his diocesan bishop—or, failing that, from Rome? Alternatively, a priest has the right to petition Rome to have his orders annulled by rescript under paragraph 3 of canon 290 of the Catholic code of canon law. However, that is granted

"to deacons for only grave reasons, and to priests for only the gravest of reasons."

Catholic constituents for whom I have the greatest regard and affection have raised the concern that, regardless of civil law on the subject, it appears unlikely that a Catholic priest in a western European democracy would be permitted by his church to hold political office and remain in good standing. I sincerely hope that I am wrong in that belief.

In conclusion, any cleric—Anglican or Catholic—can simply walk away from his Church and stand as a candidate in an election. However, that person would no longer be in good standing under the law of his Church. My hope is that compassion and sensitivity would determine the outcome when a prospective candidate is caught in such circumstances. If such a problem were to arise with a candidate in Scotland, I hope that Cardinal Winning and his priestly colleagues would show precisely that compassion and sensitivity.

I welcome the Bill and I sincerely hope that it becomes law before the general election.

5.38 pm

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman), who in opposition used to sit on the Benches behind those occupied by members of my party. We have had a long friendship, although recently we have sparred more than we have supported each other. For example, his final comment concerned the standing of Roman Catholic priests in the western democracies, yet I recall that a priest in the United States was removed from office when he challenged papal authority. That is another possibility that we must bear in mind. The Minister said earlier that we should not introduce theological arguments into our debate, but the harsh reality is that those arguments are part of the debate.

As the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) propounded, the issue at the heart of the debate is that priests are clerks in holy orders who receive remuneration under the Crown. If this reforming Bill is to succeed, the bar on candidates standing for Parliament who are now in receipt of such remuneration—for example, through membership of a quango—may have to be removed. I drew attention to that issue in connection with the Church of Scotland, which is in a different situation. Over the years, however, there has been a barrier to ministers ordained in the Church of Scotland.

I am an ordained minister of a sister Church, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. I have not resigned my office; I was relieved from the pastorate. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland allows us to be ministers without charge under the care of presbytery, able to perform duties to help our colleagues and to carry out pastoral work if we are called on to help someone out. Often I do not deal with political or housing issues in my surgery but with some of the issues that regularly came my way when I was pastoring a congregation.

I am one of those with links with 1950. I was a student in Londonderry, in the constituency of Belfast, West, where Rev. J. G. MacManaway sought guidance from the then Attorney-General of Northern Ireland, who I believe was right in his interpretation. I think that even Professor Blackburn would give that impression. The late Edmund Warnock said that he would be qualified to stand for election to the House of Commons and he was so elected, but the electoral court went into more rarefied arguments.

[Rev. Martin Smyth]

I believe that the people of Belfast, West, where I was a constituent at the time, were robbed of a very useful representative, but, at the same time, I can understand some of the arguments.

I do not believe that anyone wants this place to be full of ministerial or clerical clones. However, the issue seems to be that those who have been priests are barred. I sympathise with that, but when does a person cease to be a priest? I read during the week of an elderly priest who was unfrocked because of some obscene behaviour in the past. It is rare for a priest in the Church of Rome to be unfrocked; they are quite often simply removed from the office of public priesthood.

The Minister referred to priests being barred because of their activity in political circles. Desmond Wilson in Belfast, West was barred from public priesthood by Bishop Philbin. I remember Gerry Fitt, now ennobled in another place, coming to me in real anger because Desmond Wilson had published a book with a worldwide imprimatur that gave a different opinion of what was happening in Northern Ireland. He said, "I can never understand why Bishop Daly restored him to the office of public priesthood." That day, I was walking through Heathrow airport to get the plane back to Belfast and I met Dr. Daly. I said to him, "Bishop, my constituents and some of your flock have been asking why you restored Desmond Wilson to the office of public priesthood, when Dr. Philbin, your predecessor, removed him from it." The gracious Dr. Daly was rather taken aback that a mere Presbyterian politician should ask him such a question. He stepped back with a little start and, giving that lovely smile, said, "I tried to win him back but I failed."

I wonder whether the Bill is premature and whether there is any real reason for it. I have no difficulties with people coming here who are elected by their people. I had to face that challenge myself, although, interestingly, it did not come from political circles. When my parliamentary predecessor was murdered, I, as someone interested in public life, encouraged others to put themselves forward, but two of my brothers—not filial but ministerial—from different spheres of the presbyterian ministry asked me, "Is it not your turn?" I could not encourage someone else to stand when danger was involved, unless I faced that danger myself. I prayed about the matter and the doors opened. I believe in and understand the concept of ordination for life. I am an ordained minister for life.

I am glad that the trite expression "Ye cannot serve God and mammon" has not been used today. After my election, I received several letters expressing that view, but they were unsigned so I could not respond to them. I remind all of us who claim the Christian profession that the Master said those words not to disciples—apostles—but to followers. When we are dealing with issues of conscience, it behoves all of us, even in this place, to put that loyalty to the Master clearly to the fore. If the Almighty could shut doors for Paul, who wanted to go here, there and everywhere, and yet open another door that could not be closed, He had a great opportunity, through the selection and electoral processes, to shut the door on Martin Smyth.

Today, we are debating whether the law of the land should shut doors on people or open other doors that may cause problems in the future. We glibly say that anyone who is a leader of any religious community should have a right to be a Member of this place if he is elected, but would we be as keen if they belonged to the strange cults that have developed in the modern world, and could brainwash other people into selecting and electing them?

Mr. Fabricant: I am listening to the hon. Gentleman's argument with considerable interest. He presents a powerful case. However, surely those who are ministers of strange cults can be elected to this place anyway. Is not that correct? I look to the Minister for clarification, but he is engaged in a private conversation so I am not getting any help. The Bill specifically aids members of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church.

Mr. Forth: That is not what the Bill says.

Rev. Martin Smyth: The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) makes a valuable point, with Lichfield's two lovely towers, but he is wrong this time. It is possible that the earlier argument is rather superficial and we should be careful about following it.

Mr. Forth: Does the hon. Gentleman share my worry about the Bill? It loosely uses the words "minister" and "a religious denomination" without giving any definition. That could open the door to the situation described by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant). The measure could be widely or loosely interpreted and might lead us in directions that we cannot yet anticipate.

Rev. Martin Smyth: The right hon. Gentleman makes a valuable point and it should be borne in mind. It might be argued that the arguments made earlier were about preventing the election of people who hold offices of profit under the Crown. However, Presbyterian ministers were in that position at one time. There was the regium donum—the gift of the Crown—but many years ago, my forebears commuted their money and invested it in central church funds. As a result, we are under no obligation to the Crown.

Dr. Godman: Can the hon. Gentleman remind us whether he raised similar objections in respect of membership of the Northern Ireland Assembly during the passage of the Northern Ireland Act 1998?

Rev. Martin Smyth: I do not believe that that objection was raised. There was a powerful lot of things in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and we did not always have enough time to explore them and expose some of the weaknesses that are still being worked out in Northern Ireland, not least of which is the failure of having an unaccountable Executive—we do not know where we are with them.

5.50 pm

Ms Sandra Osborne (Ayr): I declare a personal interest, which will become clear shortly. I very much welcome the Select Committee on Home Affairs 1997–98 report, "Electoral Law and Administration", which recommended the change that we are discussing. However, I agree with those hon. Members who have said that it has taken some time to institute a change which is

long overdue. For reasons that will also become clear, it is a matter of great regret to me that the change did not occur under the previous Government.

In 1951, a Select Committee report on clergy disqualification recommended no change on the basis of practicality. Various hon. Members have argued today that there is no groundswell of clergy desperate to stand for election to the House. That may well be the case, but this is an issue of principle which should be addressed, and it does not matter whether David Cairns or two other people want to stand for election.

I fully accept that under the current legislation—which dates back centuries, as hon. Members have said—non-Church of England and former episcopalian ordained priests and Catholic priests suffer a double discrimination in that they have no practical remedy, as no provision exists to alter their status if they want to stand for election to, and be eligible to sit in, the House. However, I wish to highlight the issue from a different perspective: for most ministers of religion, especially those who have been ordained and served for a considerable time, it is not an insignificant decision to demit their status.

The Labour candidate in Ayr at the 1992 election was a victim of the discrimination the Bill will end. He had spent six years at university, training to be a Church of Scotland minister. He then spent 15 years working in some of the poorest areas in Paisley and Ayr. Alongside his parish work he was involved in politics, so it was a natural progression that members of the local party asked him to stand as the Labour candidate in Ayr in 1992. However, as a Church of Scotland minister, he was barred from taking a seat in the House. The Church put no impediment in his way, but the law of the land did.

To stand for Parliament, he had to demit his status as a Church of Scotland minister—the equivalent of a doctor having his or her name removed from the general medical register, or a lawyer having his or her qualified practising certificate revoked. Can hon. Members imagine the outcry if people had to abandon their right to practise law if they wanted to become a Member of Parliament?

Mr. Forth: A good idea.

Ms Osborne: Indeed, but there would be an outcry in the highest places if that were ever suggested and there would no longer be any learned Members.

When I said that I declared an interest in the matter, I should have added that the Labour candidate in Ayr in 1992 was my husband—in fact, he still is. If he ever wanted his ministerial status back, he would have to petition the general assembly of the Church of Scotland at its annual gathering. When I was elected in 1997—a worthy successor to my husband as candidate in Ayr—I was aware that there had been a time, not so long ago, when I, too, would have been barred from sitting in the House—not because I was a minister, but for the specific reason that I was a woman, and no remedy would have been open to me to circumvent that ruling.

In 1992, my husband stood for Ayr—a highly marginal seat at the time, although it is obviously no longer one—with no guarantee of winning. Indeed, as most hon. Members will know, he was defeated by 85 votes out of 55,000—a small margin by anyone's standards, except perhaps in Florida. Yet the law requires such people to sign away years of study, hard-won qualifications and a lifetime of work and service, perhaps 18 months or two years before an election, to stand for a seat that they may well not win.

It was ultimately my husband's decision to make that stand, but a democratic deficit is involved. As I have said, the Church itself placed no impediment in his way. Indeed, the Church of Scotland has a long and honourable record of encouraging not only its members and adherents but its clergy to be involved in the political process. I disagree with the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) about the clergy's involvement in political activities, as does the Church of Scotland.

The moderator's annual visit to the House is a well-established and happy occasion. Only last week, the press reported that this year's moderator is ready to join an anti-nuclear protest outside Faslane and has declared himself undaunted by the possibility of arrest as a result. The Church of Scotland's church and nation committee speaks out on all issues affecting the life of the Scottish people and is listened to by the Government at Westminster and Edinburgh.

Parallel bodies of the Church exist at local presbytery level to speak out on community and social issues. Countless ordinary members have viewed it as a natural extension of their Christian faith to be involved in politics for the good of humanity and society. That involvement can range from going along to the local tenants group, or campaigning for the cancellation of world debt in the poorest nations, to becoming a local councillor, or even a Member of Parliament. Why should one part of the political process be barred to a particular group of Christians—the clergy—and then only to the clergy of certain denominations?

Many clergy have held elected political office. I think of those who have been councillors. One giant figure of the Scottish Labour movement comes to mind—the Rev. Geoff Shaw. Geoff was the founder of the Gorbals group and went on to lead Strathclyde regional council, serving a population half the size of Scotland's. If he had not died so tragically young, who knows where his politics might have taken him?

Reference has been made to other clergy who have been Members of Parliament. I know from my own experience that people often refer with some puzzlement to the position of the hon. Members for South Antrim (Dr. McCrea), for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) and for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth). They are still bemused when I try to explain that they are not clergy of an established Church, debarred under current legislation. Indeed, going back in the history of the House, Scottish Presbyterian ministers—albeit of denominations other than the established Church of Scotland—have made a significant contribution.

A great figure of the Scottish Labour movement was the Rev. James Barr—a pacifist and socialist. He was elected to the House in 1924 as the Independent Labour party Member for Motherwell. He was a forceful opponent of Ramsay MacDonald's National Government and lost his seat opposing it in 1931. He was returned as Member for Coatbridge in 1935. Along with great early socialists, such as Keir Hardie, he campaigned tirelessly for home rule for Scotland, a minimum wage and temperance. I am sure that he would have given this Government a pass mark of two out of three.

[Ms Osborne]

One of James Barr's claims to fame was that he made one of the longest ever maiden speeches—88 minutes and stretching to 18 columns in *Hansard*. I considered reading out his speech verbatim to hon. Members, but I thought better of it; I am sure that that would be the last thing they would want to hear. However, I know from personal experience that clergymen often like the sound of their own voices, can make excellent contributions to debate, and tend to be accomplished public speakers.

Suffice it to say that James Barr was attacking the Church of Scotland (Property and Endowments) Act 1925 in his maiden speech. He vehemently opposed any link between Church and state and thought it wholly the responsibility of the Church to support and maintain itself on a voluntary basis. When the union took place in 1929, he felt so strongly about this that he stayed with the rump of the United Free Church. If he had not, he would have found himself debarred from membership of the House of Commons.

Mr. Winnick: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech and, among other matters, has referred to the position of her husband. Does she accept that those hon. Members, such as myself, who are not adherents of any religion support the Bill? Indeed, I do so as a member of the Home Affairs Committee, because the existing position represents a form of discrimination that certainly cannot be justified. Does she also agree that if any criticism is to be made, it is that such a measure should have been introduced years ago?

Ms Osborne: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. If this Bill had been introduced 15 years ago, my husband would probably still be a practising minister in the Church of Scotland. However, he had to demit his status when he stood as a candidate.

Another great figure of the Scottish Labour movement was Campbell Stephen. He was elected as MP for Glasgow, Camlachie in 1922 and he was one of the famous Clydeside group of Independent Labour party Members. He, too, lost his seat in 1931 only to be re-elected in 1935. What is not so well known is that he, like Barr, started life as a minister of the United Free Church of Scotland. He gave up his charge in Ardrossan to fight unsuccessfully the Ayr Burghs seat in 1918 and he never resumed his ministry.

The point of my argument is to illustrate that there is no real difference between a politically active minister of the Church of Scotland and one of any number of other mainstream denominations in Scotland who are not caught up by this arbitrary legislation that debars membership of the House of Commons to ministers of the Church of Scotland.

I do not think that we should be too parochial when considering this matter. Internationally, clergy have played a significant role in the politics of their respective countries. I think in particular of the African continent and north and central America. Other aspects of the issue, particularly the case of former Roman Catholic priests, will be, and have been, taken up by hon. Members. I have concentrated on the Scottish Presbyterian dimension.

I would never wish to suggest that being an MP is the highest expression of political involvement. There are many ways of being involved in the political process and for many people being an MP would not be their chosen way. George Bernard Shaw might have been thinking of ambitious would-be MPs when he wrote:

> "There are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it."

The third tragedy might be to be barred from achieving what may not be one's heart's desire at all, but should be a democratic right—to become a Member of Parliament.

The Bill should not be about any particular person's smooth passage into the House. It is, like the separate case for the repeal of the Act of Succession, an issue of individual human rights—a matter of religious and civil liberties and an opportunity to add to the democratic credentials of the House.

6.2 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I cannot share the general support for the Bill for a number of reasons. My instinctive reason always in such a case is that, when nearly everyone agrees on something, it is probably wrong. That seems to be so in this case. The fact that the Bill was introduced with smug complacency and the fact that almost all those who have spoken seem to be of one religious persuasion tend to set my antennae quivering. I wonder what it is all about.

The Minister was originally coy, and then blustered when he was asked why we were getting the Bill now. The answer appeared straightforward once we got it. The Bill is the legitimisation of a Labour candidate, and I can think of no worse reason to change the law of the land. There may be many good reasons for the changes to be introduced by the Bill, but to legitimise a Labour candidate now is the worst possible reason that I can think of. We can dismiss that as a proper reason; it does not explain why we should support the Bill at this time.

The tragedy is that the local Labour party either selected the candidate in ignorance of the law—that would not say much for the party's support for its local organisations—or, worse, it selected him knowing that the law as it stands would prevent him, if elected by the voters of Greenock and Inverclyde, from taking his seat. Either way, that is not a good recommendation for the House to approve the Bill at this stage, however excellent the individual may be. As my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) pointed out, none of us has met this man, and, in one respect, we have absolutely no interest in whether he is elected. We would rather that a Conservative is elected in Greenock and Inverclyde, but—although I have been away from the Clyde for quite a long time—I suspect that the chances of a Conservative being elected there are as about as strong as the chances of a Labour candidate being elected in Bromley and Chislehurst.

Dr. Godman: May I point out again to the right hon. Gentleman that local Labour party members were unaware of the anomaly? He should not denigrate decent, ordinary activists in a particular party. How many Members of this Parliament—let alone ordinary activists in a local party—knew of the anomaly?

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman should not get too excited. I will denigrate whoever I like, whenever I like, and for whatever reason I like. I, not the hon. Gentleman, will decide whether the good Labour supporters of

Greenock and Inverclyde are immune from that. However, my criticism is directed at the professional agent—if there is one—or the Labour party in Scotland, which should concentrate on such matters instead of the other nonsenses that it gets up to. That is where my criticism is levelled. I repeat my point that, because the Greenock and Inverclyde Labour party found itself in this position, that is no reason to change the law. That is my first argument against our supporting the Bill on this occasion.

My next point echoes a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon). If we were to change the law now, that would give rise to legitimate grievance among many people who were aware of the law, respected the law and did not offer themselves as candidates. They would find that they had suddenly been put in a most unfortunate position. For whatever reason, Mr. Cairns is being presented as a candidate and he is having the law changed for him just before an election. However, all the other people who may well have wanted to become candidates and who chose not to because they believed that the law did not allow them to would have good cause to say, "Hold on a minute; this is completely and grotesquely unfair." Believe it or not, the law is being changed to benefit one individual when, for the reverse reason, it could disbenefit many other people.

Mr. Bercow: It is very rare for my right hon. Friend and me to be at loggerheads, but may I suggest that the thrust of his point runs counter to his general enthusiasm—an enthusiasm that I share—for risk-taking and entrepreneurship? Does he accept that it would have been entirely open to any other individual to put himself or herself forward as a prospective candidate in the knowledge that it was legal to stand but would be illegal to take his or her seat? That person could hope, plot and collaborate with others to campaign for a change in the law and take his or her chance. Why has my right hon. Friend not considered that perfectly estimable possibility?

Mr. Forth: Of course, it is a possibility. However, in this case it helps if that person is a member of the Labour party and not any other party—a fact that may, unusually, have escaped my hon. Friend's attention. He is right, but I gather that Mr. Cairns is quoted as saying, "Don't worry, chaps. We'll have the law changed, and that will put everything right." My point is that the timing is most unfortunate. Although my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) rightly emphasised that official Opposition Members would have a free vote, she pointed out that there have been several opportunities recently to change the law.

Miss Widdecombe: Four.

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend assures me that were four occasions when we could have legislated on this matter in proper time, allowing time for proper consideration and allowing other people to benefit from the change in electoral law. In almost every respect, the timing of the Bill's introduction is not only unfortunate, but unacceptable and unconscionable. The fact that the Government gave priority not to this measure, but to anti-hunting Bills and piffling Bills on vehicle crime says much about their sense of priorities. I shall return briefly to the issue of timing, because it is important.

I am also uneasy about the Bill because I do not think that it should be dealt with in isolation. In his typically learned and well-researched way, my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury provided the background to the matter and brought out strongly the fact that such a Bill cannot be considered as a tiny piece of a large mosaic. It should not be considered entirely in isolation, because it carries with it important constitutional implications, not least, as he suggested, for the position of the established Church.

As a result of our history, there is an unusually complex relationship between the state and the Churches, especially the established Church. Different Churches and religions have a different status. A Labour hon. Member prattled on, as Labour women do, about equality. She used the word frequently and the implication was that as the issue concerns equality, it must be right to change the law. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury explained, we do not live in an age of equality, certainly in this respect. Our different faiths, religions and Churches have an unequal status in society. Whether that is right or wrong is of huge importance. To single out an aspect of it—a by-product of our history—and deal with it in isolation without tackling other important issues is wrong, but that is symptomatic of the way in which the Government have gone about making piecemeal and unrelated changes in our constitution, which have been to our detriment.

We are also suffering from that approach to reform of the other place, which has a direct bearing on the Bill. Our constitutional and statutory arrangements contain a right for a number of Church of England bishops to sit in a House of Parliament and participate in the legislative process. That has a bearing on the eligibility of people to be elected to this place. How much sense does it make for bishops of any Church to have a place, as of right, in a Chamber of these Houses of Parliament, and does that have implications for the question of whether people should be eligible to serve in this place? Those two questions are connected, but we are deliberating on eligibility to this House while paying no regard to the composition of the other place. That makes no sense.

We are being invited to narrow our vision to one individual in one set of circumstances and to change the electoral law of the land, but we are expected to pay no regard to the context within which it was set, as described by my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury. Having said that, the relative position of different religious faiths and Churches and their representatives should be borne in mind. It is a convention that leading figures of other faiths are given a seat in another place. That might be admirable for as long as that Chamber is not properly elected, which I should like it to be, but it raises the issue of the different status of different Churches. If there are 26 bishops from our established Church in our legislature, why should there be only one chief rabbi or one representative of any other faith or religion? Those are important matters and they relate to the subject of our debate.

Mr. Bercow: I am anxious to establish—although I think that it will gradually become clear—whether my right hon. Friend is objecting simply or primarily to the cack-handed manner in which the matter has been handled, or to the proposed change on principle. If the Government had not introduced the Bill with such haste and had got on, as we would both favour, with the

[Mr. Bercow]

important project of creating an elected other place with no automatic entitlement for bishops to sit in it, would he be in favour of what many of us think is a simple and common-sense measure?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is inviting me to deliver my punch line before I have reached it. As I have such respect for him, I shall accede to his request. My view is simple: whoever is elected by our electoral process to represent a constituency is entirely a matter for the voters in that constituency. Whether people who are elected are acceptable to us is neither here nor there. Debarment by statute is probably wrong. History is important and we should be prepared to adjust our view appropriately, but not in this Bill, not now, and not in the piecemeal way in which we are being invited to consider the matter.

Although police officers and some others are debarred, I want there to be a minimum number of restrictions on people's eligibility to be elected to this place because it is for the voters to decide. By and large, people in this country get the politicians they deserve.

Mr. Stunell: Do I understand the right hon. Gentleman's approach correctly? Is he saying, "Make me good, but not yet"? Is not a little reform better than no reform? Is not a little movement better than no movement?

Mr. Forth: Absolutely not. Perhaps I should start my speech again because obviously I have not persuaded the hon. Gentleman of my case. I condemn the Government and their fellow travellers in the hon. Gentleman's party for doing what he has described and claiming it as a virtue. They introduce piecemeal, disconnected and ill-thought-out change for the sake of it. They usually call it modernisation and think that that will fool us, but it does not. My argument is that the Bill is wrong, ill-conceived and has been introduced at the wrong time. That is why I am unhappy with it.

I want to raise a more sensitive and delicate matter, even at the risk of offending some colleagues and people outside the House—I have, of course, never shrunk from that. I am concerned about possible conflicts of loyalty. My understanding of history does not begin to rival that of my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury, so I am diffident about raising the issue. However, at the time of Henry VIII and the reformation, the question of to whom people in this country owed their primary loyalty must have arisen. Was it to our sovereign monarch and sovereign state, or to something or someone beyond, which at the time was the papacy? That issue is still alive. Indeed, it might be even more potent in our multi-faith society. Some people might believe that sections of our multi-faith, multi-cultural society have, in some circumstances, not only a divided loyalty, but a greater loyalty than that given to the Queen and the state.

Mr. Key: My right hon. Friend might agree that, although the cold war is over, instability is all the greater as a result.

Mr. Forth: Indeed. That is becoming daily more evident, which is why the Bush Administration's concept of a missile defence system is something that we can all wholeheartedly support. The sooner they put their umbrella over me, the safer I will feel.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): My right hon. Friend's point about Henry VIII is important. He was the first successful Eurosceptic, and he showed that a single Act of Parliament can remove the power of European courts. I understand my right hon. Friend's argument and agree entirely with what he is saying about where allegiance lies.

Mr. Forth: I hope that my right hon. Friend's excellent book, which he launched today in the Jubilee Room, will contain more on that matter. I am sure that we will all be much the better for reading it, although I have not managed to get around to it yet.

Mr. Winnick: The right hon. Gentleman referred to the status of Catholics at the time of the reformation. Is he suggesting that Catholics are not loyal to the United Kingdom or have a wider loyalty to an outside force?

Mr. Forth: No, that is a matter for Catholics. I am simply saying that we should not duck this issue. I confess that my understanding of the intricacies of the Catholic Church is limited, but I am making the more general point that it is possible that the total loyalty that someone has, by dint of their vocation, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald called it, expressed in formal terms to a deity or moral authority could clash, in some circumstances, with the loyalty that we should all feel to our state and our monarch. That may manifest itself in many different ways, and it is directly relevant to the Bill because of the removal of the disqualification that we are now discussing.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston): The right hon. Gentleman makes a serious charge, and a great deal of what he says seems to be based on innuendo. Will he give us an example of circumstances in which loyalties may be challenged?

Mr. Forth: I do not think that I was using innuendo at all; I thought that I was making the perfectly clear point that potential conflict exists and we should not duck that matter or skate over it. My difficulty with the Bill is that in the warm glow of consensuality that is becoming ever more popular in this place and in the body politic, we risk not squaring up to such issues and resolving them to our satisfaction before we move on. Surely, as a political institution, we are still sufficiently mature—although I sometimes wonder—to discuss these matters properly and deal with them or dispose of them before we move on to legislate. That is my point, and if it makes Labour Members uncomfortable, I am doing my job.

I turn briefly now to one or two of the details of the Bill. My first difficulty is whether the term

"a minister of any religious denomination"

is sufficiently precise or accurate to do the job that Members imagine the Bill will do. It strikes me that in this ever-evolving world of denominations, faiths and sects, there is at least the possibility of difficulty arising from the lack of a proper definition of the term "religious denomination". I put it no more strongly than that,

but with the seeming proliferation of different organisations calling themselves churches and faiths, there could be very real difficulty. We may want to pay attention to that matter in Committee.

Mr. Stunell: I hesitate to provoke the right hon. Gentleman, but is he suggesting that there might be an occasion when the House would want to proscribe certain religions from putting forward candidates? That seems to be the direction in which his argument is going. If I understand him correctly, he is saying that although this measure might be good enough for Roman Catholics and other well-known denominations, there might be others that we have not yet invented which the House would want to prevent from offering candidates. Is that his thinking?

Mr. Forth: Yes, it is indeed. I have in mind the possibility of organisations that many hon. Members may find offensive, subversive, dangerous or threatening calling themselves a religious denomination for the purposes of the Bill and seeking to promote their members as politicians or Members of Parliament. We may have to think about that.

Mr. Stunell: We seem to be moving from a discussion about whether we should repeal legislation that restricts certain people to an argument that we should retain that legislation in case we want in future to restrict certain people who are not currently covered. I look forward with considerable interest to the right hon. Gentleman's amendments in Committee.

Mr. Forth: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman looks forward to that. Let us hope that we have enough time in Committee to deal with all the matters in detail and at whatever length is necessary. However, that is the next debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and you would not want me to anticipate that, would you?

I have another simple query that I am sure the Minister will be able to answer. The heading of clause 2 is "Short title, commencement and extent", but I see no reference in the Bill to a commencement date. When does the Minister envisage that will be? Timing is an important consideration, and here we must pause for a moment and work backwards from when the Minister thinks the general election is likely to be. As the whole reason for the Bill is to allow one individual to be elected to this place, it is obviously essential, if the Bill is to fulfil its purpose, that it is enacted and commenced in time for the general election. We are therefore entitled to hear a bit more from the Minister about whether he believes there is sufficient time left properly to consider the Bill in all its stages in this House and in the Lords before Parliament is dissolved.

I ask because no date has yet been named for the remaining stages of the Bill, and I understand from the next item of business that the Government are to ask the House to deal with the matter in a Committee of the whole House. We have a short recess coming up, so I assume that the matter cannot and will not be dealt with until afterwards, which takes us to the end of February. That means that the Government will presume upon the House of Lords to deal with the Bill rapidly and peremptorily in time for it to be enacted so that the individual Labour candidate gets statutory cover for his candidature and can come to the House.

I shall be interested to see whether the Minister has any comment to make about that. It strikes me that, in their typically arrogant way, the Government are making a series of presumptions about the parliamentary process, both in this House and in another place. I think that those presumptions are unacceptable, but the Government have long since ceased to bother themselves with that. Perhaps as a result of the matters that I and other Members have raised, we will pay attention to the Bill in Committee and on Report, and the House of Lords will want to examine it closely. I hope then, at the very least, that the Government are presuming too much about the parliamentary process, and all their plans, ploys and plots to get one person elected by altering the law of the land may well not come to fruition. If that is the case, I will certainly shed no tears.

6.27 pm

Mr. Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow): I take the opportunity to speak in this debate because it is about fairness and tolerance. I remember that, many years ago, when I was at St. Mary's Catholic junior school in Jarrow, one of the highlights was when the Catholic missionary from Africa or elsewhere came to the classroom to inform us about his work with the poor. That gave us an insight into his vocation and into what seemed to be an idyllic existence, helping the poor in an exotic country. I also remember the tales told in school about the famous Father Rooney from Hebburn, a town in Jarrow. He was a great priest, a fund-raiser for the Catholic Church, who travelled widely and had many famous friends, such as the Kennedys and the Sinatras. He even had a racehorse named after him, such was his notoriety in the Catholic world for his good work.

Of course, as I grew older, reality sank in and I realised that the priesthood is not the glamorous life that it was portrayed to be when I was a young child. Very few people become a priest because it is such a hard life and such a difficult vocation. That is why those who make it, and those who stay in the priesthood, are such special people. Priests are great men because they have a vocation and a way of life that very few people can follow. Very few people embark on becoming a priest without serious thought. Once they are in the priesthood, they must make an important decision if they want to leave. Some young men get so far, fail and do not bother trying to be ordained. Some are ordained and then decide that they do not have the calling, so they drop out.

The question is whether those who decide, after they have been ordained, that they do not have the calling, should be discriminated against for the rest of their lives for their honesty. They are honest to themselves, to their God, to their community and to their congregation when they say, "I don't think this life is for me. I want to serve God in the community in a different vocation." Should they be classed as second-class citizens, and should they be discriminated against for the rest of their lives? Surely that is what the debate is about.

Mr. Key: Is not the greatest discrimination that the Roman Catholic Church refuses to ordain women?

Mr. Hepburn: I shall continue with the point that I was making. Any sort of intolerance or unfairness should not be tolerated by any society. It is not for me to

[Mr. Hepburn]

comment on what the Catholic Church does internally. I am talking about what the state can do to try to create a fair environment in which people might prosper.

We know that the Bill is not entirely about Catholic discrimination, but it was the Catholic issue that caught my eye originally. We know that there are anomalies. Some members of the clergy are disqualified and some are not. Some priests can relinquish their ministry and become Members while others are unable to do so. Certain Christian priests are disqualified whereas ministers of other religious faiths, such as Judaism, Islam and Buddhism, are eligible. I merely point out the anomalies.

Is it right that a Catholic priest, who decides that he no longer wants to continue in that role and wishes to join society, to marry and to have a family, for example, because the vocation is not for him, cannot become a Member, whereas a practising Jewish rabbi or Muslim cleric can stand for Parliament and become an elected Member? It is obviously not right.

Ministers of the Church sit in the House. The hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) made his point clearly. The example should be given again of Bruce Kent, a former Catholic priest. No matter what anyone thinks about him politically, his views were pinned to the mast. He is a CND supporter and a socialist. He has always seemed a loving and caring man to me. He stood for Labour at Oxford in 1992. If he had been successful, he would not have been able to become a Member. There seemed no reason for that.

The present position is nonsensical. It stems from some historical row that took place about 100 or 200 years ago, or 500 or 600 years ago when Henry VIII wanted to divorce his wife. I do not care especially what the reason was. The unfairness should be challenged.

One valid concern is whether the passage of the Bill will result in the House being awash with clergy. However, that is a matter for the Churches and not for Parliament. If the Churches want people to stand for Parliament, that can be done.

We are in a new era of fairness, equality, caring and modernisation. We do not stand for discrimination in our modern society. That should not be tolerated on any basis, whether it be age, gender, disability or religion. What goes for Members should stand also for the monarchy.

When I was younger, there were young people alongside me who decided, "I might go for a calling and go into the priesthood." Some might have been successful and become missionaries, for example. Some might have become great priests doing a great job for local congregations in carrying out the work that suited them. Others may have tried. Some might have been ordained, only to decide that it was not for them. I would hate to see those people condemned for life because of religious discrimination that stems from centuries ago, which we as a responsible Parliament, made up of all parties, seem to be upholding.

6.34 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn). He represents the area that was the home of the Venerable Bede. On this occasion, I find myself agreeing with him entirely. Perhaps that is dangerous.

It is extraordinary that we are debating this issue as we enter the 21st century. It is an old hangover from old law and prejudices. There is a list of those people who are not allowed to stand in Parliament. They include, as we all know, undischarged bankrupts, offenders sentenced to more than one year in prison, persons convicted of corrupt practices at elections—they are disqualified for seven years—and those holding offices listed by the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975, which includes the class of people that we are now debating.

It includes also senior civil servants, judges, ambassadors and members of the regular armed forces. It is a pleasure to see the hon. Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Joyce) in his place. I had the pleasure to speak after he made his powerful maiden speech. The hon. Gentleman was in the armed forces. The list continues with members of the police force and paid members of the boards of nationalised industries. How few such board members are left? Also included are Government-appointed directors of commercial companies and directors of the Bank of England.

I will not name those who I think are disreputable and those who I believe are to be admired. However, it is astonishing that included in the list are practising clergy of the Church of England, Church of Scotland, Church of Ireland and former or practising priests of the Roman Catholic Church.

I would not wish to try to emulate or even compete with my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) in his historical knowledge, but I read some information that told me that in 1678 there was the second Test Act. It did not effectively prevent Roman Catholics from serving in Parliament, but it required them to make a declaration abjuring transubstantiation, worship of the Virgin Mary and the celebration of mass. In practice, that would bar all Roman Catholics, especially Roman Catholic priests, from serving in this place.

There might have been a problem at that time with dual loyalty. I usually agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), and there might have been a dual loyalty between the Holy See and that of England. I am sure that now there would be no conflict of interest in, to use my right hon. Friend's word, a deity and the House of Commons. Most of us probably believe in a god of some sort, and I hope that most of us exercise our conscience from time to time. Conscience is often dictated by one's religious views, whether they be Christian, Jewish, Islam or whatever.

I was keen to speak in the debate because I believe that one of the greatest Prime Ministers that we ever had, certainly until the 1980s, was Benjamin Disraeli. He was baptised at an early age, but if that had not happened and if he had followed the religion of his antecedents—Benjamin Disraeli is considered generally as being Jewish—he would not have been able to be Prime Minister. I think that we all agree that that would have been wrong. It is equally wrong now to say that Roman Catholic priests should be barred from membership of the House.

Mr. Winnick: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about Disraeli. We all know the story of why he was baptised by his father. It arose from a dispute with the synagogue. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that being the supreme opportunist that he was, even if Disraeli had not

been baptised, he would have made sure, without the slightest hesitation, of becoming a Christian at the appropriate age so as to be able to come to this place?

Mr. Fabricant: It is not for me to try to imagine what Benjamin Disraeli might or might not have done. I do not think that he was an opportunist. He was a patriot. He recognised that in years to come there would be a party like the Labour party, which would seek to nationalise everything. He knew that he had to create the modern Conservative party—which he did, in effect. If that is called opportunism, I say "Hear, hear". I remind the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) that new Labour tries to emulate today's Conservative party, especially that of the former Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. Let us not have no doubt whatever about that.

Although I do not object to the principle of the Bill, I object to the way in which it is being introduced today. As hon. Members have pointed out, the Select Committee on Home Affairs recommended in 1998 that such a Bill should be introduced in Parliament. The hon. Member for Walsall, North and I serve on that Committee, but I did not have the honour of doing so when it made that recommendation. One has to ask oneself why the Bill is being introduced now? I have to say that the answer is plain, simple opportunism, and is to do with the Labour candidate who is standing for Greenock and Inverclyde, who earlier fought for Ayr, where he was rightly rejected by the electorate.

Incidentally, I note that in *The Independent*, Mr. Cairns was reported as saying that he is "confident" that the law will be changed before the next general election. I wondered how he could be so confident? After all, for my party, the Bill is to do with one's conscience and there is a free vote on a one-line Whip. As I have argued, there are good reasons for introducing the Bill, although perhaps not at this point. I popped out of the Chamber when my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) was speaking and checked with an honest and honourable Labour Member—whose name I shall not divulge in the House, lest he be hanged, drawn and quartered—who showed me his Whip. I was amazed that, for the Government, this is a three-line Whip, not a matter of conscience. Mr. Cairns therefore has every right to say that he is confident that the law will be changed before the next election.

Dr. Godman: If I may say so, I was hoping to leave this place—but that is another story.

May I help the hon. Gentleman by putting the record straight? He said that Mr. Cairns fought the Ayr parliamentary constituency in a previous election. That is simply not the case.

Mr. Fabricant: I stand corrected. A previous speaker—I cannot remember who, although perhaps it was the hon. Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne)—said that about Ayr.

Ms Osborne *rose—*

Mr. Fabricant: I think that the hon. Member for Ayr wishes to intervene and set the record straight. However, all that I am saying is that I was listening to the debate, and took that information from her. I may have misheard her, but I shall give way to her.

Ms Osborne: It was my husband, a former Church of Scotland minister, who stood for Ayr.

Mr. Fabricant: Earlier, I said that, although I am good at languages, I am not good at dialects. I do not mean to be offensive, but I must have misheard the hon. Lady. I happily withdraw my remark.

Nevertheless, David Cairns is standing for election. Why have the Government left the matter for so long? I do not expect that the Government in power acted a year later on the second Test Act of 1678. However, given that the Home Affairs Committee reported on the need for change more than two years ago, it seems that the Government are motivated to make a change by introducing the Bill now to enable David Cairns to stand for the constituency of Greenock and Inverclyde and, they hope, to be elected.

That is wrong and it is equally wrong, as I said earlier, that the Government have subjected the Bill to a three-line Whip. That breaks a sort of understanding in the House that, on matters of conscience—no matter what hon. Members have said, this is a matter of conscience—there should not be a three-line party Whip. I am rather pleased that members of my own Front Bench have demonstrated that principle. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) has yet to make his speech, but he has said already, as I have, that he supports the general principle of the Bill. However, I know that our right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald is not keen on the Bill for good reasons of religion and conscience. I do not agree with her, but she is free to oppose the Bill because Conservative Members believe that matters of conscience should remain so and should not be a question of party political opportunism.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): What a pile of nonsense.

Mr. Fabricant: That opportunism has been created, as the Government Whip has just pointed out.

Is the Minister aware of any Labour Members who oppose the Bill on the ground of conscience? Will they be allowed to vote against it or will the full might of the Government Whip be thrown at them, which, in the shape of the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty), would be a very frightening prospect indeed? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Bercow: I am truly horrified by what has just been uttered by a Member from a sedentary position. Did my hon. Friend overhear the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick)—who, unless I am mistaken, is a lifelong and inveterate opponent of the death penalty—advocating the death penalty for any Labour Member foolish or brave enough to vote against the Bill?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Perhaps it would be a good idea if we returned to the contents of the Bill.

Mr. Fabricant: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

[Mr. Fabricant]

In conclusion, the Bill is overdue in the macro-chronology of events. It should have been introduced in the House two and a half years ago and should have been voted on according to conscience. I will support the Bill if it is put to the vote, but what would have been a renowned Bill, which would have been respected in the House, has been degraded by the Government, who have acted opportunistically, for party political ends, in their embittered fight against the Scottish National party in Scotland. For that reason alone, the Bill, as it appears before the House today, is to be deplored.

6.47 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I rise in response to the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), who argued that this is a case of allegiance. While I rush to give him historical illustrations, what I mean by saying that this is a matter of allegiance is very different from what it would have meant in the 16th century when these debates were initiated. I do not believe that, in the modern world, the problem case is that of the Catholic priest. Paradoxically, it is that of the Anglican.

If we look at the list of disqualifications, we see that civil servants have been disqualified from membership of the House. I believe that even the present Government intend to continue that disqualification. That is sound: the argument runs that the prime loyalty of a civil servant is to the Department, the service in general and to a particular Minister who may be either in the House of Lords or the House of Commons. He may also be loyal and responsible to one Minister in the other place and another in the House of Commons. It is therefore thought inappropriate, if not impossible, for someone to stand for election, to continue that prime loyalty to an individual Minister through the civil service and, at the same time, to do the job of a Member of Parliament, exposing the pros and cons of Ministers and subjecting the Executive to the necessary scrutiny and examination. That decision is right.

One problem in the case of the Anglican priest is that we still have an established Anglican Church. Ultimately, the Anglican priest reports to, or is responsible to, a peer in the other place. There is some similarity or analogy between the argument about the prime loyalty and allegiance of the civil servant to the Minister and the argument that the prime loyalty and allegiance of the full-time, employed priest, through those to whom he reports, is to the bishop who is sitting in the other place.

There could be a complication, were the practising Anglican priest to secure election to the House. If his career as a priest also flourished and he was invited to become a Lord Spiritual—the ultimate honour in the Anglican Church—he would immediately have to vacate his seat in this House or be faced with a difficult and painful choice. The problem arises both for the individual and for the House as a result of the fact that the Church is still established.

I am in favour of the Church remaining established. Perhaps the Government intend to introduce legislation to disestablish the Church, in which case the Bill would be more consistent and would make more sense, but the Government are putting the cart before the horse by including serving Anglican priests in the current legislation.

Mr. Stunell: I have been following the right hon. Gentleman's line of thought carefully. Does he think that we should pass legislation to forbid the sons of the remaining hereditary peers to stand for election to the House, on the ground that one day there might be a by-election?

Mr. Redwood: No, that would not be sensible. Given the way the hereditary peers have been treated by this miserable Government, a further insult to them would hardly be justified or sensible.

The Bill deals with a far more important set of cases. I hope that when the Minister responds he will try to answer my dilemma. I broadly welcome freedom. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst and other colleagues, I want to open up access to the House as widely as possible. I am a democrat. I want as many people as possible to have the opportunity to come forward. I certainly do not wish to penalise anyone for having a faith other than my own.

There are elements of the Bill that I therefore find attractive, but I am worried by the general conundrum concerning the role of an established Church. It used to mean a great deal. The relationship between Church and state has been carefully thought through and worked out.

If the Minister wants to win over someone like me to his cause, I hope that he will explain how it is possible for us to continue—rightly, in my view—with a disqualification for a civil servant who reports to a Minister and could otherwise get into a conflict of interest, but not to have similar worries about an Anglican priest who reports to a Lord Spiritual and bears allegiance to the established Church of the country, which is still carefully interwoven with our partly written and venerable constitution. I hope that that point will be cleared up.

I hope, also, that the Minister will say more about the timing of the legislation. I was disturbed by the argument of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), who believes strongly that the Bill is a rush job, with a particular candidate and a particular election in mind. Good law is not made out of hard cases. These matters need considering in the general and in the round, and the relevant legislation should be put through when it is not particularly contentious.

If it is the Government's plan to rush the legislation through before the election for electoral purposes, we can discover that if the Minister will give us an honest answer about the timing of the Bill's coming into force. I would be more swayed if he promised me that the legislation would not come into force in time for the likely general election in April or May this year. We would then know that my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield had, uncharacteristically, been too sceptical about the Government, and that they had no intention of legislating for hard cases in the run-up to an election.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. Is he seriously saying that he wants to keep the disqualification on the statute book, and that he would vote for the Bill only if it did not become law until after the general election, so that someone would be prevented

from standing in a constituency where he might be elected to Parliament simply because he was a priest, although no longer practising as such? Is that really the right hon. Gentleman's view?

Mr. Redwood: No, I was not saying that that was my view, but I have found out something very interesting about the Minister's intentions. Although he has not been prepared to write into the Bill, or to tell the House, the date by which he wants the legislation to pass and come into effect, we have now discovered that it is a rush job and that the Government failed to think about the matter in good time, over the past three and a half years, when we could have had a more leisurely discussion and the House could have given the Bill proper consideration. Now they suddenly have a problem and they are trying to rush the Bill through before the general election.

I repeat that that is not a good way to legislate. I do not want to trespass on the debate that might follow on the timetable for considering the legislation, but it is relevant to this important debate on its principles that there is no date in the Bill, and that the Minister seems to have expressed the wish to move rapidly to a conclusion.

Dr. Godman: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Redwood: I shall give way when I have dealt with the Minister's point. *[Interruption.]* I shall be happy to give way to the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman). This is a debate, and I am delighted that hon. Members are taking it seriously.

I shall complete my answer to the Minister. I am not saying that people should be barred from standing for election. I have just explained that, in general, I welcome the broadening of eligibility as much as possible. However, I have raised one issue, and if the Minister can deal with that satisfactorily, he may well sway me, even as regards Anglican vicars. I have already said that I have no problem with other types of minister. I was always referring to people who are practising and are on the payroll in their Church, not to people who have ceased to be on the payroll and are moving on to an entirely different career.

Dr. Godman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. May I point out to him that if the Bill becomes law, it will bring us into line with the laws governing election to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly? He speaks of the relationship between the state and the Church. May I remind him that this Parliament governs a multinational state, not an English state?

Mr. Redwood: I agree that this is a Parliament for the whole United Kingdom, but it is also the Parliament responsible for the established Church that covers the biggest part of the United Kingdom. We know that successful battles have been fought in the past to disestablish Churches in the United Kingdom. I understand why that happened, and I understand the historical context.

There is still an established Church for the largest part of the United Kingdom, and the way in which that Church is established and its relationship to the House of Commons are important parts of our inherited constitution. I am asking the Minister to explain a little more how it will be changed, damaged or improved if the legislation goes ahead. From what I have heard so far, I do not think that that issue has been thought through fully.

The fact that the same rules do not apply in the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly does not surprise me. If, in Scotland, there is no established Church like the Anglican Church in England, there is not the same complication as the one that I raised for the Parliament of the Union. That is exactly my point. The fact that the Minister remains in his seat suggests that he cannot answer the conundrum.

Mr. Stunell: It is a pity that the right hon. Gentleman was not present for some earlier speeches, when he would have heard a number of times that the Church of Scotland is directly affected by the legislation. In the light of that, will he reconsider his last remarks?

Mr. Redwood: I do not need to reconsider my remarks. I did not say that the Church of Scotland was not affected by the legislation. I said that it was in a different position. I am speaking of the established Anglican Church and its relationship to this Parliament. That is not a matter for the Scottish Parliament and it is not a complication in the case of Scotland.

Ms Osborne: The Church of Scotland is the established Church of the Scottish nation.

Mr. Redwood: The Church of Scotland has arrangements with the Scottish Parliament different from the arrangements that the established Anglican Church has with the Parliament of the Union. That is my point. I am interested in the latter, because I am a Member of the Parliament of the Union. As the hon. Lady knows, I am not a member of either the Scottish Church or the Scottish Parliament, so that is not my direct concern. The Bill is of direct concern to the House of Commons, which is the Union Parliament and also the Parliament of the established Anglican Church.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I speak as the son of the moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. The Church of Scotland is an established Church in this Parliament. Its relationship to this Parliament is precisely the same as that of the Church of England.

Mr. Redwood: I cannot accept what my hon. Friend says. Of course, the Church of Scotland has an arrangement in which this Parliament has a legitimate interest, but it does not have the same arrangement as the established Anglican Church, because of the differing histories of those Churches. I, as an Anglican and a Member of this House, am primarily interested in that relationship, which is the dominant relationship because the Anglican Church is the established Church of the largest part of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Stuart Bell: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene as the Second Church Estates Commissioner. The Church of England fully supports the measure before the House and believes that it has no relevance or significance to the established Church.

Mr. Redwood: I am delighted about that, but it does not surprise me. Of course the Bill provides a greater

[Mr. Redwood]

freedom. If a civil servant were present and it was proposed that we should remove the disqualification of civil servants from the House of Commons, he might say that it was an excellent idea that provided greater freedom. However, that would not necessarily mean that it was the right thing to do.

I do not want to prolong my remarks, as I know that hon. Members want to make progress. However, I hope that the Under-Secretary will clarify the Bill's bearing on the important constitutional balance that was fought over and debated for many centuries in order to achieve an established Anglican church for the greater part of the United Kingdom. Will he describe the Bill's impact on the reporting lines of the clergy in respect of Lords Spiritual? I suspect that he will argue that there is no truth in my analogy between a civil servant reporting to a Minister and a vicar reporting to a Lord Spiritual. Why does he believe that to be the case?

7 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I rise to support my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), with whose remarks I agree almost entirely. I am sorry that I have not been present to hear all the speeches that have been made. I was especially sorry not to hear the one by my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key), who understands better than most people the history of the matters under discussion.

The House must carefully consider any proposed changes to its composition and should not introduce them in a hurried fashion. A number of modifications have been made to the electoral system during the current Parliament. Indeed, we debated other disqualification measures last year, when the Government proposed that people who owed no allegiance to this country should nevertheless be entitled to sit in Parliament, even though the taking of an oath of allegiance is a condition of membership of this House.

The Bill is important and deals with a matter that is not to be trifled with. Even if we live in more secular times than we used to, I greatly deplore it. Nevertheless, the Church of England is the established Church in this country. Every coin in our pockets bears testimony to that fact, as each coin of this realm carries the two letters "FD", which stand for the term "fidei defensor". Her Majesty the Queen is defender of the faith—the Anglican faith. That is inextricably bound up with this Parliament and the way in which it enacts legislation. That is why I believe that the matter should not be dealt with hurriedly.

Miss Widdecombe: The title "fidei defensor" was granted by the Pope, and related to defence of the Catholic faith.

Mr. Howarth: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that additional information, although it does not detract from the fact that Her Majesty is defender of the faith today. I understand that the title was conferred by the Pope on Henry VIII, so she is correct, but I hope that she will agree on today's practice, in which Her Majesty is the defender of the faith. Perhaps the cardinal archbishop will have noted her enthusiasm to leap to the defence of her newly espoused Church.

Miss Widdecombe: It was seven years ago.

Mr. Howarth: Seven years is not a long time in my right hon. Friend's political career, past or future.

When the Select Committee on Clergy Disqualification considered the matter in 1951, it reported that no evidence was

"offered to Your Committee of public demand for an alteration of the law."

The same applies today. I have not received from my constituents any letters urging me to change the law. I have not even received letters from members of the clergy in my constituency, or anywhere else in the country, urging me as a member of the Select Committee on Home Affairs to bring about a change in the law. The Bill appears to have sprung out of the ether.

Mr. Forth: Has my hon. Friend received any letters from Labour candidates asking for the law to be changed?

Mr. Howarth: I confess that I have been sent no letters by Labour candidates, although I have received a letter from a Member of Parliament—the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). The letter begins with the words "Dear colleague" and is signed by the hon. Lady herself, who I do not think is present. It states:

"I am writing to each of the members of the Home Affairs Select Committee to alert you to the above measure, which is receiving its second reading on Tuesday 6th February. This government Bill is entirely based on a recommendation of your committee, which in turn formed the basis of a Ten Minute Rule Bill that I introduced unsuccessfully in June 1999.

I am taking the liberty of enclosing some notes that I have prepared."

In the attached notes, she sets out the Church's view and explains why she believes a change in the law to be necessary. However, she does not refer to an important fact of which I have since been advised: her research assistant is intended to be the Bill's immediate beneficiary.

I find it astonishing that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden did not come clean with me and other hon. Members. Why did she not explain that she had a clear interest, because her research assistant was a candidate in Greenock and Inverclyde and was to be the first and principal beneficiary of an extensive and wide-ranging proposal to change the law governing the composition of the House of Commons? It appears that the Bill is not a matter of conscience for the Labour party or even of implementing a recommendation made two years ago by the Home Affairs Committee. Instead, it appears that it has been produced hurriedly—indeed, I suspect that it was formulated at the last minute—in order to benefit a chosen Labour party candidate.

I ask the Under-Secretary to imagine what would have happened if the Tories had done the same thing. Mr. Campbell would have been weaving his way around all the Fleet street editors saying, "What a disgrace. The Tories want to use Parliament to change the ancient laws of this land simply to benefit one of their own."

Mr. Redwood: Is my hon. Friend saying that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) paid a research assistant, out of House of Commons research allowances, to produce a brief recommending a measure that would advance his future career, but not revealing that that was the case?

Mr. Howarth: My right hon. Friend asks an important question that I cannot answer. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden is not in the House and I am relying on a briefing, so I may be entirely wrong. However, she may have paid her research assistant to produce the briefing and then have failed to tell hon. Members what was going on. It is no good the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland shaking his head. That is the perception that the Government are promoting.

I am not against the Government saying that they have a problem. They could have told us that they had a good candidate and wanted to clear the way for him to stand for Parliament and take his seat if he was elected. They could have said that the matter focused attention on the fact that, as Professor Blackburn pointed out, the law was somewhat archaic in this respect. Furthermore, they could have told us that they wanted to seize the opportunity provided by an individual case to tidy up the law. If the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department had said that in the first place today, I would have understood. However, they did not do that. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden cited the report of the Home Affairs Committee and sought to dress up the issue as a matter of principle.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): Is it not a convention of the House that hon. Members should inform other Members if they intend to launch a personal attack on them? The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) began the onslaught. I cannot explain why my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) is not present; there may be serious reasons for her absence. However, if she is to be attacked, it would have been courteous to inform her in advance. The attack is obviously premeditated.

Mr. Howarth: I am sorry if the hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) perceives my comments as an attack on the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden. Does the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden expect me to remain silent on a matter about which she has written to me, not only as another Member of Parliament but specifically as a member of the Home Affairs Committee, which produced a report that she cited to support her contention? She has claimed the Bill as hers. I cannot account for her absence today; I understand that there may be good reasons for it. However, her absence should not prevent me from taking the opportunity to point out my anxieties about the submissions that she made to me. She chose to stay away; I did not choose to exclude her from the debate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am not absolutely sure of the facts, but it is possible that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) has a very good personal reason for not being present today.

Mr. Howarth: I am grateful for that guidance. I made the point to the hon. Member for Don Valley that there may be good reasons for the absence of the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden. I was not criticising her for her absence. However, she took the trouble to write to me, but she did not declare that she had a specific interest in the measure. I believe that the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) is good enough to acknowledge that by nodding his head.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It would be a good idea to consider the content of the Bill.

Mr. Howarth: I am more than happy to do that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I was trying to respond to a challenge from the hon. Member for Don Valley.

Mr. Redwood: I should like to respond to the hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint). My comments were not premeditated. I listened to the debate and a question occurred to me. I should be delighted if the matter could be cleared up. I was not attacking the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden, but I should like to know the precise relationship that we are considering and how the research reached my hon. Friend.

Mr. Howarth: Like my right hon. Friend, I generally support the idea that the law should be tidied up. I was a member of the Home Affairs Committee, but I was not present to vote on the conclusions of the whole report on electoral law reform. I made it clear during our discussions, when Professor Blackburn appeared before us, that currently ordained and serving clergy of the Church of England were debarred from membership of the House for the good reason, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham explained, that they are represented in the other place by the Bench of 26 bishops.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham explained why it would be difficult for a clergyman who had been ordained in the Church of England to serve in the House while answerable to his—or nowadays her—bishop, who might sit in the other place. The Anglican clergy are all over the place on some important issues, and their presence in this place would be a disaster for the Church of England, of which I am a staunch member. It would not be beneficial for the Church of England to have many practising clergy here.

If a clergyman resigns from the Church of England and ceases to run a parish, or resigns from the Catholic Church, as Mr. Cairns has done, it is logical that such people should be able to stand for Parliament. I have no problem with that. I also have no problem with the current arrangement whereby some of the nonconformist Churches permit their ordained members to serve in the House. That seems to work, and I have no desire to turn the clock back and exclude them. However, as long as we have an established Church with 26 bishops in the other place, allowing currently practising clergy from the Church of England to serve in this place would cause difficulties and overturn the longstanding relations between the House and the Church.

Mr. Key: I have been to the Library and confirmed that David Cairns is employed in the House out of the public purse. Does my hon. Friend share my distress at the Government's refusal to come clean about Labour Members being on a three-line Whip and at our discovery that the man who stands to benefit directly and financially

[Mr. Key]

from the Bill works for a Labour Member of Parliament in the Palace of Westminster? The Government did not tell us that.

Mr. Howarth: You have already ruled on the matter, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but perhaps you will permit me to say that, sad to say, my hon. Friend makes an important and valid point. What would the Minister think if the Government were Tory and had put Conservative Members on a three-line Whip? The Opposition would have gone berserk. I do not oppose the Government's attempt to change the law, because some legislation is anachronistic and needs reforming. However, that is not the reason that the Government advanced.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I do not want my position to be traduced in the way some hon. Members have traduced it. I introduced David Cairns to the debate. I mentioned him first and pointed out that he was a Labour candidate. I also said that I believed that, whatever political party a candidate represents, it is right that legislation should not prevent electors from voting for that person. I believe that the hon. Gentleman shares that view.

Mr. Howarth: I am sure that hon. Members are grateful to the Minister for making that absolutely clear. I am also acutely aware that a former hon. Friend sought to change the law. I do not oppose the principle of the Bill, but it is unfortunate that the reason for it was not made clear at the outset. I accept that the Minister mentioned it in his opening speech, but we should have advance knowledge of the reasons for measures. We know why the Criminal Justice and Police Bill and the Hunting Bill were introduced. However, I had to get a briefing from the Library to learn the reason for the Bill that we are discussing. I subsequently received the letter from the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden that said that she had introduced a ten-minute Bill in 1999. I picked up a briefing this morning on which I read Mr. David Cairns name. I therefore discovered the true purpose of the Bill only this morning.

Mr. Fabricant: I was present for the opening speeches. The Minister was less than open, unusually for him, when I asked him whether there was a three-line Whip. He did not volunteer the information that David Cairns is a paid employee who works in the House.

Mr. Howarth: I understand my hon. Friend's point.

I shall not support the Bill in the Lobby. I do not believe that we should stick to the status quo, but I oppose the proposal that all clergy, whatever their denomination, whether currently practising or not, should be allowed to stand for the House of Commons. I believe that Church of England clergy should be excepted because they are answerable to their bishops who sit in another place.

7.20 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): This has been a good and instructive debate, to which 14 right hon. and hon. Members have contributed. This is a grim, and arguably gruesome, occasion for me because it is one of the relatively rare—and, I hope, decreasingly common—occasions on which I find myself substantially in agreement with Labour Members, to whose defeat I have dedicated the past four years. I also find myself somewhat out of sympathy with a number of my right hon. and hon. Friends, which is a deeply uncomfortable experience.

Rarely do I agree with the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) and I feel somewhat unclean at the prospect of siding with him in a Division. However, Conservative Members have a free vote and, in the event of a Division, I know that my right hon. and hon. Friends will not all go into the same Lobby. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) made it clear that she had substantial reasons for conscientious objection to the Bill, which would cause her to vote against it. For my part, I have studied the Bill and the sequence of events that form the centuries-long background to its introduction, and I am sympathetic to it.

The presentation of the Bill has, however, been badly handled, shabbily introduced and inappropriately conducted in typical new Labour fashion—in other words, in a disingenuous, untoward, hasty and arrogant fashion that is contemptuous of the rights of the House of Commons. Nevertheless, one has to make a judgment about the content of the Bill, and I agree with its provisions.

There have been good, well-considered and carefully thought through contributions from both sides of the House. In circumstances such as these, we should try to disagree with one another while respecting one another's motivations. I listened with interest to the speech of the hon. Member for Enfield, North (Ms Ryan), who argued the classic position in support of the Bill that keeping the disqualification on the statute book was undemocratic, a violation of rights and an historical anachronism, and that the time had now come to dispense with it. A similar argument was developed in witty and entertaining fashion by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) and, with his customary gravitas, by the parliamentary representative of the Church Commissioners, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Mr. Bell).

We are accustomed to the historical exegesis of my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key), which I always find entertaining and from which I always learn things of which I was previously ignorant. His speech today represented no exception to the general rule.

I understand and respect the motivation of the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) and I accept without question his assurance that his constituency Labour party selected Mr. Cairns in ignorance, perhaps, of his background, but, certainly, of the fact that unless the law were changed, he could not take his seat in Parliament. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) made a perfectly legitimate point about the level of intelligence, or information, in that constituency Labour party. That is a fair point to make, but I accept the point made by the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde that his constituency party did not know that this problem would arise. It is now for the House to decide how we want to tackle the issue.

Dr. Godman: I think that I used the term "justifiable" in my arguments about my constituency activists. May I

point out to the hon. Gentleman that a large number of my constituents are Catholics, and that the Catholic Church in Scotland supports the Bill?

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that, and I shall go on to say something about support for the Bill in a moment. May I also clarify an observation that I made a moment ago, which was possibly infelicitous? When I referred to the intelligence level of people in the constituency Labour party, I was not suggesting that they were dim-witted. I used the word "intelligence" in the sense of the possession of information.

The hon. Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne) explained clearly the background to her strong support for the Bill, and that is respected. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst gave a characteristic tour de force, and he was joined in that enterprise by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) and my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth).

It is not surprising to note that my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) is a supporter of the Bill, as he frequently supports the reform of institutions that he judges to have become antiquated and indefensible. He gave us another example today of his relatively modern outlook on politics. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn) is no longer in the Chamber. He, too, made a sincere contribution, and that is respected.

The position on disqualification is obviously anomalous. Whatever view we take, we all recognise that. The disqualification applies to some people and not to others. It applies to members of the clergy in the Church of England and Ireland—but not Wales—to ministers in the Church of Scotland, to Roman Catholic priests, significantly, and to priests ordained by a bishop, all of whom are disqualified from sitting in this House.

There are no similar disqualifications for ministers of other religions. Nonconformist ministers are unaffected by the House of Commons (Clergy Disqualification) Act 1801 and the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829. We are, therefore, specifically concerned with the practical effect of the 19th century legislation, which is to constrain non-Church of England, former episcopally ordained priests, including Roman Catholic priests.

I shall not dilate on the MacManaway case. However, an awareness of that case and the follow-up to it are essential to an understanding of the issue. The individual concerned, the reverend, had been ordained a priest in 1925 by the Bishop of Armagh, but subsequently relinquished all his rights as a priest in the Church of Ireland. The question arose as to whether his election in 1950 in Belfast, West should be allowed to stand.

The Minister, who is undoubtedly well versed in the intricacies of the matter, will be aware that a Select Committee considered whether Mr. MacManaway's election was void. In a report in 1950, it concluded that immediate legislative action was necessary to clarify the law. Regrettably, the Home Secretary at the time referred the issue to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council at the request of this House, and that Committee concluded that the use of the words

"ordained to the office of priest or deacon"

meant that that disqualification extended beyond priests and ministers of the established Church to all episcopal ordinations.

I challenged the hon. Member for Enfield, North earlier on the subject of the rather pusillanimous response of the Select Committee on Clergy Disqualification as long ago as 1952-53. I emphasise that point, to which I know all my right hon. and hon. Friends are keenly attending, because the Select Committee recognised that the situation was anomalous. It then pondered whether to recommend reform, but timidly retreated from the fray. It stated in memorable and, frankly, damning words:

"Your Committee think that it would not be desirable to introduce any legislation to deal with the anomalies ahead of any general legislation which may hereafter be contemplated to deal with the qualifications and disqualifications of Members generally."

In a nutshell, that meant that the Select Committee at the time saw that there was a problem, worried that it was a hornet's nest and did not want to stir it up. I politely suggest that, 48 or 49 years on from its inconclusive and hedging report, there is now a good case for acting and for not allowing the problem to fester any longer.

Two key developments have brought us to where we are now. The first is the Select Committee on Home Affairs report of 1997-98 on electoral law administration. Giving evidence in that report, Professor Robert Blackburn, whose contribution was mentioned earlier, said that answering the question "Can a priest stand for Parliament?" involved consulting no fewer than nine separate Acts dating back to the 16th century. Significantly, the professor also said:

"The present situation whereby the disqualification of clergy operates in a discriminatory fashion between different faiths is no longer acceptable."

Many, and perhaps most, right hon. and hon. Members agree with that verdict. If we agree with that verdict, if we believe that there is a case for change and if we consider there to be no reason for the discrimination to persist, I do not believe that objections to the procedure—there will be a free vote, however—and to the Government's rather grubby handling of the matter should allow us to neglect the big issue, which is whether the Bill is right or wrong.

Miss Widdecombe: It is wrong.

Mr. Bercow: My right hon. Friend, chuntering from a sedentary position, suggests to me that the Bill is wrong. I say to my distinguished boss, who will be Home Secretary in a matter of weeks, that she thinks that I am wrong, but I know that she is. That will have to do for tonight as that was a risky thing to say to the person who will soon be Home Secretary.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Although many may agree with my hon. Friend that it is wrong to discriminate between different faiths when considering whether people are eligible for election, does he agree that it seems a bit daft to go ahead with the Bill when we are doing nothing about the most appalling discrimination in the other place? The Home Affairs Committee report referred to the Church of England, which has a number of bishops sitting in the other place even though other Churches such as my own and the Church of Scotland have no entitlement whatever. Instead of introducing a Bill to sort out a problem for one

[Sir Teddy Taylor]

candidate in one seat, would it not be wiser to consider discrimination between the faiths throughout the parliamentary system?

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend speaks a lot of good sense, but my response must be that two wrongs do not make a right. I share his enthusiasm for speedy Government action to reform the composition of the other place. For my part, I favour a fully elected second Chamber and wish to goodness that the Government would get on with that important project. However, the fact that they have chosen not to do so in no way justifies us failing to take the right decision on the merits of this case, although the overall position lacks consistency and has no rational basis. It ought to be changed.

I must tease right hon. and hon. Members about matters tactical for future reference. They had a good case, but they spoiled it in two material particulars, at least as far as I and, I suspect, many of my right hon. and hon. Friends are concerned. First, most Conservatives—certainly those of us here present—could not give a tinker's cuss as to the view of the European convention on human rights about the matter. The fact that we might be under pressure from the European convention or as a result of passing the iniquitous, ghastly, risible, detestable Human Rights Act 1998 matters not a jot as far as many of us are concerned.

Secondly, Labour Members should not ruin the argument by jabbering on about the merits of Father Bruce. I refer, of course, to the fortunately defeated Labour candidate in the Oxford, West and Abingdon constituency in 1992. If there were one good reason to keep the discrimination, it might conceivably be to keep out the discredited former leader of communists, neutralists and defeatists. Really, that cuts no ice with me. Even though I have no regard for Monsignor Kent, I could not bring myself to do other than support the Bill in a Division. I could not have brought myself to do other than that even when he was standing for Parliament and would have taken his seat in the House if elected.

I make my final observation by way of an appeal to some of my right hon. and hon. Friends. As Conservatives, we oppose wholesale change and we believe in gradual reform. We favour evolutionary rather than revolutionary development, but we most certainly do not oppose change on principle. My view, which hails from that of Burke, the father of modern Conservatism and one of the most distinguished statesmen ever to serve in the House, is as follows:

"The state which lacks the means of change lacks the means of its own conservation."

A good case has been made. The content of the Bill is sound. We can no longer defend the current iniquity. That is why, if there is a Division, I for one shall vote for the Bill, though I know that many will be inclined to do the opposite.

7.34 pm

Mr. Mike O'Brien: With the leave of the House, I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) for supporting a measure introduced by the Labour Government, which he will not do often. I wish that I could thank the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), but we shall wait and see how she votes.

I welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Buckingham. In passing, I remind him that the support given by Conservative Front Benchers to the Human Rights Act 1998 is noted by us and will be commented on by us at every possible opportunity. May I deal with the free vote and the Whip? The Conservatives have a free vote because their Front Benchers are split. As usual, they are rowing among themselves, but they want to make a virtue out of a quarrel. Just because they cannot agree does not mean that everyone else has the same problem.

Labour Members are united: we oppose discrimination; we oppose the disqualification of priests; we support equality; we support the Bill. This is a Government Bill, it is whipped and the Whip will be applied, but Labour Members, even on a three-line Whip, are not obliged to vote against their consciences. If any consider the Bill to represent an issue of conscience, they can exercise their conscience. Furthermore, Opposition Members are under a one-line Whip. They are not only split, but have been told that they need not even bother to turn up for the vote. We heard all that verbiage and nonsense about matters of conscience, but this is not enough of a matter of conscience to make the Opposition ask their Members to turn up to vote. That is the shambles of today's Conservative party, but enough of party politics: let us deal with the more serious points raised by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald.

The right hon. Lady does not believe that priests should be both Members of the House and practising holy orders. I understand that view, but, with the greatest respect, that is not the issue. Whether priests should be MPs is a matter for the internal rules of their Church. The issue is whether the state should intervene to forbid priests of the Catholic Church, the Church of England and the Scottish Church from being MPs when most other religions encounter no such state prohibition. The Government believe that the state should not exercise that prohibition, but should leave it to the people to decide who their representatives should be and to the Churches to decide their own internal rules.

The right hon. Lady also said that she did not believe that a priest should sit in this place. Although David Cairns remains a priest under canon law, he no longer practises as a priest and no longer celebrates mass. That does not mean that he is not a practising Catholic, which he remains. The law, because of the way in which canon law operates, forbids him from becoming a Member of Parliament. I believe that that is wrong. Obviously, the right hon. Lady is entitled to her own view. However, if she believes that no clergyman—even a man not practising his holy orders—should be allowed to sit in the Chamber, does she therefore favour extending the ban to cover all ordained ministers, such as the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) and the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley)?

Miss Widdecombe: Theology is not much discussed these days, but the Minister will know that there is a massive difference between priest and minister—and I said "priest".

Mr. O'Brien: The right hon. Lady did indeed say "priest", but if she takes the principled view that those

who are ordained should not be Members of the House, surely she cannot seek to use the law of the state to exclude only Catholics and members of the established Church.

The right hon. Lady also asked why we have not used the Representation of the People Act 2000 and the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 to make the changes. There are a number of reasons, and the obvious one is that the short titles did not allow it, although we could have dealt with that. At that time, we were awaiting responses from the Churches to inquiries about their views and, following the publication of the Home Affairs Committee report and the selection of David Cairns as a candidate, we wanted to ensure that we knew those views before legislating.

Let me add that at that stage we were not sure whether the legislation was needed. We were exploring the possibility of non-legislative means and considering whether there was a way in which, within the law, David Cairns could become a Member of Parliament. Following a full investigation, the level of doubt was high enough to make us feel that we should present this Bill.

Miss Widdecombe: I thank the Minister for his elucidation, but two issues are being considered. The first is the case of David Cairns, an ex-Roman Catholic priest; the second is the question of serving clergy.

It was always clear that the second issue would have to be addressed through the law, and that there would never be any question of a non-legislative option. I think that the Minister is trying to make the best of a very bad job. He knew about the position for a long time, but did not do anything about it until faced with an immediate case. We have already dealt with the disqualifications legislation; the word "disqualifications" should have made it possible to encompass this provision in that Bill.

Mr. O'Brien: The right hon. Lady is not making an entirely unfair point. It is because we are now faced with the case of a particular individual who wishes to stand for Parliament, and who would be excluded under existing legislation, that allowing the current law to stand has become an immediate question of unfairness. I have always been clear about the fact that the David Cairns case is the reason for urgency. As the hon. Member for Buckingham said, the existing law is wrong, and it would be unjust to allow that law to prevent someone's election because of that person's former membership of the priesthood.

The right hon. Lady said that the process was all too rushed. I think that after 200 years we are entitled to argue that when a case such as the one we are discussing arises, getting rid of prejudice—far from being too rushed—is long overdue.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) asked why we had waited so long. To some extent, I have already dealt with that. Parliamentary time is always at a premium, and many members of the hon. Gentleman's party constantly demand the presentation of this or that Bill. Members of Parliament are here to be legislators, after all, but the injustice of David Cairns's position is manifest, which is why we had to present our Bill now. That is not opportunist; we are dealing with the practical circumstances of an individual, and a case of injustice would have had to be dealt with had we not presented the Bill. The hon. Gentleman may not care about injustice. He may well feel that those who seek to deal with a particular injustice are mere opportunists. I say that this is a matter of principle—and I am glad to note that the hon. Gentleman will support it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, North (Ms Ryan) said that we were discussing an issue of equality. It is indeed the case that the Catholic Church, the Church of England and the Church of Scotland are subject to restrictions that are not placed on other religions. It is time to end that inequality.

In what I considered to be the best speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne) said that this was an issue of principle, regardless of whether David Cairns was involved. She was entirely right. We should all heed her description of the problems that arose in her constituency and the way in which she and her husband were personally affected—it lent a particular conviction to her passionate contribution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) set out his case with characteristic clarity and, again, passion. He asked whether a priest could renounce the priesthood. Catholic priests can be defrocked; indeed, a Catholic priest who had committed child abuse in my constituency was defrocked yesterday. I am very pleased about that, as I cannot think of a better case for defrocking; but David Cairns—whose case has brought this issue to the fore—is not a defrocked priest, but a priest who no longer celebrates mass and acts as a priest. He cannot cease to be a priest without enormous difficulty, which is why we should ensure that he is not prevented from becoming a Member of Parliament.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The Minister rightly says that no one should be disqualified from holding an office in the state, serving this Parliament or otherwise, simply because of his or her religion. Do the Government consider that that applies to the position of head of state?

Mr. O'Brien: There are always exceptions to every rule, and there are always exceptions relating to those who can stand for Parliament. The hon. Gentleman was not present earlier—I know where he was: no doubt he was working very hard on the Hunting Bill—but if he had been, he would have heard the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) list all the people who, for various reasons, were prevented from standing for Parliament. I certainly accept that in many instances there were justifiable reasons for restricting their candidature, but this is not such a case.

We listened carefully to the hon. Member for Belfast, South. He has the benefit of being ordained, and as an ordained person he illustrated the value of not shutting the doors, as he put it, on members of other religions who are also ordained.

I turn now to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), which I always do with particular pleasure. He said that the Labour party in Greenock and Inverclyde had selected someone in breach of the law. As I have said, the law was unclear at the time, and the party cannot therefore be challenged on that basis.

I welcomed the right hon. Gentleman's support for the principle, although I do not think he liked the Bill or its timing. I hope I have been straightforward about why the timing was necessary.

[Mr. O'Brien]

The right hon. Gentleman seemed to question the loyalty of Catholics to this country. Catholics will be deeply offended by his comments. He says he does not care about that, and it is certainly his right to make such comments, but I think he will find that many conclude that some of the old prejudices are still rampant on the Conservative Back Benches. I suspect that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald will have to watch her back.

Mr. Winnick: I do not know whether my hon. Friend was present when I intervened on the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), but his questioning—it could only be described as such—of Catholic loyalty to this country, and having a wider loyalty, was surely unacceptable and, indeed, downright disgraceful.

Mr. O'Brien: I agree. The right hon. Gentleman always seeks to be provocative, and on this occasion he was indeed provocative. There is no justification for questioning the loyalty of Catholics to this country: many sacrifice their lives fighting for it and seeking to protect it. I am sure that, on reflection, the right hon. Gentleman will feel that his comments were unjustified.

The right hon. Gentleman said that Catholic priests would not come here because the Church would not allow them to do so; but former priests will, I think. The Church of England is content for its clergy to be here if they choose to be so, but it is indeed the case that the Catholic Church does not allow practising priests to become MPs.

In an excellent speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn) asked why a priest who no longer acted as such should be banned from Parliament, while a rabbi, mullah or Methodist minister could be an MP. That, I think, sums up the Government's basic case.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst asked another question, which I forgot to mention earlier: he asked whether there would be enough time to deal with the Bill before the election. I can only say, "I hope so; I do not know; wait and see." He also asked for the commencement date of the legislation. It will come into force by Royal Assent, and an amendment will be tabled for that purpose at the Committee stage. He asked about the definition of "minister". It is in the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1978. I do not think that we have had any problems with that definition, and we are relying on it.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) asked whether a Church of England minister could be subject to instructions from a bishop. I thought the analogy with a civil servant's allegiance to a Government Minister was particularly spurious, but there is no evidence to suggest that a Church of England minister who became an MP would be suborned by a bishop, whether he belonged to the Church of England or the Church of Scotland.

The right hon. Gentleman began to dig a deep hole for himself when he challenged the established position of the Church of Scotland. At that point, it looked rather as though he had wandered into the debate at a late stage, with a speech that he had not particularly considered. Indeed, I think that that is exactly what had happened.

Mr. Redwood: The hon. Gentleman does me less than justice. I was very clear about the different established position of the Anglican Church and its very special relationship with both Houses of Parliament. He has also not done justice to the question that I asked. Will he explain to the House what difference it will make to the role of the established Church if junior members of the priesthood of the established Church can be Members of Parliament, in the lower House, when the spiritual peers are in the upper House?

Mr. O'Brien: I can see no particular change that that would create in relation to the established Church. A bishop would not seek to suborn a Member of this place. That is just not going to happen, and it is an entirely spurious point. The right hon. Gentleman can accept that or not, but it is certainly my view.

Mr. Stuart Bell: May I echo the position that the Minister has just confirmed? It is totally impossible for the Church to suborn its bishops in the Lords and have them vote in a particular way. The idea that they could suborn a Member of Parliament is ridiculous.

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He proves the point that I was making about the way in which the right hon. Member for Wokingham made his point.

Whatever justification there may or may not have been in the past, there can now be no reason to keep measures on the statute book that prevent ordained clergy, though they be few in number, from being elected to serve in this place. The Government are firmly of the view that Catholic priests should have similar status to Church of England clergy and that both should be able to present themselves to the electorate unless they have a voice in another place.

The Bill is a small but significant measure that will remove unfair and anachronistic legislation that prevents both serving and former ministers of religion from taking seats as Members of Parliament if they are elected. It deserves the support of all hon. Members and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

House of Commons (Removal of Clergy Disqualification) Bill (Programme)

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the following provisions shall apply to the House of Commons (Removal of Clergy Disqualification) Bill:

Committee

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

2. Proceedings in the Committee of the whole House shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Eight o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is Thursday, at Five o'clock on that day.

Consideration and Third Reading

3. Any proceedings on consideration, and proceedings on Third Reading, shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Ten o'clock on that day or, if that day is Thursday, at Seven o'clock on that day.

Programming Committees

4. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House or on consideration and Third Reading.

Lords amendments and further messages from the Lords

5. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any motion to vary or supplement this order for the purpose of allocating time to proceedings on consideration of any Lords amendments, or on any further messages from the Lords, and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.—*[Mr. Mike O'Brien.]*

7.52 pm

Mr. Bercow: I am sorry that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), chose to move the motion formally because it is a matter of the greatest importance. We have just had a debate about the merits or demerits of the Bill itself, and now we proceed to the issue of its consideration and the time allotted thereto.

I am not remotely embarrassed by the fact that there were differences of opinion among Opposition Members about the Bill's merits, and I tell the Minister—who, in fairness, in a slightly light-hearted and good-natured fashion teased us about those "divisions"—that it is not surprising that there should be such differences. We are talking about an issue of conscience rather than one of party politics. Just because the new robots who permeate the Labour Benches all subscribe to the same view—because that is what they are told they have to do upon pain of the most dire consequences being visited upon them—it does not follow that Conservative Members operate on a similar basis. I am not at all embarrassed by the fact that there are genuine differences of opinion among Opposition Members about a matter that should not be party political.

The question that we have now to consider is whether the Government's proposed allocation of time for the Bill is adequate. The first point is that—on this occasion, as on so many previous occasions when we have debated a timetable motion—it is peculiarly difficult, if not impossible, to state with confidence whether the time will be adequate. One of the principal reasons why, at this stage, we can have no idea whether the proposed time will be adequate is that we do not know how or to what extent right hon. and hon. Members will seek to amend the Bill. Without knowing how many amendments there will be, how complicated their content will be, or how strongly held opinions on both sides of the House might be, it is absurd to speculate on whether there will be sufficient time to consider the issues.

The Government's programme motion clearly states:

"The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House."

For the avoidance of doubt, I should say that that proposal in itself is right and proper. This is a constitutional measure, and it is perfectly reasonable that it should be considered by a Committee of the whole House. However, the Government's subsequent proposals in the motion are singularly inadequate. Paragraph 2 states:

"Proceedings in the Committee of the whole House shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Eight o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is Thursday, at Five o'clock on that day."

We are invited to conclude, I say to this packed and attentive Chamber, that that will be adequate time for our deliberations. Judging by today's debate, however, I am not at all sure that there will be adequate time. In today's debate, including my own speech and the Minister's reply, there were no fewer than 16 speeches. The subject of those 16 speeches was the general principles of the Bill, the background to it, the rationale for it and the likely consequences of it. We were of course also talking about a Bill with two clauses and two schedules.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Perhaps I can gently tease the hon. Gentleman with the fact that sitting with him on the Front Bench is one Whip and sitting behind him are three Opposition Back Benchers who are obviously very worked up about the Bill. It seems that among the assembled ranks of the Conservative Opposition there is not, as he suggests, great interest in either the programme motion or the Bill itself. Moreover, he supports the Bill.

Mr. Bercow: I do support the Bill, and I am not overly embarrassed about that. I am, however, grateful for small mercies. It is the most enormous relief to me—it will save me the loss of sleep that I otherwise would have incurred—that I have not had to go through the Lobby with the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick). That is obviously very satisfying from my point of view.

Nevertheless, the Under-Secretary is right that I support the Bill. However, I think that he is unwise—indeed, rash—to make the observation that he has just made. The first point is that some of my right hon. and hon. Friends have been strenuously devoting themselves to the terms of the Bill since we began debate shortly after 3.30 pm. Consequently, although we all know the fearsome constitution of the Under-Secretary, some of my hon. Friends have repaired for cups of tea.

My second observation—or prediction, and only time will tell whether I am right or the Minister is correct—is that when we consider the Bill in a Committee of the whole House, there will be far more than merely three of my hon. Friends behind me. Several hon. Members will be wanting conscientiously and in detail to consider and to speak in support of or in opposition to not only the Bill's clauses, but the amendments that have been tabled.

Mr. O'Brien: How many hon. Members?

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman challenges me, rather vulgarly, to say precisely how many hon. Members will attend the debate. I am not psychic; that is not among my qualities. I do not know and I cannot be sure, but I say confidently that it will be more than three. I also say that, just as size is not everything—I have very good reason for regularly making that point—numbers are not everything either. Despite our disagreement on this issue, I would sooner have one of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) than six dozen of the right hon. and hon. Members who pepper the Government Benches.

Mr. Stunell: May I give the hon. Gentleman one very small sliver of comfort? Liberal Democrats Members also

[Mr. Stunell]

support the Bill and oppose the programme motion, for many of the reasons that he is outlining. We also believe that size is not everything.

Mr. Bercow: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman and I respect his good intentions. However, I am bound to say—I hope that he will not take it the wrong way—that I do not know whether that intervention and that assurance of Liberal Democrat support for the official Opposition's position is intended to make me feel better or worse. We shall have to see. It is rare indeed to have a Conservative-Liberal Democrat alliance in this House.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: I am sure that my hon. Friend will accept that I for one feel extremely strongly about the Bill. I have nothing against Catholics; if the Catholic Church wants its ordained members to stand for Parliament, that is fine by me. In the debate on Second Reading I explained why I take issue with my own Church, the Church of England. I did not call for a vote at the end of that debate as I wanted to spare my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) the personal humiliation of having to go into the Lobby with Labour Members, instead of joining me, as he so often does.

Mr. Bercow: I am indebted to my hon. Friend. His natural kindliness and his conscientious regard for my preservation are greatly appreciated. However, I know that the Minister is not at all embarrassed about the Government's draconian behaviour and that he will want me to return to the point that I was making about timing.

The key part of the motion states:

"Proceedings in the Committee of the whole House shall . . . be brought to a conclusion at Eight o'clock on the day on which those proceedings commenced."

For the edification of people outside the House listening to our proceedings, I must explain that that means that if there is a statement after 3.30 pm—which is commonplace, especially when the Government are keen to truncate consideration of a Bill—it is possible that we would not start consideration of the Bill until 4.30.

If the Government were inconsiderate and malicious enough to hold two statements on that day—and those statements might be followed by a Bill under the ten-minute rule—it is entirely conceivable that consideration would not begin until 5.30. The House would therefore have two and a half hours to digest, consider and pronounce a verdict on a Bill that is a crucial constitutional measure and to which an unknown number of amendments might have been tabled.

The Minister must not underestimate the Bill's significance. He said that it was small but important. He is right; it is not a megameasure, but it is important, with potentially important ramifications. We should have adequate time in which to debate it.

The motion suggests that, if Committee consideration of the Bill falls on a Thursday, we should finish by 5 o'clock. However, it is entirely conceivable that any statements on a Thursday might run until 2 o'clock or even 2.30, so that proposal is, frankly, alarming.

The Government display an overall disdain for the House—habitually, unselfconsciously, and almost unknowingly. That is what so distresses Opposition Members. Even those of us who consider, as I do, that the Bill is sound in principle, believe that the House ought to be able to look at the detail and that the Government should be willing to entertain any amendments that might be tabled.

I am very confident that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst will table a number of amendments to the Bill, and I should not be surprised if other Conservative Members also have proposals in mind to improve it. We need proper time to consider such proposals but, so far, it is not clear that that time will be made available.

The Minister is usually fairly candid in his public utterances, but he is being a little shifty about the Government's intentions. My right hon. Fried the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst challenged him in characteristically robust fashion about whether the Government intended and expected to get the Bill through both Houses of Parliament before the general election. There was a slight twinkle in the Minister's eye and what bordered on a smirk on his face when he said that he did not know and that we would have to wait and see.

To judge by the Government's enthusiasm for the rights of the prospective Labour candidate for Greenock and Inverclyde—and I do not cavil at that enthusiasm—they will break a leg to ensure that the Bill is rammed through Parliament in time for the general election. They will do that with no regard for the reservations that some of my colleagues feel about the Bill.

It is a great pity that the Government should display such haste in this matter, and such indifference to the rights of the Opposition.

Mr. O'Brien: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that he would prefer that the Bill were not put through the House before the general election, as the Government hope to do? If so, is he suggesting that the law as it stands should be allowed to prevent David Cairns from standing for Parliament?

Mr. Bercow: The answer is simple. Speaking for myself, I do not suggest for a moment that a deliberate attempt should be made to prevent the passage of the Bill in order to frustrate the legitimate political ambitions of the prospective parliamentary candidate for Greenock and Inverclyde. However, getting the Bill right is the paramount—indeed, the only—consideration in my mind, as it should be in the Minister's mind.

I do not know Mr. David Cairns, who may or may not be an estimable fellow. I have no strong feelings about him either way. I defend his rights, as I would those of other people, but Parliaments's overriding responsibility is to pass good law and to prevent the passage of bad law. To ensure that we achieve that, we need adequate time. My concern is that we do not have that.

The Government should have been prepared to consult on the matter. Instead, they indulged in their usual hole-and-corner and devious manoeuvres. Had they not done so, we might have reached a better outcome than the motion before the House this evening.

8.6 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I find myself in uncharacteristic agreement with the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). As my hon. Friend the

Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) said, we support the Bill and want it to reach the statute book. We appreciate that there are good reasons why the Minister should want to press it through the House with a degree of urgency, but the timetable on which the Government are insisting has not been debated or discussed. They are trying to railroad it through the House—an attitude that Liberal Democrat Members find deplorable.

As we have said, we will be happy to vote against the motion, if it comes to a vote. We do not believe that the House's business should be conducted in that way. No amendment has been tabled yet, and we do not know how much consideration will be required by those hon. Members with an interest in the Bill, yet the Government have insisted on this programme motion. We oppose it for that reason, and urge the Government to think again.

I do not think that the Government's action is hole-and-corner or deceitful. It is a quite flagrant abuse of the House to use programme motions on every Bill, yet that is what the Government have done since this Session began. However, it is perverse for Opposition Members to stand up and complain at great length about lack of time on programme motions.

I shall not detain the House, beyond making it clear that we do not believe that this is the right way for business to be conducted.

8.7 pm

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Bill is straightforward, with two clauses and two consequential schedules. Clause 1 is the substantial and major clause, as clause 2 deals merely with the Bill's short title, commencement and extent. I cannot see any great need for prolonged debate on the Floor of the House on the detail of the Bill: there was not even a Division on Second Reading, so the level of controversy aroused is clearly minimal.

The Government's proposals for the timetable motion are in order and entirely reasonable. I believe that the House should be able to deal with the Bill within that time scale.

Question put:—

The House proceeded to a Division—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House divided: Ayes 278, Noes 57.

Division No. 106] **[8.9 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Borrow, David
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge Hl)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGrady, Eddie
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*

Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Mike Hall.

NOES

Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Body, Sir Richard
Brand, Dr Peter
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fraser, Christopher
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Malins, Humfrey
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Shepherd, Richard
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stunell, Andrew
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyrie, Andrew
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Oliver Heald and
Mr. David Heath.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Political Parties

8.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth): I beg to move,

That the draft Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (Disapplication of Part IV for Northern Ireland Parties, etc.) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 25th January, be approved.

I am grateful for the opportunity offered by this debate to explain why the Government believe that the order is necessary.

During the debates on the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, clause 70(1), which permitted the Secretary of State to exempt the Northern Ireland parties from part IV of the legislation, was covered at some length.

In some parts of the House, the strength of feeling about those exemptions was made clear, so I want to explain why we think they are still necessary if all the parties in Northern Ireland are to function on a fair and equal footing with their counterparts elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

In the course of my speech, I hope to demonstrate that the only way to ensure fairness and equality for political parties in Northern Ireland is to recognise and allow for the special circumstances in which politics has to operate there.

First, I briefly remind the House of the purpose of the order. The order exempts political parties in Northern Ireland from registering the source of their donations and exempts them from the specified list of permissible donors set out in the Act. The exemptions are to last for four years but can be revoked before that time, although they may also be renewed after the four-year period.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): The four-year period is an upper limit. Given that we really want to move on from these provisions as quickly as possible, will the Minister consider reducing the time to two years?

Mr. Howarth: Later in my speech, I intend to address the circumstances in which we might need to consider a review of the legislation. As matters stand, a review could be triggered by events rather than at a particular point in time. I shall reflect on the hon. Gentleman's comments and if we see some merit in the argument, we could return to it when the order is debated in another place.

The order is based on the recommendations of the Neill report. After taking evidence in Northern Ireland the Neill committee made two specific recommendations. The first of these was that

"the Government should consider in the context of the development of the peace process whether it would be expedient to introduce a short term and reviewable exemption from the reporting requirements in respect of donations made to political parties in Northern Ireland."

That recommendation reflected the widespread concern expressed to the committee that the publication of names and other details of donors could and, in some cases, probably would lead to intimidation. The recommendation has been accepted because we have no intention of endangering people's security, nor of inadvertently discouraging them from donating to political parties.

The second recommendation acknowledged the importance of the Good Friday agreement and of our relations with the Republic of Ireland. As a consequence, the committee recommended that

"in relation to donors to political parties in Northern Ireland, the definition of a permissible source should also include a citizen of the Republic of Ireland resident in the Republic subject to compliance with the Republic's Electoral Act 1997."

Again, we accept that recommendation. It is a matter of some regret, however, that it did not prove possible to draft the definition of a permissible source in quite the way that the Neill committee envisaged.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I appreciate that the Minister said that it was not possible to define the phrase, "permissible source", but can he tell us what definition is used in the Republic's electoral law? Which circumstances govern such subscriptions there?

Mr. Howarth: At the moment, the Republic of Ireland has no equivalent legislation. I intend to comment further on that matter as I develop my speech, and I shall then cover the point that the hon. Gentleman makes.

The Electoral Commission—a United Kingdom-based organisation, which will have the responsibility for policing the arrangements—could not reasonably be expected to verify whether those in the Republic of Ireland who made donations were in compliance with the Republic's law, even as it stands.

A consequence of accepting the second recommendation—that donations from the Republic of Ireland were to be permitted—was that there was no way of preventing donations from elsewhere in the world being routed to Northern Ireland via the Republic.

Although we recognise that we are making an exception to our own policy on party funding, I hope that the House will understand, and perhaps agree, that we should not make provisions that would be impossible to police. It must be recognised that if anonymity is needed and donations from the Republic of Ireland are to be allowed, the amount of checking that can be completed in an entirely separate jurisdiction is very limited.

To return to the point made by the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) at moment ago, I am aware that the Irish Government are examining the arrangements regarding foreign donations to political parties. That is clearly a matter for that Government, and it would not be appropriate for me to express a view one way or another on what they should do. However, I recognise that such a change in law in the Republic of Ireland would have implications, depending on how it was framed, for the exemptions listed in the order. I therefore acknowledge that, in those circumstances, it would be proper to review the exemptions, and I am happy to assure the House that we would do so in the light of any changes in Irish law.

To ensure that the exemptions were considered necessary, I undertook a round of consultations with many of the political parties in February 2000. To be fair, that round of meetings revealed that there was a range of views among the Northern Ireland parties about the matter. On the whole, however, a majority of the parties at that time expressed fear for the safety of those who were named as donors—whether individuals or businesses—and thought that anonymity should be

[Mr. Howarth]

permitted. There was also a general recognition of the role of the Republic of Ireland in Northern Ireland's political life, which is, of course, entirely consistent with the Good Friday agreement.

As the House will probably remember, because of the concerns expressed about the exemptions—not least by the official Opposition—we promised that there would be a second round of consultations before the order was presented to the House. To fulfil that commitment, I invited all the Northern Ireland parties to a second round of meetings, which took place in January this year. During that round of meetings, it became apparent to me that the consensus for the exemptions has, to some extent, broken down. Nevertheless, even those parties which thought that complete anonymity was not warranted still sought an assurance that names could be given on a confidential basis to the Electoral Commission.

I hope that the House will understand that it is no reflection on the Electoral Commission when I say that no such assurance of complete confidentiality can be given. In any case, some of the parties have already indicated to me that a list compiled on a confidential basis, not to be published and available only to the commission, would still be enough to frighten away their donors on the grounds that there may be a leak and inadvertent disclosure.

As a Government, we have a responsibility to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland can make contributions to political parties without fear of reprisals or intimidation of any kind. We also have a responsibility to ensure that democratic parties are allowed to flourish. In my view, the only way that we can achieve this is by allowing complete anonymity for four years, so that the democratic process in Northern Ireland is not vulnerable in any way to those who would intimidate or inflict violence on others.

Similarly, there are sound reasons for allowing contributions from the Republic of Ireland. The truth is, however, that we do not have any realistic or reliable way of checking whether such money originated outside the Republic of Ireland. So, while we regret that these exemptions are necessary—I say that in all sincerity—there is a need to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland can be allowed to show their support for their chosen political parties without having any reason to fear for their own safety. Even those Northern Ireland parties that wished for full transparency acknowledged the need for some protection for certain groups of people.

For the reasons I have just given, we will obviously, as I said earlier, keep the need for the exemptions under review. If the political situation changes in the Republic of Ireland or the fears for the security of donors recedes, we will come back to the House and revoke the order. On the other hand, if, after four years, the Government's view is that the exemptions are still needed, we will seek to renew them for a suitable period and will come to the House with an affirmative order as we have done tonight.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Although we respect the way in which the Minister is moving the order, many of us think that, at heart, it is a miserable measure. Does he not accept that the conduct of politics is not only about political parties but, not least in the context of Northern Ireland, about cross-community organisations? Will he confirm that, if the order is passed and there is subsequently a referendum on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein will be able to take money from abroad, but a cross-community organisation that is manifestly and indisputably committed to peaceful means will not be able to do so?

Mr. Howarth: I am not sure what point the hon. Gentleman seeks to make. If he cares to elaborate on it, I shall try to give him a considered answer. If he is implying that the measures are designed purely to facilitate Sinn Fein, he is quite wrong.

Mr. Bercow: I intended to be clear; I am sorry if I was not. My point was that it is entirely conceivable that an organisation that was not a political party could and would have a view about the yes or no answer to a question in a referendum but, unlike a political party, it would not be able to receive funds from outside the country.

Mr. Howarth: The exemption in the order is designed entirely to cover political parties. It has no bearing on the conduct of a referendum. Other parts of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 deal with referendums and, if the hon. Gentleman has any concerns about them, I suggest that he takes them up with the Home Office. We are dealing exclusively with the funding of political parties, and the two relevant issues that flow from the Neill committee report.

Mr. Öpik: I had assumed that a non-political organisation could get funds for a referendum or something else from wherever it can secure them. Will the Minister clarify whether that is the case?

Mr. Howarth: In general terms, it is the case. The point that the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) made related to the fact that referendums are covered by the Act and he wanted to clarify whether there was a difference between a referendum and the provisions in the order. If that is the clarification that he sought, I am happy to confirm that there is a difference. Although a referendum would be funded on a different basis, that would apply across the United Kingdom. My case is that the funding of political parties is subject to different pressures in Northern Ireland.

Rev. Martin Smyth: I want to press the Minister on that issue. The order is on political parties, elections and referendums, but referendums do not always affect the whole of the UK; some have been held in Northern Ireland specifically on Northern Ireland issues. Does the fine print in the order mean that cross-party groupings and non-party groupings can get money from anywhere and that it is only political parties that are restricted on donations?

Mr. Howarth: If the hon. Gentleman reads the order, he will see that the headings refer to Northern Ireland parties, the disapplication of schedule 7, which covers political parties, the registration of the meaning of a registered political party and the registration of donations by regulated donees in Great Britain. It does not mention referendums that are held only in Northern Ireland or UK-wide.

Referendums would be affected only if a political party chose to campaign on them. The considerations that relate to any other means of fund-raising would apply in those circumstances because they are disapplied from the Act. There may be circumstances in which resources that were donated to a political party could be used for campaigning in a referendum, but presumably that would not be the purpose for which those general campaigning funds had been raised.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): Perhaps I can help the Minister. When challenged on this matter during the Bill's passage in another place, Lord Bassam said:

"I fully accept that the situation as it stands will mean that a Northern Ireland party would be able to use foreign donations in any future referendum . . . Another consequence . . . which I do not seek to hide is that a Northern Ireland party could use foreign funds in a referendum but any other permitted participant could not. I do not pretend that the position is ideal."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 November 2000; Vol. 619, c. 768.]

Mr. Howarth: I am in no way disagreeing with my noble Friend. I said that in those circumstances it would be possible for political parties to campaign in a referendum as described. However, the Act sets expenditure limits on campaigning generally in referendums. Unlimited expenditure of any kind would be penalised.

I feel bound to draw one further factor to the attention of the House. At least one party, the Social Democratic and Labour party, which is represented in the House tonight, has been fund-raising in anticipation of the exemptions. I also understand that some of its prospective donors have promised funding on the basis that the Northern Ireland parties would be exempted and not identified. In view of the fact that we signalled that the order would be introduced, it was not unreasonable for the party to do that. However, if we were to backtrack on that commitment, it would represent a breach of good faith. In those circumstances, we are honour bound to meet that commitment. Having made those important points, I commend the order to the House.

8.45 pm

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): We strongly and passionately oppose the motion, for reasons that I and others outlined during the passage of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill through both Houses of Parliament.

The Minister's speech was uncharacteristically confusing, and I did not think that his heart was entirely in it. I hope that he will forgive me if I am a little critical.

Mr. George Howarth: To dispel any misgivings that the right hon. Gentleman might have, I can assure him that, whatever my speech conveyed, my heart was properly in it. I have given the measure careful consideration and I believe that, in the circumstances, it is exactly the right thing to do.

Mr. MacKay: I am grateful to the Minister. I shall be happy for him to intervene again, but perhaps I could first make a little progress.

Our first fundamental objection concerns the fact that it has been decided, rightly, that political parties in our country should no longer accept overseas donations. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) became Leader of the Opposition, one of his early decisions, before the Neill committee reached its conclusions, was that the Conservative party would not in future accept overseas donations. There was no real dispute about that during the Bill's passage. Our concern is that Northern Ireland is being treated differently.

I passionately believe in the Union of Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. As a unionist—and I emphasise the small "u"—I believe that, wherever possible, Northern Ireland should be treated in exactly the same way as the rest of our country. It is fundamentally wrong that political parties in Northern Ireland are able to obtain funds from abroad when parties based on the mainland are not.

I am particularly concerned that the measure is largely, but not exclusively, a sop to political parties that are still close to violence and inextricably linked to paramilitaries. I willingly acknowledge to the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) that I am obviously excluding his party. I acknowledge also that, as the Minister said, the hon. Gentleman and his party are anxious to obtain money from abroad. I think it fundamentally wrong for any party to do so, and it is particularly sad that the majority of parties that will try to do so have past and present paramilitary links. That is the first fundamental reason for our opposition to the motion.

Secondly, there is a red herring in the debate. The Minister says that even if we banned donations from abroad in Northern Ireland, the security situation means that there could be threats to donors, so their names would not be revealed and we would not know whether the donations were from abroad. We fully accept that, in the present climate in Northern Ireland, it would be wrong to publish the names of donors, whether individual or corporate. There is nothing between us on that point, and I do not think that any Member would think that publication was wise at the moment. The Minister and I hope that the situation will change, and that such precautions will not be necessary in future if the peace process that we support reaches a logical and happy conclusion.

I beg to differ on one point. I notice that the Minister was particularly cautious in his reference to the Electoral Commission, when he said that he hoped that it would not be insulted by what he had to say. On the commission's behalf, I would have accepted those remarks, had they come from some Ministers, as an insult, but I did not in this case. However, the commission is a neutral, secure body, and if the commissioners alone were given the names of donors, they would be able to establish whether or not they were foreign. It is therefore an excuse and a red herring to use legitimate concerns about publicising donors' names in this instance. There would be no problem in giving them to the Electoral Commission alone, and we should do that.

There is another separate and serious aspect of the Act and the order. I think that we have established that the Minister was incorrect when he started to suggest that the order had nothing to do with referendums. As I illustrated in my intervention, it clearly does; I quoted his ministerial colleague in another place, Lord Bassam of Brighton, at some length. That is another of our serious complaints about the order.

[Mr. MacKay]

It is conceivable that there will be a border poll in the future. It might even be advantageous at some time to have a further border poll. As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) mentioned, it is outrageous that a political party—for instance, Sinn Fein—can obtain money from abroad to campaign in such a referendum, yet a cross-community group supporting the peace process and the Union would not be allowed to do so. That is far from a level playing field; indeed, it is unfair and unreasonable.

The Minister will know—it could be that the note coming from the officials' Box is confirming this—that the situation is straightforward, and that political parties can obtain money from abroad but groups campaigning in a referendum that are not political parties cannot. These are groups with which he and I would probably want to associate. In anybody's book, that is deeply unfair and wrong.

The Minister said that this does not really matter, because there are severe limits on how much each political party can raise from abroad in a referendum campaign. I remind the House that there are rather generous limits, with which I do not quibble. Each political party is allowed to raise £500,000 for each referendum campaign. That is not a trivial amount. In the case of Sinn Fein, much of it might come from abroad. That gives it a distinctly unfair advantage.

In general, I have the greatest reservations about referendums. I believe in our parliamentary democracy wherever possible. We should use this elected Parliament to make decisions. If the electorate does not like the decisions that we make, it has an opportunity every four or five years to put others in our place who might make more favourable decisions. However, I acknowledge that occasionally there is need for a referendum. One of the obvious examples, going back over the past 60 or 70 years, was the border poll to which I referred earlier.

If we are to have referendums, it is vital that there be a level playing field. The last referendum to take place throughout the United Kingdom was conducted in 1975. The Minister and I were perhaps on the same side of the argument. I campaigned for a yes vote—*[Interruption.]* Apparently, he did not. I nevertheless welcome the Minister's conversion.

I still believe that Britain's future is within the European Community, but I had great reservations about the funding that turned out to be available to the two different campaigns. That is why limits must be set and why, wherever possible, there should be equality of campaigning so that the British people can make a decision in any referendum that is based on equal spending and equal advocacy by both sides. On reflection, 26 years later, that did not happen in 1975, which is regrettable. I think that I would have won and the Minister would have lost—as in fact happened—even if the funding had been different. However, the matter was rather distasteful, and it appears more distasteful as the years go by. We therefore learned a lesson from the 1975 referendum, and we should ensure that the same thing never happens again.

I hope that I have expressed clearly my serious concerns about specific referendums in Northern Ireland, of which the most obvious is about the border poll that will probably take place in the near future. I should now like to move on to the wider issue of referendums elsewhere in the United Kingdom and I shall explain, Madam Deputy Speaker, why I am not trespassing out of order. The most obvious referendum to come up Europe-wide—that is a wonderful Freudian slip, but I mean United Kingdom-wide—in the foreseeable future will be on whether or not we should join the single currency. Again, I suspect that the Minister and I would be on opposite sides of the argument, which is a pity. However, it is essential that we have a level playing field.

I should like to look at the situation in Northern Ireland. Political parties registered in Northern Ireland would be able to obtain £500,000 abroad and add that to the referendum campaign throughout the UK. The Minister will say that they are not allowed to pass that money on to political parties on the mainland, but they will have to. They can take advertising space and publish leaflets. It is quite easy to spend £500,000 on a referendum campaign on a single currency. That would however be wrong, and it would influence unduly what happened in the campaign.

I shall give a spurious example which, I hope, is not sensitive in the context of Northern Ireland politics. The Conservative party in Northern Ireland is a registered party in the Province, and it could spend £500,000 on billboards and advertising, quite separately from the separately registered Conservative party on the mainland. It could spend that money on the same campaign as the Conservative party, but it would pay for different advertisements in different places. We could easily take a logical step further and divide the Conservative party in Northern Ireland into individual constituencies, so that there are separate Conservative parties registered for Strangford, South Down and Belfast, South. Each party could then accept £500,000 from people who were against entry to the single currency. We could direct that money to them and they would spend it on the referendum.

I believe that the Minister would think that wrong and unfair and that it would act against his desire to join the single currency. Lest there be any doubt, may I add that the Conservative party would have no intention of doing what I have just said? I am simply saying that that option would be available to us; it drives a coach and horses through the order, which is highly dangerous.

Mr. Öpik: I have always regarded the right hon. Gentleman as highly dangerous. He has just answered his own point: he is being theoretical and building a castle in the air, but has also pointed out the real fact that no responsible party in the Chamber would undertake such action. I accept his concerns—although we have different views—since parties could indeed do that. Surely, as he said, wherever possible Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK should be the same. On this occasion, however, there are mitigating circumstances that, perhaps, would lead to the need to have a temporary difference. Would the right hon. Gentleman not accept even a partial justification on that basis?

Mr. MacKay: No, I do not accept that. The only exception is the fact that, in the rest of the United Kingdom, the names of donors who give more than a certain sum have to be published, whereas that is not the case in Northern Ireland, for legitimate security reasons. Northern Ireland should be treated differently from the rest of the United Kingdom only in respect of security issues.

I take issue with the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik). I said that I had deliberately used a sensitive example that would not offend people in the House and in Northern Ireland—the example of my own party in Northern Ireland. I went on to say, quite reasonably, that we would not abuse the order in that way.

However, political parties in Northern Ireland may feel strongly about a certain issue. For example—the hon. Member for South Down will correct me if I am wrong—the Social Democratic and Labour party is closely and legitimately linked to the Labour party, takes the Whip in the House and is strongly in favour of joining the single currency. Under the order, there is no reason for the SDLP not to accept large donations from abroad for the euro referendum and to pay for a great many pro-euro advertisements in the campaign on the mainland.

There would be nothing wrong with the hon. Member for South Down doing that. We know that his party is a democratic, non-violent party which has substantial support in the Province and always acts with due propriety. It would not be doing anything illegal or out of order if the measure were passed tonight.

The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire is wrong if he thinks that that is just wild theory, with no chance of being realised. The House must always make sure that the laws that it passes are tight, exact and well defined; otherwise, they can be abused. That in turn brings the House into disrepute and causes serious problems later. The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire may be relaxed about the order being so open to abuse, but that is not a prospect that the Liberal Democrats, with an honourable history over many years, have ever countenanced in the past.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. So that we do not become obsessed with hypothetical models, will he confirm that the order would last for four years? If his concern is about a referendum, is he conceding that there will be a referendum within four years? If so, he obviously knows which party will be in power.

Mr. MacKay: The hon. Gentleman's seat is one of our leading target seats in the west midlands, as he knows full well. I believe and expect that there will be a new Member for Hall Green in the next Parliament, but I do not want to trespass on the hon. Gentleman's personal grief.

I say to the hon. Member for Hall Green, as I said to the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire, that we must legislate for every possibility—even the horrendous possibility of the re-election of a Labour Government, and the re-election of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe). Much as I hope and expect that that will not happen, I would be unwise and not fulfilling my parliamentary and legislative duty if I did not take it into account. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept that.

To return to the serious arguments against the order, I conclude and summarise by saying that the order is wrong because it treats Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the United Kingdom, without good cause. The order is wrong because it prays in aid the security situation and the non-publishing of donors' names, although the electoral commissioners could scrutinise any money coming from abroad. The order is wrong because it will allow abuse and an uneven playing field for referendums in Northern Ireland and possibly elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): The right hon. Gentleman makes some powerful points. If the Electoral Commission is to scrutinise contributions in camera, what happens when there has been a breach of the law? What sanctions will be imposed, and will any subsequent litigation also be dealt with in camera?

Mr. MacKay: I have no doubt that the Electoral Commission will take the same action and impose the same sanctions as it would in relation to a party that is registered elsewhere in the United Kingdom and which is found to be taking money from abroad. I am glad to see the Under-Secretary nodding.

The hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) is a lawyer, so I shall not try to second-guess him on whether subsequent court action or appeals should be heard in camera. Off the top of my head, my answer is that they should not be. I would trust the commission, which is an independent body. Indeed, I think that it has the confidence of all political parties. Once again, the Under-Secretary nods. If it finds abuse in Northern Ireland or any other part of the United Kingdom, the commission should act accordingly. If the political party and donor in question think that they have been wrongly treated, perhaps because the donation did not come from abroad, the decision can be tested in the courts. That is fine and proper. It is up to the donor and party to decide whether to pursue the case. The more I reflect on the hon. Gentleman's question, however, the less I think that the court case should be heard in camera.

For all the reasons that I have given, I believe that the order is profoundly wrong, and I hope that the House will reject it.

9.6 pm

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): I rise to speak on behalf of my party in support of the order. I should like to return to the practical reality of political life in Northern Ireland and move away from the castles in the air to which the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) referred.

In the SDLP's submission to the Neill committee, we stated our firm belief in

> "the principle of openness, transparency and accountability in the funding of political parties in the context of a normal and modern democratic society."

We asked the committee to be sensitive to the practical difficulties of applying such principles in what is still a deeply divided, sectarian and troubled society. That is where Northern Ireland is today. It is different from Great Britain—a difference that is addressed through its exemption from the requirements of section 65 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.

In past years, the SDLP party headquarters has been bombed five times. Our members have been physically intimidated and abused, and their property has been damaged and destroyed. Only two weeks ago, the constituency headquarters of my colleague Alban Maginness, the Member of the Legislative Assembly for Belfast, North, were bombed. That context creates fear. We cannot say that it does not exist and that Northern Ireland is the same as Great Britain. It is not the same, and that is the problem that we are trying to address in order to sustain a proper democratic process. Of course, members of other Northern Ireland parties have suffered equally, and Members of Parliament have previously paid the ultimate price of political violence by having their lives taken from them.

[Mr. Eddie McGrady]

We have resisted violence over the years and have tried to create a normal political society. We have been tested in every possible way by sectarianism and violence. Now, every morning in news bulletins, we hear about pipe bombing. That is where we are at. In that context, we asked the Neill committee and the Government to exempt Northern Ireland parties for a trial period of four years to ascertain whether we could achieve some normality and subsequently be covered by the whole Act.

I am a wee bit surprised by the comments and attitudes of the Conservative and Unionist party spokesperson, the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay), because the Ulster Unionist party agreed with us on the matter and made similar requests to the Neill committee. Jack Allen, the central treasurer, said in paragraph 6667:

"Over a number of years, because of the political situation in Northern Ireland, people did not want to be identified with political parties . . . because of the risk factor in Northern Ireland."

That statement was supported by the late president of the Ulster Unionist party, Josias Cunningham, when he referred to foreign donations in paragraph 6676.

Funding from the Republic of Ireland cannot be banned because such a ban would contravene section 2(1) of the Ireland Act 1949, which states:

"notwithstanding that the Republic of Ireland is not part of His Majesty's dominions, the Republic of Ireland is not a foreign country for the purposes of any law . . . in any part of the United Kingdom".

That is the answer to jibes about such funding.

The exemptions in the order were originally proposed by the Neill report, which states:

"The Government should consider in the context of the development of the peace process whether it would be expedient to introduce a short term and reviewable exemption from the reporting requirements in respect of donations made to political parties in Northern Ireland."

I stress that that is a proposal from the Neill committee, not from the Government. Nothing could be more specific than that recommendation from the report on standards. The proposal is reflected in the order.

During the drafting and in the debates, we lobbied jointly with the Ulster Unionist party until the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 was passed and the two exemptions for recorded donations and foreign fund-raising were made. There was consensus throughout the discussions between us and the top officials at the centre of the Ulster Unionist party. Our chair and central treasurer received a letter, which stated:

"As you know, business people and individuals are already wary of making donations to political parties and are likely to be even more sensitive if their donations are to be recorded"—

recorded, not publicised. The letter continues:

"I am afraid that reassuring people and organisations that their donations will be recorded but not published will make no difference."

That is a statement from the Ulster Unionist party in a letter to us. I have not quoted it out of context. The last phrase of the letter asks us to feel free to refer to it in our discussions with anybody, so I am not betraying any confidence by using those quotations.

Something subsequently happened. The leader of the Ulster Unionist party insinuated or even said that the Under-Secretary had misled the House. However, I have the submission to us from the Ulster Unionist party in writing; it is there for the public to see. The Under-Secretary did not mislead the House.

Furthermore, the SDLP, with the approval of the Electoral Commission, supported the Bill on the basis that the Northern Ireland parties would be exempt from recording donations. As a result of the Act and with the guidance already received from the Electoral Commission, we have informed potential donors in good faith that there will be no requirement to declare their donations at least for the four-year exemption period.

We believe that our future will be based on normalising politics in Northern Ireland, and we look forward to a normality of the kind enjoyed by Members of the House here in Great Britain, but not, as yet, by us. We look forward to a normality in which people will be free publicly to express their support for a political party, to put their party posters up in the windows of their homes and businesses without fear of intimidation, and to donate openly to political parties without fear of threats to themselves or their families.

I pray and hope that that day will come, but it is not here yet. Meanwhile, we must be conscious of the potential threat to individual personal security if donations are disclosed or written down in any way. I ask all hon. Members, who are democratically elected and proven to subscribe to the democratic process, to trust us. We shall not usurp any powers, or do any wrong.

Hon. Members may be worried about the wrongdoers doing wrong, but they will continue to do wrong anyway. They will have the advantage of doing wrong and not being caught. If a paramilitary organisation wants to get funds from Timbuktu, it will get funds from Timbuktu irrespective of any legislation passed by this House. However, the democratic political parties, which form a bulwark against such activities, must be given the ability to sustain themselves until the day arrives when we have normal politics in Northern Ireland. I support the order.

9.16 pm

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): I would very much like to see normalisation in Northern Ireland, as would the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay). Indeed, I think that we all would. We are making good progress, but we are not there yet.

In some of our debates on Northern Ireland, it almost feels as though we are so focused on the issues and so willing to accommodate Northern Ireland in its efforts to achieve normality that we sometimes fashion individual bits of policy round the needs of individual parties, or perhaps even round individuals in Northern Ireland. Is that not a great model for Parliament, in which politics fits itself round the needs of a community in transition rather than expecting the community to fit round the needs of the policy-makers? In that context, it is reasonable, on a judgment call, to make this exemption. My party has consistently felt, throughout the debates on this issue in the House and elsewhere, that we probably need to make the exemption, as long as it is temporary.

We have been told by the Minister and by the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) that individual donors could be at personal risk. The hon. Member for South Down cited some examples that I found very persuasive. There have been real examples of intimidation of a nature that we do not tend to experience on the

mainland of the United Kingdom, which alter the political environment for providing donations and support to particular parties.

For now it is, therefore, probably defensible to protect the anonymity of the individuals making such donations. However, four years seems to be too long a time for such an exemption. A two-year exemption would make much more sense, not least because having to re-justify it sooner would provide a driver and a focus for the Government. It would still be an exemption, and the right hon. Member for Bracknell rightly described it as one that should, preferably, not exist at all.

As I understand it, under a two-year exemption the political processes of the House would require the Minister to ensure that the order was laid again in the upper House, because it would be hard to rescind it in two years' time and it could not be modified. Will the Minister consider re-laying the order in a format that incorporates a two-year upper limit when it goes to another place? That might involve a little more administrative messing about than he would have wanted, but a 24-month exemption just makes more sense. To that extent, I agree with the implication in the comments of the right hon. Member for Bracknell that we should get out of these arrangements as quickly as possible with regard to Northern Ireland.

However, I disagree that the measure is a sop to party politicians who are involved with paramilitary organisations. The hon. Member for South Down, who spoke for the SDLP, can hardly be described as public enemy No. 1. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Bracknell did exclude the SDLP—*[Interruption.]* I am acting as a messenger for the right hon. Gentleman, who rightly points out that he went to great trouble to do so. *[Interruption.]* If he wants to say more, he will have to intervene because I do not get paid to speak for the official Opposition.

The right hon. Gentleman seemed to miss the fact that the SDLP is obviously one of the key organisations that need the exemption now. He acknowledged that the SDLP was not culpable in a paramilitary sense, but perhaps did not acknowledge that it is typical of a party political organisation that clearly thinks that there is a political imperative for the exemption in the short term. That is a persuasive argument and we must respect the people on the front line of Northern Ireland politics who say that they need the exemption.

The right hon. Gentleman also said that, wherever possible, Northern Ireland should be treated in exactly the same way as the rest of the UK. The crucial words are "wherever possible". Northern Ireland has done a good job of catching up, but is not there yet. He also regards it as outrageous that political parties could take money from abroad and said that it is fundamentally wrong for political parties to obtain money from abroad. Not that long ago, his own party did exactly that. Northern Ireland is only about five years behind the rest of the UK, which is not bad. We must recognise that the normalisation of Northern Irish politics will happen, but it must be given the space to allow that.

Incidentally, it is equally outrageous that political parties on the mainland are willing to accept enormous private donations—£5 million, for example. That implies that, on occasion, the wealth of donors to political parties represented in the Chamber can have an impact on the ability of those parties to campaign effectively. The Liberal Democrats have long talked about state funding and I would like to think that the implication of comments in the debate is that other parties now seriously recognise its benefits. We could remove the cheque book's influence on the quality of debate and the strength of campaigning here on the mainland.

Whatever hon. Members feel about the situation, the problem will go away because some time in early summer, when the Liberal Democrats form the next Government, we shall return to it and make sure that everything is put right. Until then, let us continue apace with the normalisation of Northern Irish politics and acknowledge, in all seriousness, that we have room to differ. In fairness, the right hon. Member for Bracknell and his party have been consistent throughout the debate. This is a judgment call, not a matter of principle, and I tend to side with the Minister and the hon. Member for South Down. The right hon. Gentleman and his party simply take a different view.

Time will probably tell who is right, but, for now, we are prepared to live with the risk. I remind the Minister again that, although we agree that the order should be approved, two years would be better than four. I say to the right hon. Member for Bracknell that we still think two years better than none.

9.23 pm

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I shall not follow the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik), especially if we have to wait until the next Liberal Government come to power for improvements to be made. There are problems. I understand the points made by the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady), but we have not given enough credit to people in Northern Ireland who have carried on democratic politics despite all the fierce opposition that has been directed towards them.

I have lost colleagues—one I replaced as Member of Parliament for Belfast, South and the other, who represented Belfast, South in the Assembly, was one of the brightest young lawyers on his way up in the United Kingdom—and seen other members of our party brutalised and killed. I understand something of the terror, but the harsh reality is that we are discussing not that but how Northern Ireland has constantly been made somewhat different from the rest of the United Kingdom. Some Members of the House, who have continually made us different, have the audacity to say, "But Northern Ireland is different."

If the order is passed, registered parties in Northern Ireland will not have to adhere to a specified list of permissible donors, make quarterly reports with respect to donations or make weekly donations reports during election periods. An individual donor will not have to make a report to the commission if he or she has made an aggregate donation of more than £5,000 in any given calendar year, and the commission will not have to keep a register of donations reported to it.

I understand why the secretary, chairman and treasurer of the Ulster Unionist party may say that they are concerned about even reported donations to the commission, given that the Parades Commission released names submitted to it to a Sinn Fein representative. That, however, does not strike me as a final answer.

Our main concern relates to foreign funding. I know that in earlier years, for a considerable time, the SDLP was a major beneficiary of the National Democratic

[Rev. Martin Smyth]

Institute, which trained and funded the party for election and other purposes. The order, however, does no service to the people of Northern Ireland. It fails to provide transparency in the financing of Northern Ireland political parties.

In recommendation 24 of its fifth report, the Neill committee said:

"Political parties should in principle be banned from receiving foreign donations".

The order permits foreign funding for Northern Ireland. It is true that the committee said in recommendation 29:

"In relation to political parties in Northern Ireland"—

the Minister referred to this—

"the definition of a permissible source should also include a citizen of the Republic of Ireland resident in the Republic subject to compliance with the Republic's Electoral Act".

I should like to know what that really means, and why we are being asked to sign a blank cheque.

The Neill committee incorporated a Northern Ireland exception in its fifth report. That exception was not to benefit the Ulster Unionist party or any other unionist party, but to benefit Northern Ireland nationalist parties. We know that nationalist parties in Wales and, in particular, Scotland may well have benefited from exceptions, but no exception was made for them. What is before us might be called a Northern Ireland nationalist party order—or, to be more exact, a Sinn Fein rather than an SDLP order.

The order will go beyond the Neill committee's recommendation of an exception for Northern Ireland parties. It will permit financing by any country, not just the Republic of Ireland. That was not recommended by the committee.

Republicanism is international—Irish republicanism, that is. It goes beyond Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, it is abroad that the romantic message of "mother Ireland" sells best. Men like Martin Galvin find those in the United States easy prey: they have not witnessed the misery and brutality of the Provisional IRA campaign in Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom for the past 30 years. Galvin has now declared his support for the Real IRA and the Continuity IRA.

Lest we forget what those groups are doing in Europe, I remind the House of a recent report in the Swedish paper *Aftonbladet* that the IRA was raising funds through a restaurant it was running in Stockholm. That money could easily be used for the Armalite or the ballot box, such is the fluidity of the relationship between Sinn Fein and the IRA.

Ulster Unionists have an exceptional problem because our people regularly say that we do not do enough. However, they would not allow us to be funded by the types of sources used by Sinn Fein-IRA. Those sources include not only foreign donations, but the proceeds of criminal acts in the community.

What about records and transparency? Disapplying chapters I to III of part IV of the 2000 Act to Northern Ireland will result in all the provisions on donations not being applied. The term "permissible donors" will mean nothing. All sources will be permissible; indeed, the concept of permissibility will not even exist. Unlike in the rest of the United Kingdom, if a party in Northern Ireland cannot identify the source of a donation, there will be no issue. Anonymous donations will continue to be permitted in Northern Ireland.

Hon. Members have suggested that, because of the terror, business men do not want to be identified. When I was a young assistant, we were building an extension to a church. A certain business man said to my senior, "We see that you've made a start. We'll give you a £100 contribution." That was almost 50 years ago, when £100 was a fair sum. The church was extended and the hall was built. However, regardless of how closely one searches the records, one will find no mention of a £100 donation from that business man. I think that, sometimes, people who are interested only in making money for themselves, not in supporting democracy, say that they do not want to be seen to be supporting a political party.

Unlike in the rest of the United Kingdom, no improperly obtained funds will be subject to forfeiture in Northern Ireland because there would be no concept of improperly obtained funds. In Northern Ireland, funding sources will not need to be voluntary, as is implied in the term "donor", and racketeering will continue to be a legitimate form of funding for paramilitary-linked parties. The order will ensure that the

"evasion of restrictions constituting an offence"

will not apply to Northern Ireland. Then again, as there will be no restrictions, there will be no restrictions for one to evade.

Northern Ireland parties will not need to concern themselves with reporting on donations weekly, quarterly or otherwise and regardless of whether they are made in an election period. Although disapplying part IV will reduce administration for Northern Ireland parties and might be perceived as beneficial, there is clearly no benefit in comparison with what is being lost by not subscribing to the rules and regulations that will apply to the other United Kingdom parties. It is essential that, sooner rather than later, Northern Ireland political parties, like political parties elsewhere in the United Kingdom, are subject to the rules on funding sources.

Only Sinn Fein and other paramilitary parties will really benefit from a non-regulated system and a lack of transparency. It is they—not the Ulster Unionist party and other constitutional parties in Northern Ireland—who have something to hide.

At the beginning of the debate, hon. Members had exchanges with the Minister on referendums. It is strange that there is confusion even about those. We cannot have referendums without the involvement of political parties, but, in Northern Ireland, political parties will not be restricted. Conversely, the order seems to provide that cross-community groups could be restricted. Additionally, if referendums were to follow the precedent set by the 1973 border poll and the United Kingdom European referendum, the sums provided to one side could entirely skew the result. Not for one moment am I suggesting that Ulster Unionist people will vote to withdraw from the Union. However, the weight of funding available for publicity could have an adverse effect on turnout. That is why it is important for us to consider the matter again.

The Belfast agreement, with its concept of the principle of consent, provides for the possibility of such a referendum on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. I shall be brief, as other hon. Members want to speak and I do not want to curtail the time available for

the Minister's response. However, as I said, we do not believe that extravagant campaigning by republicans and nationalists in any future referendum on Northern Ireland's constitution would persuade Unionists to be anything other than Unionists, but there could be an adverse effect on turnout.

A further anomaly is that those organisations set up especially to campaign in a referendum under the Belfast agreement would be banned from receiving foreign funding. If we read the legislation aright, those parties are dealt with in a different part of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. The Minister seems to have missed that.

Campaigning organisations have been dealt with, and I noticed that the hon. Member for South Down was a little puzzled when his party was referred to as the sister party of the Labour party. I do not understand that, as he and his party leader have regularly proclaimed that both parties belong to the socialist federation.

Mr. McGrady: The hon. Gentleman must have misinterpreted my facial expression to reach that conclusion. I am sorry to have misled him in that way. I agree that there is a good relationship in the socialist international between my party and the Labour parties of these isles.

Rev. Martin Smyth: I appreciate that clarification. I did not have my glasses on, so I put the hon. Gentleman's response down to a facial aberration. However, he merely confirms what the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) suggested—that it is possible for the SDLP to get money and use it to promote the Labour party's position in Great Britain. I hope that a miracle will happen, and that a Conservative party in Northern Ireland will get £500,000. I should be especially glad to take the crumbs from the table if that happened in Belfast, South.

Finally, I turn to the matter raised by the hon. Member for South Down. I do not challenge his quotations, but he said that he had noticed a change in the submission made by the Ulster Unionists. In evidence to the Neill committee, Mr. Cunningham and Mr. Allen—my party's former president and current treasurer, respectively—said that we would be reluctant to have a public register for security reasons. However, we can still argue for transparency coupled with security. A register could still be maintained by the electoral officer or the Electoral Commission, so that the security of donors would not be compromised for transparency. It is important that the books are clearly open, so that no one could be hoodwinked in a general election.

9.38 pm

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): I recognise that the Minister wants an opportunity to respond, and I simply wish to put on record my party's position on this matter.

First, I thank the Minister for the courtesy that he has extended to my party in our meetings on this matter and other electoral issues. He has kept us abreast of the Government's thinking and he knows our views. We have been on common ground for the most part, but there is a degree of difference in regard to this motion that we must set out.

It was interesting to hear the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) talk about amounts of money that might be put into a Northern Ireland context. Most hon. Members from the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties would probably roll around on their Benches with laughter if they knew just how little political parties survive on in Northern Ireland. It is a pittance compared with the funds available to parties on the mainland. Therefore, a level playing field becomes all the more important, because the position is easily distorted when a party or group is capable of bringing in resources from outside Northern Ireland.

That is why funding from outside Northern Ireland becomes particularly important. It has distorted the position to the detriment of the SDLP, although it would not admit it. Substantial funds from outside Northern Ireland have assisted Sinn Fein-IRA in bettering the SDLP in almost every by-election in recent times, and increasing substantially its share of the votes in every general election as well. Such distortion is a result of the influence of those outside the territory of Northern Ireland. That is wrong. For that reason, and a number of others, we are opposed to foreign donations.

I agree with the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady), who has left the Chamber, that Northern Ireland is different from other parts of the United Kingdom with regard to the dangers of people being identified with a political party. If people are seen to donate money to a Unionist party, they might believe—correctly or not—that there is a danger of being targeted by a republican organisation. Equally, if a firm is seen to donate to a nationalist party, it might see itself as open to being targeted by what are described as loyalist paramilitaries. This will ensure that firms do not easily give money to political parties.

I find it laughable that the hon. Member for South Down raised the issue. There is a recent instance in which a firm identified itself with a democratic political viewpoint and the SDLP hounded it. The Ulster Unionist party has had a discussion within its ranks about matters relating to the Belfast agreement. A firm—McCann Erickson—provided a viewpoint which was consistent with those whose views are against the Belfast agreement, and did so publicly. It was hounded by the SDLP. When I was Minister for Regional Development, I received questions from SDLP Members wanting to know how much McCann Erickson was getting in Government contracts. The clear implication was that if a firm was against the views of the SDLP or the First Minister, it should not receive contracts from Departments in Northern Ireland. More than that, the SDLP went to Mr. Hennessy, the controller of New York, and got him to apply pressure on McCann Erickson, threatening the job of the person who had been prepared to put his head above the parapet.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that his illustration of what happens in Northern Ireland is true of businesses throughout the kingdom, and that it is regularly said in company reports that no charitable or political donations have been given during the year?

Mr. Robinson: Yes, indeed. There is clearly a difficulty with firms putting their heads above the parapet and identifying themselves, albeit by subscription, with political parties. That is a reality with which we have to live.

[Mr. Robinson]

There is an element of the Bill that is too important for us to allow it to be overcome. Our submission to the Minister and the body that considered it was that we should allow firms to have their donations recorded and the Electoral Commission should be told the nature of those donations to each of the political parties, but there should be no publication of that list. That would have ensured that the political parties were acting in the best interests of the electorate, and that people in the United Kingdom would have the safety of knowing that the matter was properly scrutinised.

I think that the issue of what happens when a matter is brought to court was rather bogus. Almost daily, the courts in Northern Ireland decline to allow the names of individuals and groups to be published. The case would be against the political party, not against the organisation which subscribed to it. That could easily be kept out of the public arena. It could be overcome by the Minister, while allowing Northern Ireland to stay as far in step with the rest of the United Kingdom as possible, given the special circumstances.

I regret not being able to speak for a longer time; I realise that the Minister is keen to respond to the debate. It is important, however, to record our opposition. We are opposed to permission being given for nationalists—we should be clear about that—to receive foreign donations. We oppose the refusal for publication to be withheld; the Electoral Commission should receive details of all donations to political parties in Northern Ireland.

9.45 pm

Mr. George Howarth: The debate has been genuinely useful. Differing opinions have been expressed—indeed, every possible variation of opinion on the matter has been expressed during this short debate. It is both useful and important that those voices are heard.

I shall deal with two or three of the points that have arisen. The right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) said, in effect, that the order was a sop to Sinn Fein. He may think that. He may even doubt the sincerity of Sinn Fein; he is entitled to do so—as, no doubt, will others. I can only tell him that in the two consultations on the issue that I have held with Sinn Fein during the past 12 months, its publicly stated position, repeated to me, is that the party is content with complete transparency and that it does not seek exemptions for Northern Ireland.

I realise that there will be scepticism in some parts of the House as to whether Sinn Fein's private position is the same as that stated publicly. However, if I was planning to give a sop to Sinn Fein, it would be somewhat surreal to offer something for which the party had never asked. I should certainly receive no credit from Sinn Fein for doing that, so such speculation is bizarre.

I do not doubt that Sinn Fein, along with every other party in Northern Ireland, will benefit from the exemptions. That is unquestionably the case. My major concern is that the SDLP, both in representations to the Neill committee and to me during two rounds of consultations, has made it absolutely clear that there are legitimate grounds for the exercise of an exclusion for four years.

The hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) has been entirely consistent. Last month, he repeated what he told me 12 months ago. His party has concerns, although its members believe that they could be addressed in a different way.

We should listen carefully to my hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady), who made an important contribution. It is not for me, for the right hon. Member for Bracknell or for any Member to say that the requirements would pose a particular problem for the SDLP. It is right, however, that we listen to the SDLP. Its position has been perfectly consistent. From the beginning, the SDLP has pointed out that, in an ideal world, the party would want complete transparency with no exemptions, but that, in its particular circumstances in Northern Ireland, such exemptions are right and proper. My hon. Friend put that case fully and well.

I have been persuaded not by Sinn Fein but by my hon. Friend and by a party that is represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly—the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. It, too, feels that the matter is important and that if the exemptions did not apply, the party would be damaged.

The hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) has made it clear that there was some movement in his party's view on the issue. In no way do I condemn his party for that; any party is entitled to change its point of view over time, and I accept that his party had genuine reasons for doing so. The hon. Gentleman is a serious politician and he takes such matters seriously. I hope that he will accept that our intentions are not to favour nationalists or anyone else. The order was drafted and the exemptions exist because we have a concern for all of the political parties in Northern Ireland.

I shall make a brief point in response to the comments of the hon. Member for Belfast, East. He believes that foreign funding can be separated from registration. He has repeatedly told me that on behalf of his party. Frankly, the difficulty is that if there is not a register, it is impossible to track whether or not foreign donations are being made to any political party—one piece of information depends on having the other, and it is not possible to separate the two. The hon. Gentleman would concede that that is the case. However, he says that he would like the Electoral Commission to hold that information, but not to publish it. That is his party's stated position. In no way do I wish to impugn the commission's integrity, but I have to say in all honesty that there can never be any guarantee that the information will not leak out in some way or another.

I shall give the hon. Gentleman a perfectly reasonable example. If there were reason to believe that a donation was made improperly and the commission felt that it had to investigate the matter, the very act of launching an investigation could prejudice the secrecy of the register. The hon. Gentleman well knows that, in Northern Ireland, a rumour has only to start in Coleraine in the morning and he will probably hear about it in Belfast in the afternoon. Such is the nature of all political information. If an investigation were under way, there could be no guarantee that the information could be kept entirely confidential.

On referendums, I simply say that such matters are set out in schedule 14 to the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. Of course, political parties could be involved in referendums, but equally, as I said earlier, they are subject to strict limits. I will not trade

reminiscences with the right hon. Member for Bracknell about where we were respectively during a referendum in 1975, but when he was campaigning for a yes vote, I was the leader of the Huyton no vote campaign, which consisted of me, as the secretary of the Huyton young socialists, the Huyton Communist party and two Conservatives, who ran a ballroom dancing academy. What else we had in common, I do not know.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 304, Noes 123.

Division No. 107] **[9.54 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Benton, Joe
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGrady, Eddie
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry

Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Anne McGuire and Mr. Jim Dowd.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McCrea, Dr William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Moss, Malcolm
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev Ian
Pickles, Eric
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Keith Simpson and Mr. James Gray.

Question accordingly agreed to.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 January],

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That, for the current Session of Parliament, Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

LANGUAGE OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCEEDINGS

Motion made,

That—

(1) this House approves the First Report from the Procedure Committee, Session 2000–01 (HC 47); and

(2) the Resolution of 5th June 1996 on the Language of Parliamentary Proceedings be amended accordingly by inserting, after the word 'Wales,', the words 'and at Westminster in respect of Select Committees'.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object

PETITION

Nuclear Waste

10.10 pm

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): This is the "Colchester says no to burning nuclear waste at Bradwell" petition. It is the petition of Susan Brooks, Judith Lunn, Bridget Searle and 1,570 residents of Colchester and surrounding areas.

The petition declares their opposition to the burning of low level nuclear waste, including oils and solvents, at Bradwell Nuclear Power Station, Essex. The Petitioners state that burning does not destroy radioactivity; instead it spreads radioactive particles into the atmosphere to be inhaled and ingested internally by populations downwind such as those living in my Colchester town constituency and surrounding areas including Mersea, Brightlingsea and Clacton. The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons takes action to prevent low level nuclear waste, including oils and solvents, from being burned at Bradwell Nuclear Power Station.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table

School Bus Services

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

10.11 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for granting me the opportunity to present this short but, I think, important debate.

Time and time again over the past three to four years since I have been a Member, I have sat through and contributed to many transport debates. The school run and its contribution to congestion on our roads has often been raised by hon. Members on both sides of the House. I have sometimes found it annoying that parents continually are blamed for using a car when I think that there are real reasons for them choosing to do so. So far, we have not come up with an expanded proposal to change their minds.

I think that there are three reasons why parents choose to take their children to and from school by car. First, there is the issue of safety, whether that is road safety or the risks that parents feel their children may face from other adults. Most parents will not let their children go unescorted to school.

Secondly, the reality is that more mums work. In doing so, they have to drop off their children at school and get to work on time. With the opening hours of school, that is not always possible to do either by walking or by using other forms of public transport. That being so, they choose to use the car.

We expect people to travel further to their place of work than was expected of them many years ago. That is all the more true in some communities such as mine of Don Valley, where many people used to have work literally on their doorstep in the local coalmine. Today, as part of our regeneration, we are having to challenge people to move further to work and to provide transport in order for them to do so.

Thirdly, we have seen the deregulation of bus services, which is the legacy of the previous Tory Government's 18 years of office. That has left many parents unable to rely on public transport. When time is at a premium, I do not blame any parent for using the car to save time. For many of them, there is no other practical choice. I want to show how the experience of a journey as day to day and mundane as that of being taken to and from school, for many children and older pupils at Don Valley, can be reformed to contribute to improving the larger picture that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), must always consider. That is a picture of too many cars crowding into too many bottlenecks at peak hours, and too many public transport services as yet unable to resolve the congestion problem, which is made worse by the school run.

I have spoken to transport providers, local authorities, schools and parents, and the message is clear. The deregulation of bus services by past Conservative Governments is continuing to have a disastrous effect and impact on the provision of rational local bus services that meet people's needs and, especially, the needs of children and young people.

My concern this evening is primarily school transport. However, in offering new options on the way forward, I hope that I can help the Government to reduce congestion.

[Caroline Flint]

Up to 20 per cent. of morning rush-hour traffic is that of parents doing the school run. I want to help our children by reducing road accidents and creating the safe travel to and from school that the Government seek. I want also to help our schools by reducing late arrivals and support working parents, for whom time on a weekday morning is at a premium. I also hope that I can help the Government to support our local transport authorities and councils by contributing to the sensible planning of complementary services, quality education and quality public transport to and from school.

My hon. Friend the Minister will know that, under the Education Act 1944, local authorities have a legal obligation to provide school transport, based on a reasonable walking distance to and from school of two miles for children under eight and three miles for older children. The three-mile walking distance dates back to section 74 of the Elementary Education Act 1870, under which a reasonable excuse for school non-attendance was that there was no elementary school within three miles of home.

I am afraid that things appear to have moved on very little in 130 years, as we are still applying those two and three-mile rules. I contend that those rules are out of date, and I ask any parent in the House to walk their five, six or seven-year-old child up to two miles to school every day. In this day and age, it is just not practicable to expect parents to walk their under-eight children up to two miles to school and their over-eight children up to three miles. For many parents, therefore, the use of the car is an understandable necessity.

As a constituency Member of Parliament, I believe strongly that good policy derives from understanding the life style and goals of ordinary people. We politicians are at our best and most useful when we can help the many, not simply the few, to meet those day-to-day challenges. A parent from Warmsworth, who was paying £100 a term to send her children to their catchment school by public transports commented:

"It would be cheaper to take my children to school in a car, but as a responsible family we try to use public transport as much as possible and agree with Mr Prescott's ideas of cutting congestion during the school run."

When I raised my constituent's case with my hon. Friend the Minister, he observed in September 1999 that only a quarter of secondary school pupils travelled to school by bus. Only 4 per cent. of primary school pupils travelled to school by bus—the same figure as in 1975.

A parent from Sprotbrough, whose children have a free bus pass because of the distance at which they live from school, was concerned because what the children thought was a school bus was full, and they were left at the bus stop because the operator had registered the bus as a commercial service; the bus had picked up additional fare-paying school children on its circular route. A grandfather wrote to me concerning his grandchildren, who attended a local primary school just under two and a half miles from their village of Blaxton. On occasion, those children were left stranded at the bus stop after school because the public service bus was full on arrival at the stop. Young primary school children were left for 35 minutes on a cold, dark evening while their grandfather, without a car, waited at home, distressed at their failure to arrive home on time, but powerless to respond.

Children attending a school outside their catchment area face a problem, as they are at the mercy of deregulated bus services which, as we know, may be varied or cancelled with 42 day's notice. Last July, my constituents in Rossington, whose children attend the Hayfield school in Finningley, had a bus service going from Tickhill via Rossington and Bawtry to Finningley. In September, however, the bus route by-passed the less affluent area of Rossington altogether, leaving those children isolated and potentially excluded from attending their chosen school. Children in the villages of Edlington and Sprotbrough have encountered similar problems in travelling to the Danum school in Doncaster.

Those children benefit from the exercise of parental choice. My hon. Friend is a transport Minister, but he will be aware of the anomaly that, on the one hand, parents have some opportunity to choose schools beyond their catchment area, which local authorities accept, while on the other, local authorities have no responsibility for assisting with those children's travel to school, so that they fall victim to the whim of deregulated commercial bus services which may, or may not, meet their needs. I could cite many more cases and, no doubt, those stories are replicated throughout the country.

I shall clarify my proposals. First, a dedicated school bus service should be available to every child, whatever the distance at which they live from school. I should like the two and three-mile rules to be scrapped. However, I am not demanding that all children, however close to a school, should have a free bus service. It would be far better to make a low-cost flat fare available to every child, regardless of the distance at which they live from school, but I honestly believe that children living 200 or 300 yd from school will not be queueing up to pay bus fares.

Low-income families could qualify for free bus passes on the same basis as they qualify for free school meals, with no extra bureaucracy. All children could be offered season tickets, with parents being offered discounts for purchasing a season ticket in advance. If children from low-income families automatically received season tickets, there would be no stigma and, possibly, school attendance may improve.

Evidence from South Yorkshire shows a fall of nearly 10 per cent. in peak-time car journeys during the school holidays. Nearly one in 10 cars are on the road exclusively to take children to school, while a further 10 per cent. of cars do the school run prior to the rush to work. How many car miles would be saved if a reliable, dedicated school bus service was available?

My second proposal is that local authorities or transport authorities should be obliged to work with schools to provide a transport plan for all the pupils. Thirdly, the transport funding of local authorities must be reconfigured to place emphasis on funding the provision of school transport.

In South Yorkshire, concessionary fares for 4.5 per cent. of all schoolchildren account for more than 20 per cent. of expenditure on school transport. In Doncaster, provision for children with special needs account for well over half of the funds for school transport held by the local authority. I respect those children's needs, but by extension, I also believe that all children, parents and society will gain from a comprehensive and inclusive school transport strategy.

Although the UK is certainly not the USA, I see some attraction in the no-frills yellow bus, which my children see on "The Simpsons" cartoon programme every day, which offers a door-to-door service. The idea of a dedicated yellow bus service has attracted considerable interest, including from my own transport authority, the South Yorkshire passenger transport executive.

My hon. Friend knows of the widespread enthusiasm for school travel plans from the many bids that he received from local authorities to fund the preparation of local travel plans. I understand that 263 bids were received for work or school travel plans, and that a majority of them related to school travel. I also understand that my hon. Friend is funding 111 posts to prepare those local plans.

Is that the precursor of a radical expansion of school transport? Will we see a quantum leap in the number of children arriving at school by means other than by car, or will we simply see a large number of safe walking routes established at minimum cost which, to be honest, appear to miss the point? For many of those children, the answer is a bus.

The Government—the most radical Labour Government that the country has ever seen—have laid the foundations for a first-class transport network in the national transport plan. For that, I compliment my hon. Friend and his ministerial colleagues on all their work.

South Yorkshire is a centre of transport excellence, which will be enhanced when Doncaster has its own airport, located within minutes of the east coast main line and a short bus ride from Doncaster's new interchange. However, plans for school transport look undeveloped, and safe walking routes are only a small part of the solution.

We may never solve every problem, and different communities may need different solutions, but time and again we seem to overlook the central role that the school bus could play in contributing to sustainable transport. Knowing my hon. Friend's shared commitment to safe travel, traffic reduction and the efficient use of the road network, I urge him to ensure that when he and the Government are re-elected for a second term, we create an efficient, locally delivered school bus transport strategy.

10.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) for raising the matter of school bus services. I thank her for her courtesy in giving me notice of some of the main issues that she intended to discuss in the debate. I hope to offer her an encouraging response.

It goes without saying that we all want to be sure that children travel to school in safety and, wherever possible, by sustainable modes of transport. As my hon. Friend rightly observed, 18 per cent. of cars on the road in urban areas at the peak of the morning rush—that is, at 10 minutes to 9—are taking children to school.

The proportion of journeys to school by car has almost doubled since the mid-1980s, to 30 per cent., with 38 per cent. of primary pupils and more than 20 per cent. of secondary pupils travelling to school by car. Bus use has remained relatively stable, at around 20 per cent. Walking and cycling have declined, although 53 per cent. of primary pupils and 42 per cent. of secondary pupils still walk to school.

We know that children sitting in cars in congested, slow-moving traffic can be exposed to pollution levels three times higher than those outside the car, yet there is a range of alternatives to the car for the—usually short—journey to school. There is a widespread perception that healthy, sustainable travel to school largely involves walking and cycling, rather than bus use. The vast majority of children who live within a mile of school do walk, but because the average journey length has increased to 1.5 miles for five to 10-year-olds and 3.3 miles for 11 to 16-year-olds, fewer trips are now within walking distance. The bus should therefore be a positive choice for more parents and their children.

Caroline Flint: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a lack of adequate discussion and consultation on the production of transport plans to meet the needs produced by school reorganisation? Such reorganisation can occur in the form of school closures, which happen because of falling numbers, or as a result of the conversion of the structure of primary, middle and secondary schools to a two-tier system.

Mr. Hill: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. The production of such plans is one of the tasks that we expect the 111 travel plan co-ordinators for schools and firms, whom she mentioned, to address as school mergers develop. The Government have just introduced those co-ordinators, at a cost of £9 million.

Buses take up far less road space than the cars that are needed to carry an equivalent number of passengers. More bus travel during the peak school run would cut congestion on the roads and thus help to reduce vehicle emissions. With a few hopeful exceptions, bus travel has steadily declined during much of the past half century and is only now starting to show signs of recovery. Bus travel to school allows children to socialise with their peers, to gain greater independence and self-confidence and to learn important skills such as an understanding of timetables.

Bus travel is safer than car travel, and by ensuring that children use buses, we might even encourage them to become lifelong public transport users, with all the benefits that that would bring. Greater bus travel to school would benefit both schoolchildren and the environment, but getting pupils out of cars and on to buses requires partnership. Local authorities need to work in partnership with operators, parents and other stakeholders to achieve that aim.

The Government have put buses at the heart of our integrated transport plans. We have set ourselves the target of increasing bus passenger journeys by 10 per cent. by 2010. Local authorities have just received a good revenue support grant settlement, and there has been substantial growth in Government funding for the third year running. There will be a national average increase of 4.4 per cent. in general grant money next year. The settlement took into account the increase in bus contract prices that is being experienced in a number of areas.

We are also providing growing support for rural bus services, including continuation and expansion of the rural bus subsidy grant scheme; its contribution will increase to

[Mr. Hill]

£140 million over the next three years. In addition, £60 million will be provided for the rural bus challenge and we are introducing a new urban bus challenge to improve transport links for deprived urban areas, which will provide £40 million over the next three years. We are also implementing a range of policies to improve bus services generally.

All those measures are encouraging bus operators and local authorities to work together to drive up quality, frequency and reliability, and to extend bus coverage. We have now put in place arrangements that give a proper role to local authorities and ensure a clear system of local transport planning. At the same time, we recognise the need to harness the commercial expertise and innovation of the private sector.

I perfectly understand my hon. Friend's concerns. She would like a national school bus strategy to be established. I understand that to mean that she wants an increase in free home-to-school transport and in other local bus services that serve schools. We are working towards implementing the recommendations made to Ministers by the school travel advisory group, which is known as STAG, on the use and availability of buses for the journey to school. STAG wants walking, cycling and bus use to return by 2010 to the levels of the mid-1980s. That would mean that 80 per cent. of primary school children and 90 per cent. of secondary school children travelled by such means.

We are aware that many people feel that the current statutory walking distances—two miles for pupils aged up to seven, and three miles for those aged eight and above—that govern qualification for free home-to-school transport are unreasonable, and that legislation does not support parental preference on school choice. Indeed, my hon. Friend made that point forcefully. We know that, of the children who live between one and three miles from school, more than 60 per cent. of those aged five to 10 and about 30 per cent. of those aged 11 to 16 currently travel by car. Recent research has shown that a significant number of those children might be expected to travel by bus if the statutory walking distances were reduced. Reduced congestion benefits could then be expected, especially in urban areas.

To that end, STAG recommended that better use be made of the substantial resources already devoted to statutory school transport, so that arrangements are better targeted on safe, healthy and environmentally friendly travel to school.

Let me remind the House of the real purpose and function of statutory school transport. It is not and never was designed to be an all-inclusive school transport service. It is a safety net to ensure that no children are denied the right to attend a suitable school because they live too far away, have special needs or face a dangerous journey.

Caroline Flint: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hill: I would rather not. I have much to say and relatively little time. However, I appreciate the customary devotion and assiduity that my hon. Friend brings to such matters.

The amount budgeted for and spent on statutory school transport by local education authorities has been increasing above inflation in recent years. It is now a substantial sum—more than £440 million in 1998–99. However, some two thirds of the figure is spent on pupils with statements of special educational needs. That leaves approximately £150 million for the 7.5 million pupils of compulsory school age who do not have statements. It gives local authorities little scope for additional discretionary provision.

My colleagues in the Department for Education and Employment are, however, considering proposals for pilot schemes to enable local authorities to test the supply and take-up of additional school transport for children who are not currently entitled to free transport. In advance of that, my Department has invited tenders for a survey of attitudes to test the likely take-up of additional school transport services and the extent to which it would be influenced by a range of factors, including fares.

Statutory school transport is not the only source of assistance. Local authorities have the power, but no duty, to establish concessionary fare schemes in their areas under the Transport Act 1985. About 40 per cent. of shire counties have a scheme for young people, though few are countywide, and some do not provide fare reductions in the morning peak. By contrast, in the metropolitan areas, all six passenger transport authorities provide flat fares or half fares on local buses that are valid in the morning peak. Those schemes are supported by Government subsidy.

In the shire areas, it is common for discounted fares to be offered commercially by private sector bus operators, and the discount is usually half fare. In London, Transport for London, rather than local authorities, operates a discount scheme for young people at roughly half fare. It is regarded as a commercial scheme without Government subsidy, it covers the five to 18 age group and it is available in the morning peak. In the light of that, STAG also recommended that affordable bus travel to school be made available to all children in compulsory education. My Department plans to discuss that further with major bus operators.

The Department has also commissioned consultants to identify current best practice in increasing bus use for the journey to school. We consulted local authorities, schools and bus operators, and they identified many examples of local action to promote bus travel for the home-to-school journey. The consultants reported last year and we shall shortly publish a guide for local authorities, bus operators and parents groups that draws together the main lessons from the study. It will be full of real-life examples of the way in which schools, parents, bus operators, local businesses and the police have worked together successfully to increase travel to school by bus. We hope that the guide will stimulate other authorities, and especially operators, to consider the further measures that they can take.

We know that some local authorities and bus operators are currently developing innovative school bus schemes. One is in Surrey, where the recent local transport plan settlement conferred large sums of Government money on a pilot project that provides direct transportation from home to school for 40 primary schools in the county. Other schemes are based directly on the American school bus system. We are watching their development with interest. My hon. Friend is evidently doing so too.

The Department has been working with the bus operators FirstGroup to identify where American yellow bus vehicles might be modified to meet construction and

use requirements, and where special authorisation might be required. I understand that FirstGroup has agreed to make all the required modifications to ensure that the vehicles comply with the conditions of initial fitness regulations. It will hold urgent discussions with the Department on the further modifications that are required to fulfil the accessibility regulations.

Any exemptions granted to FirstGroup vehicles will have to be fully justifiable, and other operators will need to be treated in a similar fashion. I have already received representations from other vehicle manufacturers, operators and groups representing disabled people. My ministerial colleagues and I have given an assurance that the Government remain totally committed to a fully accessible public transport system, and that will be borne in mind when deciding whether those vehicles are to be accepted on UK roads.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for introducing the debate. My colleagues in the Department for Education and Employment and I regard the issue of promoting travel to school by safer and more sustainable modes as very important. I hope that I have been able to demonstrate that we are currently very active in this area. I welcome the contribution of my hon. Friend this evening, just as I welcome all other constructive suggestions about further work to be done.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-five minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 7 February 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Brazil

1. **Mr. Bob Blizzard** (Waveney): What support her Department is giving to encourage sustainable development in Brazil. [147638]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Chris Mullin): Brazil is an upper-middle-income country with very great inequality. Nearly a quarter of the population live in extreme poverty. We believe that there is a great deal that the Brazilian Government can do to resolve the situation and promote sustainable development. We are glad to see that they are making progress, but they still have a long way to go.

We are providing £8 million this year and £10 million next year in technical assistance to promote sustainable livelihoods and health services for poor people in the wider Amazon region, and to support Brazilian efforts to increase transparency of government. We try to maximise our strategic impact by working alongside major programmes such as those of the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, which each commit around $1 billion to Brazil each year.

Mr. Blizzard: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment, and wish him well in his new role.

We all know that Brazil contains some of the world's most sensitive environment, but the people who live there obviously want their economy to develop and become more prosperous. What can we do to help Brazil achieve the right balance in that respect?

Water management is a very important part of sustainable development. What can my hon. Friend do to support the implementation of the new federal water law and the work of the new federal water agency in Brazil? We in this country have considerable expertise in that regard.

Mr. Mullin: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. I look forward to serving with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, of whom I have long been an admirer; she is one of the most effective Ministers in the House. I am also happy to relinquish my title as king of the Adjournment debates.

I understand that the national water authority to which my hon. Friend referred was set up only in December to implement national policy on water resources. It is therefore a little early for us to comment on its developmental needs, and we have no current plans to develop activities in the water and sanitation sectors.

Our basic strategy is to focus scarce resources where we can have the greatest impact. That generally involves helping the poorest people in the poorest regions to enjoy sustainable life styles. We are a major contributor to, for example, the pilot programme to conserve the Brazilian rain forest.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): In pursuit of sustainable development in Brazil, does the campaign to eliminate illiteracy focus primarily on the phonetic approach?

Mr. Mullin: To be quite honest, that is a matter for the Government of Brazil. I happen to speak for Her Majesty's Government.

Brazil is actually quite a rich country, and we believe that it could do much more to help to deal with the huge inequalities in Brazilian society. We are always willing to help, and we think that Brazil has made progress recently under President Cardoso, but we feel that there is a good deal more progress to be made.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): Does my hon. Friend agree that although Brazil is correctly designated a developing country, some parts of the Brazilian economy are very developed? For instance, nowadays Brazilian steel is of high quality and, in terms of both quality and cost, it competes very well with western-produced steel. I realise that it is difficult, but will my hon. Friend try to ensure that money is given to Brazil for development only, and not used to develop areas that are already competitive?

Mr. Mullin: I entirely understand where my right hon. Friend is coming from. As I have said, our aid is targeted on the poorest people living in the poorest parts of the country. That does not include help for the development of its steel industry.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Is the Minister aware of the scam whereby people in Britain have been sold plots of land in northern Brazil, ostensibly to save that land from being developed? If so, he will know that those concerned have been arrested; but what advice can his Department give people in the United Kingdom about buying plots of land to ensure that they are maintained for sustainable development, and not simply for racketeers?

Mr. Mullin: My advice to people in the United Kingdom would be not to buy plots of land in Brazil. Any scams are of course a matter for the Brazilian Government, but we are anxious to ensure before we start giving aid that it is going not to feed a scam but to feed the people who need it, and to help them develop sustainable life styles.

Third World Debt

2. **Mr. Jim Dobbin** (Heywood and Middleton): What progress has been made on the eradication of third world debt. [147639]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): There are 41 countries that are so poor and indebted that, without exceptional help, they will be unable to escape from their debt overhang, to focus Government spending on poverty reduction and to borrow wisely for sustainable development. In 2000, 22 of those countries qualified for exceptional debt relief totalling more than $50 billion. That will reduce their debts by around two thirds, on average. Of the 13 remaining countries, we hope that as many as four will qualify for relief this year, but many others are affected by conflict, and are unlikely to qualify without making progress in ending that conflict and focusing on the needs of the poor.

Mr. Dobbin: Does the Secretary of State agree that, under the present Government, Britain has taken a lead internationally not only in areas of debt reduction, but, more generally, in areas of development? That is because of the Government's increased investment in debt reduction. I believe that that commitment will be on-going. Does she agree that it would be a disaster for development if the Conservative party were to assume power, with its in-built commitment to getting rid of debt reduction and to making cuts—particularly cuts in taxation for the wealthy—which would affect millions of people throughout the world?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I agree; I am most proud of the record on debt relief, for which people both in Britain and throughout the world have campaigned, but the big change is that the IMF and World Bank now back countries' strategies for their macro-economies, revenues, debt relief and aid to reduce poverty systematically. We led on that; everyone can be proud of the United Kingdom's general effort.

I agree that the Conservative party is talking nonsense economics. Its figures do not add up. It says that it will cut taxes and increase spending—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. As I have mentioned before, it is not for the Minister to concern herself with the Opposition's figures. She is here to answer for the Government.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): The right hon. Lady will no doubt be pleased to know that, now that we have identified £8 billion worth of savings, not a single penny will come from the Department for International Development's budget. I am glad that she raised the matter.

The right hon. Lady will remember that, in March 1999, I raised with her the issue of debt relief for Nigeria. What progress has the international community made in enabling Nigeria to qualify for debt relief? It is, after all, a country of 120 million people, with £30 billion of debt overhang, racked up by a military dictator who has now gone. Is that not an example of where the heavily indebted poorest countries initiative is too slow and bureaucratic? What is she doing to ensure that Nigeria qualifies for some debt relief?

Clare Short: I remind the House of the Tory record on development assistance. [Hon. Members: "No!"] I am simply trying to answer the question. We inherited a shrinking aid budget. We have reversed the cuts. I do not believe that the Tories can cut taxes and protect the aid budget: the arithmetic just does not add up.

Nigeria is not an HIPC country. Because it is an oil producer, it is enjoying a big increase in revenues; but it has been dreadfully run under the military dictatorship. Poverty is very great. Major reform is needed, so that its resources can be used beneficially for its people. It has a debt rescheduling agreement with the Paris club. The delay now in Nigeria is in economic reform; it is desperately important that it should reform. It is a big country. Its president has fine motives, but there has been no economic reform as yet, which is very worrying.

Mr. Streeter: I find the Secretary of State's answer very complacent and worrying. If she is not prepared to take effective action on debt relief in Nigeria, will she at least take effective action to ensure that the new Nigerian Government can recover funds that were illegally stashed away by outgoing President Abacha? Several other countries are taking effective action to ensure that those stolen funds are recovered. Why are not the British Government taking effective action to help the poor people of Nigeria?

By the way, in our policy document, which was launched this morning, a copy of which I will send to the Secretary of State, we make it clear that there will be no cuts in a Conservative aid budget.

Clare Short: Every time the hon. Gentleman gets up, he shows his ignorance—so I do not know what will be in that document. For Nigeria to prosper, its oil resources, which have been ripped off by a corrupt elite, thus distorting the country's whole economy, need to be deployed to benefit the people. Debt relief from outside, when Nigeria will not refocus its own resources, would not help the people of Nigeria. The policy that he advocates is foolish and not in the interests of the poor of Nigeria. He should look more closely at the documents that my Department publishes—he might learn something.

Arms Trade

3. **Mr. Harry Cohen** (Leyton and Wanstead): What assessment she has made of the impact of the arms trade on underdeveloped countries; and if she will make a statement. [147640]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): There are very few applications for licences for exports from the United Kingdom to developing countries. Where relevant, my Department assesses whether exports would hamper the sustainable development of such a country. If we believe that they would, we object to them. However, many developing countries have bloated and ill-disciplined armed forces.

Since March 1999, therefore, we have started to engage in security sector reform to help those countries to build responsible armed forces.

The Government will shortly publish a draft Bill to strengthen controls on arms exports. We are also working to ensure that the very important United Nations 2001 conference on small arms leads to comprehensive action, including the removal of small arms from the continent of Africa, where they are fuelling conflict.

Mr. Cohen: I thank my right hon. Friend for that important answer. Has she seen the new report from the Campaign Against Arms Trade which shows that, every day, that trade kills or maims 2,000 children around the world? Has she seen the Oxfam briefings on Mindenao or the Congo which state that tens of thousands of people, many of whom are children, are being killed by the small arms trade? Is not the trade dramatically undercutting her otherwise excellent international development policy?

Could we have more detail on what action the Government will take against the illegal small arms trade? Will she also use her weight in Government to press for registration and regulation of the brokers operating from this country?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I think that, on his last point, he will be pleased with the contents of the forthcoming Bill. There is no doubt that conflict in Africa, for example, is desperately holding back the development of that continent. In fact, 20 per cent. of its people are affected by conflict and becoming ever poorer. Small arms are the means of perpetuating that conflict. Massive numbers of small arms have already been traded and distributed across the continent, where there is also the capacity to produce ammunition.

As small arms are not coming from the United Kingdom, we want the United Nations initiative to work to ensure that arms are handed in and that exports from the Ukraine, for example, are stopped. We need the United Nations conference on small arms to be as powerful as the conference on land mines and to make a real effort to remove small arms from areas affected by endemic conflict.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Will the Secretary of State tell the House to what extent the Department for International Development was consulted in the preparation of the draft Bill on the control of arms and arms brokers? Will she say why, four years after the Scott report, we have still not seen the promised draft Bill? Is that just laziness on the part of other Departments, or is she concerned that the Government have been influenced by the arms industry?

Clare Short: I give the House an absolute, 100 per cent. assurance that the Government have not been influenced by the arms industry. My Department has also been fully consulted on the Bill to be published shortly. It has not yet been introduced because we have had Queen's Speeches stacked with legislation that we have had to pass. We have much more good legislation to come. That is why it is very important that we be returned at the next election.

Balkans

4. **Mr. Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool, South): What projects her Department is supporting towards the rebuilding of communities in the Balkans. [147641]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Chris Mullin): The UK effort in the Balkans is designed to help to build democratic government and effective economies. We focus on technical assistance that encourages best possible use of European Union, World Bank and other large-scale resources. Overall, we have committed more than £100 million to long-term development programmes in the next three years. Additionally, we are a major contributor to European Community reconstruction programmes that are worth about £3 billion over the next six years.

Mr. Marsden: In thanking my hon. Friend for that reply, may I add my congratulations to him on his appointment? May I also pay tribute to the work of our forces in Kosovo and elsewhere in the Balkans? In the case of the engineers, they are literally rebuilding communities. Does he agree with the view of Oxfam and other voluntary agencies that one of the most crucial roles we can play in that area is to rebuild small-scale economic communities, and particularly to build up civil society and non-governmental organisations? Will he assure us that the Department will give priority to considering the support and funding of those types of projects—not least because the successful regeneration of small-scale economies in Kosovo and elsewhere in the Balkans will reduce the pressures on migration?

Mr. Mullin: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind words and for his justified comments about the work of the armed forces. I agree with him that strengthening democratic institutions and civil society is essential to the creation of healthy democracies in Kosovo and Serbia. We are in discussion with a wide range of NGOs and community-based organisations about ways in which we can assist. In Kosovo, we have a programme to reform public administration that will include co-operation between local government and community-based organisations. For example, last November we funded two Kosovar NGOs to monitor the local elections and to train election officials. We intend to repeat that exercise for this year's provincial elections. We have also been helping to fund the Army's reconstruction work, and we have extended the help to the small enterprises that my hon. Friend mentioned.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): On behalf of the Opposition, may I welcome the Minister to his post and congratulate him on his promotion to dealing with international development matters? Will he, in turn, join me in congratulating the organisations helping to rebuild the Balkans, and the British Council in particular? The council operates throughout the Balkans, but especially in Belgrade and Kosovo.

The Department for International Development has drastically reduced the number of contracts that it places with the British Council. Moreover, the council's budget has been cut, and it will have to spend £18 million on making 900 people redundant. Will the Minister guarantee

that no more cuts will be made to the council's budget, and that its valuable work in the Balkans will not be affected?

Mr. Mullin: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words. I certainly join her in congratulating the British Council on its work around the world. As she is aware, the council is funded by the Department. Although there has been some reorganisation, the council's budget has not been cut and it will continue with the great deal of good work that it does around the world.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths (Edinburgh, South): May I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend, and thank him for the commitment to spending £100 million in Kosovo? May I also alert him to the fact that the Scottish charities' Kosovo appeal is grateful for the £3 million that it received from his Department, the United Nations, the USA and the EU? That money will enable the charities to help thousands of people to rebuild their homes and their lives.

Mr. Mullin: I certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Scottish charities' Kosovo appeal which, along with many other organisations active in the area, has played a very constructive part in the process of rebuilding that shattered economy.

St. Helena

5. **Mr. Bob Russell** (Colchester): When she expects to make a decision about constructing an airfield on the island of St. Helena. [147642]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Chris Mullin): We received the draft summary report of the comparative study of options for sea and air access to St. Helena at the end of December, and the draft full report at the end of January. We will now discuss the findings with the St. Helena Government. No presumption should be made that the report will lead to support being offered for construction of an airfield. The study is intended to identify the most cost-efficient solution to St. Helena's international passenger and cargo transportation needs.

Mr. Russell: I welcome the Minister to his new portfolio, and thank him for that very full reply. However, I am disappointed: I had hoped that he would fly to St. Helena with me in May next year, on the occasion of the island's 500th anniversary. Does the Minister have any idea when the airport could open, once work on it has begun?

Mr. Mullin: I am happy to fly anywhere with the hon. Gentleman. As I said, we have only just received the draft summary of the report, so it is still a little too early to start making firm commitments. The Government are committed to ensuring continued access to St. Helena. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has agreed already that the Department will provide funding equal to the least expensive capital options. The choice, of course, is between replacing HMS St. Helena, and building an airport with related infrastructure. The decision will depend on the outcome of the study that we are considering.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): Is the Minister aware that when I had the pleasure of going to St. Helena on behalf of the then Government, more than a decade ago, a delegation of the island's elected councillors told me that they did not want the airstrip that was on offer? Airstrips are not compulsory.

Mr. Mullin: I certainly agree that airstrips are not compulsory, and we shall, of course, take into account the wishes of the islanders. However, we are being pressed quite hard on the subject by people with various interests, including some of the islanders. We are studying the options and will consider which is best.

Disease Treatment

6. **Ms Julia Drown** (South Swindon): If she will make a statement on her Department's plans to encourage investment in research and development of drugs and vaccines to treat the major diseases which affect people in developing countries. [147643]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): We are working with others to encourage the development of better drugs and vaccines for the major diseases of poverty, such as HIV/AIDS—for which there should be a vaccine within 10 years—malaria and tuberculosis. We are also focusing on the development of universal primary health care systems. Most of the poor of the world are not in touch with a health system that can deliver drugs to them, let alone improved drugs. We must develop on both fronts.

Ms Drown: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply and for the good work that the Government are doing in this field. Does my right hon. Friend agree that although drug companies need to make profits, they are under a moral obligation to make life-saving drugs available? Rather than mounting legal challenges against poor countries which are trying to import cheaper drugs, should not drug companies be making life-saving drugs affordable for the millions of people at risk from AIDS and other diseases?

Clare Short: I agree that we must ensure that the best drugs are available to people across the world. However, the World Health Organisation has a list of the 90 basic drugs that a country needs; almost all of them have no patent or copyright. The problem is that people are not in touch with health systems.

Anti-retroviral drugs simply delay death from HIV, they do not cure the disease. Glaxo and other companies have said that they will make such drugs available at cost price. Even so, they are still expensive and most developing countries cannot afford them. However, I agree with my hon. Friend's fundamental point that there should not be legal clashes between companies and Governments. We should reach agreement to look at the benefits to the poor, and that is what we are trying to encourage across the world.

HIV/AIDS (Southern Africa)

7. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): What recent representations she has received regarding help needed to tackle HIV/AIDS in southern Africa. [147644]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): HIV/AIDS infection rates among pregnant women average 25 per cent. in southern Africa. That is a cause of great human suffering and a major setback to development. For example, life expectancy in Botswana—a very successful economy in Africa—is projected to fall from 71 years in the mid-1980s to 42 or under by 2010. HIV/AIDS prevention and better care are a major focus of our work in southern Africa. Since January 1999, we have committed £74 million to this work there.

Mr. Pike: My right hon. Friend, who is visiting South Africa next week, knows that this issue in southern Africa is extremely important to the economy of the whole region. More than a third of the known cases of HIV/AIDS are in southern Africa. Clearly, education and prevention are essential to stopping the spread of the disease.

Will my right hon. Friend speak to the drugs companies and the South African Government to try and end the present legal proceedings, so that progress can be made in ensuring that the necessary drugs are made available?

Clare Short: I agree with my hon. Friend. We must take action on anti-retrovirals, but prevention is more important. In Uganda, which has been a leader in education, infection rates among young people are dropping, which looks as if there has been a significant change in behaviour. That kind of programme must be put in place across Africa.

I shall be meeting representatives of the South African Government, and I have talked with the drug companies here. The legal action is very regrettable, and if we can do anything to reach agreement instead, we will.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): Will the right hon. Lady accept that the fight against HIV and AIDS in southern Africa has been hampered by the attitude of those in power in such countries as South Africa and Zimbabwe? Will she try to impress on those countries the need for prevention, education and treatment, and do all that she can to assist the people suffering from these dreadful conditions?

Clare Short: I am delighted to agree with the hon. Lady—that may be a first, but I hope not the last. What has been achieved in Uganda, and the reduction in infection rates among young people in Lusaka in Zambia and in Nairobi show that the big efforts made in prevention and education are paying dividends for the younger generation. Across the world, it is predominantly young people who are being infected, more of them women than men. Such efforts are therefore saving the next generation. We must persuade all the Governments of Africa to do what the best of them are doing. There has been progress in South Africa recently, and we hope that Zimbabwe will move forward too.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [147668] **Mr. Huw Edwards** (Monmouth): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 7 February.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

I also spoke on the telephone to Mr. Sharon, the new Israeli Prime Minister, and offered our help in the difficult times that may lie ahead for the middle-east peace process.

Mr. Edwards: The decision by Corus last week to shed 6,000 steel jobs will have a devastating effect in south Wales, especially at the Llanwern steelworks in my constituency, where 1,300 jobs are about to be lost. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the management of Corus, and especially its chairman Sir Brian Moffatt, have treated the work force appallingly and have not co-operated with the Government? May I urge him to put pressure on Corus to work with the Government, the work force and the National Assembly to save those jobs and secure British steel production in the future?

The Prime Minister: We hope that, even at this stage, Corus will be prepared to rethink its decision. We are in close touch with the company, the work force and Members of the Welsh Assembly who have been active on the issue. The Corus work force are highly productive and highly skilled, and they deserve a decent future. I know that it is no consolation to them or to people in other parts of the country where jobs have been lost, but I was pleased at the announcement of new jobs at Bridgend earlier in the week and at Ellesmere Port. We must do everything possible to safeguard highly skilled, productive jobs in the United Kingdom.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): The Foreign Secretary repeated this week that the Government, if re-elected, would make an assessment on joining the euro early in the next Parliament. Does "early" mean in the first two years of that Parliament?

The Prime Minister: "Early in the next Parliament" means exactly what it says. It would of course be within two years.

Mr. Hague: Ah, progress. The Prime Minister is more forthcoming than the Foreign Secretary, who said that early meant early, or the Trade and Industry Secretary, who under the helpful headline "Byers reopens cabinet split on single currency", reiterated his support for the single currency last night. If "early" means within two years, could it mean within months of a general election?

The Prime Minister: It has been made clear already that it does not mean that. What is important when that assessment is made is that the economic tests are met.

What is absurd is the right hon. Gentleman's position, which is that he will rule out the single currency in principle, but only for one Parliament.

Mr. Hague: It is no good the Prime Minister trying to distract attention from his policy, which is under scrutiny this afternoon. The Government have not known what "early" means. They do not know whether it means months or years, so when he says—*[Interruption.]* Let us get this clear. When he says that he will make an assessment on abolishing the pound early in the next Parliament, is he ruling out that being within months of a general election?

The Prime Minister: I did that about a year or 18 months ago. Of course we will not move immediately, but we will do it within a reasonable time frame. Surely the issue is what the sensible policy to have is. Is it to judge according to the economic tests or to rule the single currency out on political grounds? The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the speech by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. My right hon. Friend said that if we were to rule out the euro on political grounds, which is the right hon. Gentleman's policy, we would lose massive inward investment. *[Interruption.]* No, it is not waffle; it is jobs in this country. Let me tell the right hon. Gentleman—perhaps he will comment on it when he gets back up—that Nissan said in terms that if we ruled out the euro for the next Parliament on political grounds, the investment in Sunderland would not come.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister has a cheek to lecture anyone on manufacturing jobs when 6,000 manufacturing jobs have just been lost under his Government and one third of a million have been lost in this country since he took office. Now that the Prime Minister has partly adopted the policy that he has always criticised—of ruling out joining the single currency for a certain period—because he will not make an assessment until many months after the election, and as he is so clear about the timing, will he tell us, on this central point in his coming manifesto, how the question in that referendum would be phrased?

The Prime Minister: The question can be phrased at a later time, but the issue is perfectly simple: whether we join the single currency or not. The question is, what is the right policy? We have made it clear that the tests should be the economic tests that have been set out and the convergence of the economy. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman can explain to the House why, if he is against the single currency as a matter of principle, he is against it only for five years.

Mr. Hague: There is only—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer!"] I shall tell the right hon. Gentleman. There is only one honest policy: to tell the country what a future Government would do. The Prime Minister is unable and unwilling to tell us what he will do because he does not want to admit that he wants to scrap the pound after the coming election. He is not able to be more forthcoming about the timing. He is not able to say what the question will be. It would be easy to conclude that he does not know very much; actually, he does know the answer to those questions but he does not want to admit it. Why does he not have the courage to tell the country that he wants to scrap the pound after the next election?

The Prime Minister: We have said that, in principle, we favour Britain joining a successful single currency; in practice, the economic tests must be met—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer!"] I answered the right hon. Gentleman's question when he first put it—rather to his surprise. The final decision will be for the British people in the referendum. That is all absolutely clear. What is not clear is how one can be against it as a matter of principle, but only for five years. The real agenda was let out of the bag—rather well—by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) in a speech yesterday. He said:

"I urge my fellow countrymen and women to agree with me that we must renegotiate this unhappy relationship"—

with the EU—

"before it is too late."

Conservative Members are nodding.

I have explained our policy: to make a judgment according to the tests, and to do it in a way that allows the British people the final say in a referendum. There is no question of our renegotiating our basic terms of membership of the European Union. Given that the right hon. Member for Wokingham is again one of the party people at Conservative central office, perhaps the Leader of the Opposition would like to get up and disown him.

Mr. Hague: Our policy is to be in Europe but not run by Europe—a policy supported by the vast majority of people in this country. The Prime Minister's European policy is like his Minister for Europe—not trusted by anyone, giving no straight answers, and half the Cabinet wants to get rid of it. Everyone knows that his European policy is to keep the Minister and dump the pound. Should not his policy be to dump the Minister and keep the pound?

The Prime Minister: These stirring speeches in favour of the pound would be much more convincing if the right hon. Gentleman said that he was not ruling it out for just five years. That is an absurd position to be in. Of course, he did not answer the question about the right hon. Member for Wokingham, because the right hon. Gentleman was not the only one to say that. At the weekend, the Leader of the Opposition was forced to intervene with Baroness Thatcher. He was forced to stand up to her, which, for him, took a lot of courage. He slapped her down and said:

"I'm pleased to say I enjoy excellent relations with Lady Thatcher".

[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] I am sure that he does. The truth is that our policy—to judge, according to the economic tests, what is good for British jobs, British business and industry—is the right one. The final decision will be for people to make in a referendum. The real reason the right hon. Gentleman rules it out, in principle, as a matter of politics, is that he knows—as we saw a moment or two ago—that a large part of his party want out of Europe altogether. If we did leave, we would lose jobs,

investment and influence. The truth of the matter is that it is not I who have to explain my policy; the right hon. Gentleman has to explain his. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I call Steve Pound—

Hon. Members: Keep the pound—*[Laughter.]*

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): Being loved by the entire House is an experience that is completely new to me.

Did the Prime Minister see the report in *The Times* today listing the Cardinal Wiseman high school in Greenford as one of the most improved high schools in the country, notwithstanding the fact that my wife is a governor and my daughter a pupil of that school? Will the Prime Minister pay credit to Paul Patrick and his staff at Cardinal Wiseman and agree with me that here is graphic evidence of an education system that is improving and a Government who are delivering?

The Prime Minister: There is one pound that we shall definitely keep.

In relation to the education system, yesterday's Ofsted report showed that nine out of 10 secondary schools are improving, that primary schools have made a huge step change and that there is improvement in the standard of teaching. Of course, it also drew attention to problems in the schools, but that is precisely why it is important that we make the extra investment. Over the next few years, massive investment will go into our primary and secondary schools and into university education. We will put that money in, and the Conservative party would take it out.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): On the subject of education and following on from his response to the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound), will the Prime Minister guarantee that he will not put up student tuition fees if his party wins a second term of office?

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman is referring to top-up fees, we have already made it clear that we do not favour top-up fees.

Mr. Kennedy: The Prime Minister should surely recognise, because the Government's own research demonstrates, that students and potential students are being disadvantaged and put off going into the tertiary sector as a result of his policy. We have got rid of tuition fees in the Scottish context. Why does he remain wedded to that tax on learning in the rest of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: First, actually there have been 500,000 extra students in further and higher education since we came to office. Secondly, I urge the right hon. Gentleman to look at the following words very carefully:

"We support the Government's proposal to end maintenance grants and replace them with income-contingent loans as the fairest way of securing a greater contribution from students."—[*Official Report*, 16 March 1998; Vol. 308, c. 995.]

That was said, during the passage of the Teaching and Higher Education Bill, by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), the Liberal Democrat education spokesman.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South): I am sure that my right hon. Friend is more than aware of the anxieties being felt by steel communities throughout Great Britain, which of course includes Teesside. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the cancellation by Sir Brian Moffatt of a meeting with Back Benchers representing steel communities is a continued sign of his sheer indifference to the devastation that he has caused?

The Prime Minister: As I said a moment or two ago, it is important that we carry on working with the company and we hope that, even at this stage, it can reconsider. I know that my hon. Friend speaks for many of her constituents when she talks of their anger, because these are well-paid, highly productive and skilled jobs, often in areas of high unemployment; but we will stand ready to help, as we have done before, in any way that we can.

Q2. [147669] **Mr. Phil Willis** (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Is the Prime Minister proud of a record that has seen the number of vacancies in secondary schools double in his term of office? Is he proud to see secondary school class sizes at their highest for 25 years? Is he proud to see an inspector's report, published yesterday, that says that indiscipline in our schools is getting worse year by year, and that teacher recruitment over the lifetime of this Parliament is down by about 14 per cent? Is the 3.7 per cent. that the Government have given teachers adequate reward for that endeavour? The £200 million that local authorities will have to find to bridge the gap between what the Government have given and what they will have—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I think that the Prime Minister knows what the hon. Gentleman is talking about.

The Prime Minister: Let me correct the hon. Gentleman on the facts. The inspector's report actually found that nine out of 10 secondary schools were improving. It is true that he found, in a minority of schools, that there was an increase in disruptive behaviour. He then went on to say, however, that the Government were taking action to deal with that, and that that action would deal with it. We are putting in an additional £200 million to deal with some of the unruly pupils and some of the excluded pupils.

In respect of class sizes, as the hon. Gentleman knows, there has been an increase of something like 0.3 of a pupil since the election. Class sizes in secondary schools have been going up for a very long period of years. However, in primary schools, class sizes have fallen as a result of the additional money that we have put in. Now, we are making a £5 billion increase in investment in education. Of course, there is always more that we can do, and we have to do more. However, given that we are spending

five, six or seven times more on education than they ever asked us to spend, it really is absurd of the Liberal Democrats to accuse us of not spending enough.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is my right hon. Friend aware that many people in Israel, and obviously many outside, hold the newly elected Prime Minister of Israel to be indirectly responsible, as he knew what was going to happen, for the massacre by a Christian Lebanese faction of Palestinian men, women and children—even babes in arms—in September 1982? Does my right hon. Friend agree that what happened yesterday will make it that much more difficult to have a peace process working in Israel and for the Palestinians, and that one of the ironies is that Sharon's victory yesterday will bring satisfaction to many terror groups in the Arab world?

The Prime Minister: The fact is that Mr. Sharon has been elected Prime Minister, and it is important now that we, as a country, do everything that we can to further the peace process in the middle east. It is important for the middle east, and for the security of the whole world. Whatever differences there have been before, it is important that we work with the duly elected Prime Minister in Israel. The process is in a very fragile state indeed, and not just Britain, but the European Union and the United States of America, have to do everything that we can to put the process back on track and work with Mr. Sharon to deliver it.

European Rapid Reaction Force

Q3. [147670] **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): If he will make a statement on the military advantages of a European rapid reaction force outside the NATO structure.

The Prime Minister: I have already made the position clear.

Dr. Lewis: For the sake of those who might find that answer obscure even by the Prime Minister's standards, the question was: what are the advantages of having a European rapid reaction force outside the NATO structure?

Does the Prime Minister accept that the first world war certainly, and the second world war arguably, grew out of crises that escalated out of control without the Americans being involved? Does he also accept that the great achievement of NATO was to guarantee American involvement? If he does accept that, how can he possibly justify creating such dangerous arrangements, which would pave the way for conflicts in which the Americans would not be involved on the side of the European states?

The Prime Minister: Let me read what the American Secretary of State, Colin Powell, said yesterday:

"I think if we approach the European security and defence initiative . . . with an understanding that it is firmly embedded in NATO, and we're not duplicating planning capabilities, and that we're adding to the overall capacity of both NATO and the EU . . . then there's no reason to see this as destabilising NATO in any way. In fact, I think it's our common belief that it will strengthen NATO."

Colin Powell's words reflect not just American policy, but British policy. Once again, I shall state the facts for the hon. Gentleman. This is for peacekeeping and humanitarian missions. It is for circumstances where NATO is not engaged. It is perfectly sensible that Europe should have the capability, in circumstances where NATO is not engaged, to engage in those missions.

Let me give a classic example from the past 10 years. In Bosnia, in the early 1990s, because there was no European defence capability and because, at that time, the Americans did not wish to be involved, literally thousands of people were slaughtered right on the doorstep of Europe, so I regard the hon. Gentleman's comparison with the first and second world wars as absolutely fatuous. I am afraid that it is an example of how anything with the word "Europe" does something to the mentality of the Conservative party.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): When my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is in discussion with NATO colleagues concerning the European rapid reaction force, will he make it clear that there is no possibility whatever of this country or, I hope, any other European country signing up for, agreeing to or participating in national missile defence, because it would be a nuclear proliferation that would be a danger to the whole planet?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that it will not surprise my hon. Friend that I cannot make such a statement. As I have said in exchanges with the Leader of the Opposition, it is sensible to wait until we have a proposal, but I have no doubt at all that, as ever, we shall work closely with our American allies.

Engagements

Q4. [147671] **Sir Robert Smith** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Does the Prime Minister accept that the poorest pensioners in our society today are those who are entitled to the minimum income guarantee, but who fail to claim it?

The Prime Minister: Of course it is true that people who are entitled to the minimum income guarantee but who do not claim it are in poverty. We have introduced it and hundreds of thousands of people claim it. We are mounting a campaign now to increase the take-up, and those pensioners, like all the other pensioners, will get the benefit of the winter allowance of £200 and, if they are over 75, of free television licences. I say to the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues that we can always do more, but we have to do more within the resources that we have. We have many claims on those resources and, at some point, the Liberal Democrats must come to the realisation that there is a limit to the amount of money that any Government can spend.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): Does my right hon. Friend agree that setting universities free of all Government regulation would mean lower teaching quality, spiralling student costs and top-up fees through the back door?

The Prime Minister: What my hon. Friend says is absolutely right. I should perhaps educate some Conservative Members about their policy. The position that they will take at the election is to cut—*[Interruption.]* They shake their heads, but I have not even said what it is yet. Their spending cuts to fund their tax plans include

£1.3 billion taken out of public provision for universities, which will mean a rocketing tuition fee for any student. They have no way of paying for that policy and that is yet another reason why people will not vote for them at the election.

Q5. [147672] **Mr. Peter Bottomley** (Worthing, West): I thank the Prime Minister for his letter today about the Krishna Maharaj case. Although I understand that he has necessarily reproduced much of the Florida state case, may I ask him to go forward on the point that he made about doing all that can be done?

May I remind the right hon. Gentleman that, in Germany, a similar case cost $1 million for its national to be able to get his case properly represented at federal level and state level? I am not asking the Prime Minister to say yes or no today to such an approach, but will he encourage his colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—perhaps also the Home Office in view of Mr. Maharaj's possible repatriation—and Law Officers to meet the Bar Council human rights people and others working for Krishna Maharaj to make sure that his sentence was justified and that, if any more can properly be done, it will be considered?

The Prime Minister: We will of course do anything that we can and should properly do in relation to this case. I understand that representatives of the Foreign Office will be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman, and I shall ask them to contact him to arrange the meeting. We can then take whatever meetings are appropriate from there. I also understand that representatives of the Foreign Office previously met Mr. Maharaj's lawyer, and consular officials will of course be happy to set up another meeting with his legal team. As I say, subject to what is proper, we shall do what we can in respect of this case.

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister join me in welcoming this week's opening of the second runway at Manchester airport, which is now able to handle 40 million passengers a year? Does he agree that, once the new capacity is fully utilised, it could help to reduce the increasing pressures on London's airports as well as create thousands of new jobs in my constituency and throughout the north-west?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I agree. Opening the second runway is important for jobs in the area and for business, not only in the north-west but throughout the United Kingdom. I am delighted to congratulate all those who worked on the project.

Q6. [147673] **Mr. Martin Bell** (Tatton): Does the Prime Minister accept that the task of restoring public confidence in public life is as important in this Parliament as it was in the last? In view of the widespread perception that political honours are sold to party contributors on a scale unknown since Lloyd George's time, will the right hon. Gentleman fulfil his promise to clean up politics?

The Prime Minister: We accept the duty to ensure that our political life is clean, but I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's statement about political honours.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): When outlining the Government's public expenditure plans, does my right hon. Friend believe that it is essential to explain their funding to the people of the country? Does he also believe that every other party that presents plans should be able to provide similar explanations and that any party that does not is unfit to govern?

The Prime Minister: I shall certainly ensure that any proposals that we make as a Government are properly costed. That is the right way to go about it. On the Conservative party, I could not put it better—*[Interruption.]* We have noted some sensitivity from Conservative Members on a certain subject. Earlier this week, the Conservative health spokeswoman, the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), said:

> "A party that cannot realistically say how it intends to foot such a substantial bill is not fit to govern."—[*Official Report*, 5 February 2001; Vol. 362, c. 740.]

I agree.

Q7. [147674] **Dr. Jenny Tonge** (Richmond Park): The Prime Minister knows that the inquiry into a fifth terminal at Heathrow airport ended nearly two years ago, lasted more than four years and cost approximately £12 million. When can my constituents and people throughout south-west London expect to see the inspector's report, which is public property for which they paid? When will the Government tackle the environmental damage caused by unrestricted growth of air transport?

The Prime Minister: The inquiry is due to report on the latter point. It is important to realise that, although the inquiry has taken a long time—no one is surprised about that—and it will take time for us to consider the details of the report, as soon as we have done that we shall publish it and our response.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): Has the Prime Minister had an opportunity to read an article in today's edition of *The Guardian*, which questions the probity of a bookmaker who funds an election campaign for a political party while running a book on the election outcome? Does my right hon. Friend agree that, when a top politician accepts £5 million to act as a glorified bookie's runner, we need a steward's inquiry?

The Prime Minister: I notice that the company took a different view from the individual about the outcome of the election. However, my hon. Friend makes a serious point. It is no wonder that the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) espouses his policy on the euro; the money that the Conservative party receives is conditional on retaining that policy. The donor sets out stipulations for future Conservative party leaders. There are 5 million reasons why it will not change its policy.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): The Prime Minister will know about the release this morning of Stephen Downing after serving 27 years in jail. The counsel for the Crown admitted in court that the conviction was unsafe. Will the Prime Minister pay tribute to Stephen Downing's family and the editor of the *Matlock Mercury*, who have stood by him steadfastly throughout the campaign? There have been several delays

in the case. Will the Prime Minister ensure that Departments address expeditiously any future action that they may need to take?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I have not had an opportunity to study the judgment itself, although I know of the case. I also know that the hon. Gentleman has campaigned long on this issue and has asked me about it before. I would simply say to him that of course I am happy to pay tribute both to the work of the family on behalf of Mr. Downing and to the *Matlock Mercury* editor, who has championed the cause. I am only pleased that, after such a long time, this case is finally at en end.

Dr. Desmond Turner (Brighton, Kemptown): Does the Prime Minister agree that the thousands of jobs lost last week in British manufacturing underline the monumental folly of any policy that would keep Britain out of the euro? The Tories may keep their pound, but how many thousands of British jobs would be lost as a result?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that, as I said a moment ago, ruling out the euro would indeed mean an immediate loss of jobs in Britain. There is absolutely no doubt about that, which is why the decision should be taken on economic grounds. However, there is another thing that would put jobs at risk in this country—a return to Tory boom and bust. We know how that started last time: with promises of Tory tax cuts that ended up in high interest rates, tax rises and spending cuts. That is what they did before, and that is what they would do again.

Q8. [147675] **Mr. Eric Forth** (Bromley and Chislehurst): When will the Prime Minister end the scandal of English subsidies for Scottish benefits?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman and I will have to disagree on that matter. At least we can agree on one thing: he has an honest policy for the euro. He wants to rule it out for ever, and that is the policy that he wants to push on his party.

Points of Order

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. At about 8.10 this morning, Portcullis house was evacuated because of another fire alarm. Within minutes, I was told that it was a false alarm. There was also a false alarm yesterday, and since the building has been occupied there have been fire alarms about twice a week, most of them false.

The helpful man at the company that put in the fire system, Surefire Systems, said that the system was fine and that it would be perfectly all right if only people would not go into the building. He said that the problem lay with the design, and that he was just the subcontractor following the design provided by Ove Arup. I was told by the Department of the Serjeant at Arms that the system had been forced on the designers by the Home Secretary.

Not only are hundreds of people disadvantaged by this problem every time it happens, including Members and the staff who run the place for us, but the entire system is put under strain. What can you do, Mr. Speaker, to try to ensure that those false alarms stop? It is embarrassing enough having press reports every week about the cost of the building that one works in, but when that building does not work, it is worse.

Mr. Speaker: I have every sympathy with Members and staff in that situation. There is nothing more annoying than being evacuated from one's workplace because of a false alarm. I understand that the alarm was due to a faulty detector head, and that a full investigation of the fire alarm system in Portcullis house is being undertaken. Meanwhile, the system is now being operated manually, and I trust that there will no further such incidents.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday, after a flagrant abuse of Question Time by the Secretary of State for Health, you said, at column 783 of the *Official Report*,

"may I say this to Ministers? First, attacks on the Opposition are not really what I am looking for . . . Ministers are there to account for their Departments."—[*Official Report*, 6 February 2001; Vol. 362, c. 783.]

You repeated that point today to the Secretary of State for International Development.

Today, the Prime Minister, in attempting to evade answering proper questions to him about his responsibilities, attacked the Opposition on 10 separate occasions—I counted. Is the Prime Minister bound by the same rules as other Ministers?

Mr. Speaker: The Prime Minister is bound by the same rules as everyone else, but he gets a bit more leeway, and so does the Leader of the Opposition.

BILL PRESENTED

EDUCATION (FUNDING)

Dr. Nick Palmer, supported by Liz Blackman, Mr. Ian Cawsey, Mr. Vernon Coaker, Sir Patrick Cormack, Mr. Michael Fabricant and Mr. David Kidney, presented a Bill to make provision about the distribution of funding between local education authorities: And the same was read the first time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 30 March, and to be printed [Bill 40].

Homes Bill (Programme) (No. 2)

3.34 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I beg to move,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Homes Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 8th January 2001:

Consideration and Third Reading

1. Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading shall be completed at today's sitting.

2. Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Nine o'clock.

3. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Ten o'clock.

4. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Consideration of Lords Amendments and further messages from the Lords

5. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any programme motion to supplement this order or to vary it in relation to—

(a) proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments; or

(b) proceedings on any further messages from the Lords,

and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

The motion proposes that the remaining stages of the Bill should be completed this evening. The programme is supplemental to the one that was approved for consideration in Committee, which finished as planned on 1 February. I pay tribute to the members of what was an eventful Committee, coinciding with the addition to the family of the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) and the promotion to Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions of my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, North-East (Mr. Ainsworth). I feel sure that the resident of 74 Acacia avenue, who featured in many of the exchanges in Committee, celebrated both events in his local premises licensed for entertainment and the sale of intoxicating liquor.

In all seriousness, we had a constructive debate, with valuable contributions from both sides of the Committee. I am grateful for that. There was full discussion of all the relevant matters and the debates were completed within the time set by the previous programme motion.

In Committee, a limited number of minor drafting amendments were approved to simplify and clarify the Bill. The Government have proposed a few more amendments of a similar nature, and some that respond specifically to concerns raised by hon. Members in debate in Committee. We are not introducing by way of Government amendments any major new issue of principle. Therefore, one day should give us ample time to debate the remaining stages of the Bill. For thes. reasons, I commend the motion to the House.

3.36 pm

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): Here we are yet again. The Government want to drive through the Bill—

Mr. Raynsford: Of course.

Mr. Waterson: In many ways, the Bill is a perfect example of the Government's approach. It is all hype and no delivery. Before the general election, Labour promised that it would tackle gazumping, but the Bill does nothing of the sort. It is a perfect illustration of the nanny state at work. It will over-complicate and add extra costs to the process of buying and selling a house. It will criminalise ordinary citizens in private contractual dealings, making them subject to the same level of penalties as apply to the carrying of a flick knife. The Government are seeking again to suppress debate in the House and to ignore informed criticism.

The Minister began with a string of in-jokes, which I think will be familiar only to members of the Committee, Acacia avenue being one of them. The hon. Gentleman had the gall to say that the Committee finished as planned on 1 February. I do not know what alternative he was suggesting. Was it that my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) and I should have hired a Committee Room to continue the debate regardless?

Even after the date set for the close of proceedings in Committee, I applied the usual poetic licence to allow the Minister to make his kind remarks. As is normal and appropriate on such an occasion, he thanked the joint Chairmen for their chairmanship and for their skill in bringing the Committee to an end at 5 pm on 1 February. With all due respect to those two able Chairmen, that had nothing to do with them; we finished on 1 February because the Government said that we should do so.

The Government did not say at the beginning of consideration in Committee that we should finish on 1 February—they said within days, if not hours, of the Bill being published that that would be the length of the Bill's consideration in Committee. That started as a proposal, and I use that word with some care, that there would be 12 sittings, and we had 12 sittings. Had it not been that rather unexpectedly at the last minute the Liberal Democrats withdrew a group of new clauses, we would not have reached the debate on, or would have finished in the middle of debating, an important new clause that was tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry).

Mr. Raynsford: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that there was no request from the Opposition for the Committee to meet after dinner on any of the evening sittings? Indeed, quite the opposite: the Opposition Whip requested that we should finish early on one occasion.

Mr. Waterson: I do not recall that, but I do remember that, on one or two occasions, we sat until rather later than 5 o'clock.

The answer is clear. The Government said, as soon as the Bill was published, that there would be 12 Committee sittings. Then they produced a programme motion which did not change at all. They tried to make out—although I think that the Minister has abandoned this tack—that it was agreed by the usual channels. Nothing could be more wrong. Of course, there were discussions through the usual channels and we tried to be constructive—the Minister was good enough to use that word in Committee and just now—and ensure that most of the Bill was properly debated. If one is given a certain length of string, one is going to make the best use of that length. It is unfair and unreasonable of the Minister to say from the Dispatch Box that we had a full discussion of all aspects of the Bill. How does he know what other arguments Opposition Members might have deployed in Committee? By whose definition was there a full discussion of every aspect of the Bill? In some cases, the discussion by Opposition Members was downright perfunctory because we wanted to get on to meatier aspects of the Bill.

I am certainly not going to take criticism from Ministers if, in the final sitting, we tried to get on to the new clause tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon on the important issue of shorthold tenancies. The Minister said, rather grandly, that we would have ample time to debate the remaining stages of the Bill today. I suppose that we should be mildly grateful that we do not have a statement on a weighty matter, but are starting business with the programme motion, debate on which can last for 45 minutes. All of that period comes straight out of the time for Report stage. We will then have Third Reading at the end of the evening. The current proposal is that we limit that to an hour, minus time spent on any divisions that might result from debates before 9 o'clock.

It is therefore extraordinary that the Minister should claim that there is ample time for debate. How does he know? I see that there is relatively little interest in this issue on the Government Benches. Ministers think that they are running not a democracy, but a Swiss railway system. The Bill will come into the station at 10 pm; that is all that Ministers are interested in.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): My hon. Friend is characteristically generous and understates his case with his usual subtlety. If this were a one-off, it would be bad enough, but it is becoming the rule or norm, not the exception, and is happening day in, day out in this Parliament. As a result, proper debate is being truncated and the people of this country are not getting the hearing that they deserve for issues that are pertinent and, in this case, important to them for the reasons given by hon. Friend. This is a serial crime, not a one-off offence.

Mr. Waterson: My hon. Friend makes his point with great power and conviction.

I repeat that the Government are in the business of bringing the Bill into the station on time. They cannot do that with a real railway network, but they seem to be able to do it with their legislation. It does not matter how many issues right hon. and hon. Members wish to raise, they have to fit all of them into the time which the Government have decided is sufficient. I have a shrewd suspicion that not only did they decide from the outset, when the Bill was published, that 12 Committee sittings would be ample—to use the Minister's word—but that they would rush through all the remaining stages in one day, as they are seeking to do today.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): Can the hon. Gentleman tell the House which parts of the Bill the Committee was unable to scrutinise or, indeed, which amendments tabled by the Opposition could not be debated in those 12 sittings?

Mr. Waterson: The hon. Gentleman anticipates my next point. He will remember that there were points of

order from Labour Back-Bench Members—I think that he was one of the hon. Members, but if not, I do him an injustice—complaining about the amount of time that we were taking in Committee on part I.

Let us remind ourselves that part I deals with seller's packs and a transaction entered into by about 1.5 million people every year. It is extremely important to many people. For most people in this country, it is the biggest transaction they will ever undertake, yet hon. Members including, I think, the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) were bobbing up and down, complaining about the length of time that we were taking on the matter.

We took a little longer on part I and probably rather less time on part II than we might otherwise have wanted, and possibly than the hon. Gentleman might have wanted. Paradoxically, because of the procedural situation, the opposite could be the case today. Because of the weight of new clauses, many of them Government new clauses, relating to part II, we may well run out of time to deal with part I if we are not careful.

Mr. Love: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. If members of the majority side had realised how little the Opposition had to say about part II, we might not have moved procedural motions to end discussion on part I.

Mr. Waterson: The hon. Gentleman might remember that we spent almost half our time on part II, which I do not complain about. I suspect that he felt a little short-changed, as did some of us, at the way that that came about.

It is typical of the Government that they have no intention of ensuring that both parts of the Bill are fully debated. Not only are they trying to suppress debate in the House yet again, but throughout the Committee stage they chose to ignore informed criticism, and in some cases to denigrate it. Any informed person or organisation, let alone an hon. Member, who seeks to disagree is dismissed as wrong or worse. Sometimes, perhaps, such people are regarded as being slightly detached—to use a familiar phrase—or unfocused.

The Law Society was one of the first to fall foul of the Minister's liverishness on one occasion. The Law Society represents some 80,000 solicitors in England and Wales. When the Opposition in Committee quoted—no one on the Government side would do it—the Law Society's concerns about and criticisms of the proposals in part I, what did we get from the Minister? He said:

> "I would take the wider issues of the Law Society with a slight pinch of salt. It may have been preoccupied with different things in recent months and perhaps has not focused"—

that word again—

> "enough on the local experience of the seller's pack."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee D*, 23 January 2001; c. 186.]

Mr. Raynsford: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He will recall what I told him in Committee: that the chairman of the Law Society in Bristol—where the seller's pack pilot took place—was one of the strongest supporters and advocates of the seller's pack. I suggested to the Opposition, who seemed to have difficulty understanding this, that it was probably better to listen to people with practical, on-the-ground experience than to others perhaps defending a vested interest.

Mr. Waterson: Ah! Now we are getting to that. The Minister will no doubt remember what I said in Committee: that of course the president—we have nothing so humble as chairman in the legal profession—of the Bristol Law Society is an enthusiast. I said to the Minister, and I repeat the invitation, that if he would like to give £360,000 worth of taxpayers' money to the Eastbourne legal profession, I can guarantee him that the president of the Eastbourne Law Society will be a convert. The only problem is that the Minister cannot go round the entire country running pilot schemes in every town and city.

We will deal in more detail with the seller's pack, and I do not want to stray beyond the bounds of this debate, but if the Government are handing over such money to a local Law Society, and giving a great shot in the arm at taxpayers' expense to the local legal profession and local estate agents, of course they will all have smiles on their faces, just as the people who participated in the scheme have smiles on their faces—they were given their seller's packs, including their surveys.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman realises that he is going beyond the scope of the programme motion.

Mr. Waterson: I allowed myself to be led down another path, there, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): For the benefit of the taxpayers who pay our salaries, will my hon. Friend confirm that there are no fewer than 74 new clauses and amendments to be considered? Will he also confirm that, on the assumption that we take one hour to debate Third Reading, the Government have the audacity to expect us to devote fewer than four minutes to the consideration of each new clause and amendment?

While my hon. Friend is about it, will he also provide an invaluable lesson on the British constitution to the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love), who seems fondly to imagine that just because the Standing Committee considered matters in some detail, that somehow discharges our obligation to do so? Will my hon. Friend confirm that the importance of this occasion is that the Standing Committee's deliberations are being reported to, and may be pronounced on by, the rest of the House?

Mr. Waterson: My hon. Friend makes two very important points, and he is absolutely right. The Government do not think that people such as my hon. Friend should be in the Chamber debating all these new clauses and amendments—let alone those that have already been considered, albeit only by the Standing Committee. The Government think that Back Benchers should be either in their constituencies trying to get re-elected or sitting in their offices dictating into machines. That is the role of Back Benchers under this Government.

Mr. Bercow: Well, it is not my role.

Mr. Waterson: I know that it is not my hon. Friend's approach, and all credit to him for that.

[Mr. Waterson]

My hon. Friend touched on an issue that I have mentioned only in passing. That is the weight of the new clauses and amendments tabled not only by the Government but by the Liberal Democrats. It is important that there should be the opportunity, on Report, to have a rethink and to take stock. Progress on the Bill has been made at a gallop since it was published just before Christmas; it is now only the beginning of February.

It is right for people—even, perhaps, the Government—to have an opportunity to table new clauses and amendments, but the Government must allow such proposals to be properly debated when appropriate. There is an exact parallel with the debate on the original programme motion—to which I think this is a supplement or amendment—in that the Government had already decided on the length of time needed in Standing Committee before a single amendment or new clause had been tabled. That is precisely the same attitude as we see today.

Before I was led down the path that took me slightly off the subject a moment ago, I was saying why I thought that debate on the Bill was being suppressed. I gave as an example not only the way in which the matter has been dealt with in the House, but the way in which major, serious bodies, organisations and individuals—I shall come to an example of that in a moment—have been dismissed out of hand by Ministers during the course of these debates.

I mentioned the Law Society earlier. Another good example came from Mr. Nigel Holt, the director of the Independent Association of Estate Agents. That is not some little group of eccentric estate agents out of kilter with the rest of the profession; it is a body that represents 18,000 estate agents across the country. When Mr. Holt had the temerity to write to me, I had the even greater temerity to read out some of his views.

Mr. Raynsford: Lack of judgment.

Mr. Waterson: Let me come to that very issue. Mr. Holt is perfectly entitled to comment on this part of the Bill, not only as an individual but as the representative of 18,000 fellow members of his profession. However, the Minister's comment on Mr. Holt was:

> Opposition Members often dredge out some extraordinary people who have written long letters, possibly in green ink.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee D*, 23 January 2001; c. 187.]

Mr. Holt obviously has a sense of humour, because he has since written to me using green ink. However, he is not at all impressed with the Minister. It is hopeless if we are trying to have a serious debate that affects a lot of people—both parts of the Bill, in their different ways, affect many people—and Ministers are not prepared to take seriously the views expressed in a constructive fashion by people such as Mr. Holt, bodies such as the Law Society, and others.

Mr. Raynsford: Will the hon. Gentleman now tell the House what led to my comments? Will he confirm that Mr. Holt's letter accused the Government of behaving like Mussolini? If that is the case, will the hon. Gentleman tell us whether he agrees with that judgment—and whether he agrees with another ill-judged comment, by an Opposition Front-Bencher, who described local authority trading standards departments as being like the Gestapo?

Mr. Waterson: We shall come on to what I have termed the conveyancing Gestapo in due course. It is true that Mr. Holt made a passing reference to Mussolini, which I took to be jocular; but it was in the context of the application of a set of criminal sanctions to people who failed to get together their seller's packs in time. We consider that to be one of the most objectionable parts of the Bill.

Mr. Holt is perfectly entitled to express his views, and perfectly entitled to express them in trenchant terms. It certainly caught the Minister's attention, and he has been banging on about it ever since—but Ministers are not paid to dismiss the views of professionals and others with genuine opinions as simply the views of people with an interest in these matters.

Mr. Hayes: The comparison with Mussolini does not, in fact, bear much scrutiny: Mussolini made the trains run on time, whereas the Government have done precisely the opposite. Leaving that aside, however, may I suggest that it is organisations of that type—independent outside bodies—that look to the Report stage of a Bill for the raising and debating of their considered views by Members? That is not always possible in Committee. As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) pointed out, Report stage is vital if the House is to take into account that broader appreciation.

Mr. Waterson: My hon. Friend puts in a nutshell the role of the various stages of scrutiny of legislation. It is up to us not simply to make points that may occur to us, but to act as a conduit through which organisations and individuals can make their concerns known. The Government have not made it easy for outside bodies to comment; they published the Bill just before Christmas and it went straight into Committee on 8 January, when we returned from the recess. Some organisations were caught very much on the hop.

I shall not labour the point because we dealt with it at length in Committee; but the Council of Mortgage Lenders, which represents some 98 per cent. of lenders dealing with properties, also received the ministerial treatment. It was clearly hectored and bullied by Ministers into withdrawing many of its objections to the Bill.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) made the case with the gentleness and restraint for which he is renowned in all parts of the House. On the subject of arrogant authoritarianism, however, will my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) confirm that in the Programming Sub-Committee he specifically asked the Government for an additional seven hours of debate in the final Standing Committee sitting, and that the Sub-Committee—meeting hole-in-corner, in private—chose to vote down that proposed change in the timetable on the strength of a Government-whipped vote?

Mr. Waterson: I was about to deal with the issue of the Programming Sub-Committee. My hon. Friend, I believe, has his own experience of these strange new bodies that meet in secret and are barred to hon. Members

who may wish to participate, other than those who are members of the bodies concerned. Not even all members of the Standing Committee are entitled to attend. Moreover, no record is kept of their proceedings.

It is true that we tried to extend the scope of the sittings motion. We spoke of the complexity of the Bill, and made a number of points on which I have already touched. We also stumbled across the fact that a secret deal had been made between the Government and the Liberal Democrats to limit the time spent on debate.

One of the major points we made was that an awful lot of the powers to be taken under the Bill would be taken by way of regulations. The Minister has been unable to produce draft regulations, which one sometimes has available. In fairness, he produced a document that set out some of the thinking behind some of the possible regulations, but even that shopping list was added to as the Committee went on.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the main thrust of his argument is that he wants more opportunity for genuine debate on those issues? If that is the case, why has he occupied more than half the total allocated time for debate on this issue?

Mr. Waterson: I do not know why the Liberal Democrats are taking up that matter with us. They should take it up with their friends on the Government Benches, instead of kowtowing at every possible opportunity to the Government and doing little deals behind the scenes to reduce the amount of debate. I am not surprised. I doubt whether we will see many Liberal Democrats during this debate, no matter how long or short it is.

I have set out the history. There has been no delay, filibustering or anything remotely close to it by Conservative Committee members. The Minister was good enough to describe our contributions as constructive. We ended up spending less time on part II than part I, which was contrary to the wishes of some Labour Members. We have many additional Government amendments and new clauses to deal with. As I have said, because of the quirk of our procedure, we could run out of time to debate part I, which will occupy the minds of some 1.5 million people a year. Sixty-nine per cent. of the population are owner-occupiers.

Mr. Raynsford: In view of the hon. Gentleman's response to the question from the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), will he tell the House why, on the penultimate day of the Committee, he personally wrote to the Government Whip to ask that we should agree to try to get to the end of clause 26 on that day and finish then or at 7 pm, whichever was earlier? If that was his view in Committee, how can he come out with all that synthetic indignation about a lack of time for debate?

Mr. Waterson: It is simple. It seemed to be for the convenience of Committee members to finish that part of the Bill and start afresh. It was clever of the Whip to keep the note, but the Minister seems to be trying to say that he wants those matters to be debated in the middle of the night. Is that what he is saying? We are not going to take any lessons from Ministers. They think that we have had ample time to debate all the issues in Committee. They think that we have ample time today. We sensibly allocated the time as much as possible within the limits of the original programme motion. The Minister is trying to make much the same point that he began with—that the Committee finished on 1 February. Of course it did. It had to finish on 1 February. It had to finish at 5 pm on 1 February because that is what the programme motion said.

At least there is no suggestion from the Minister that this has all been agreed between the usual channels. Agreement subject to duress is no agreement at all. That was our attitude at the beginning of the Bill, it has been our attitude throughout, and it is our attitude today. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to reject the motion.

4.3 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am pleased to be given the opportunity to follow the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), but I have to correct him on three points. First, there was no secret deal between the Liberal Democrats and the Government. Secondly, there was a deal between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives: we voted for the motion to extend by seven hours the business of the Committee, as the hon. Gentleman will have to acknowledge. I see the Conservative Whip, the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown), nodding. Thirdly, no one could accuse the Government of being like Mussolini—the trains do not run on time.

All hon. Members who have participated in this short debate have had the disadvantage of not being a member of the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons. I have been a member of it and have been involved throughout in the discussions on the way in which we should seek to make our business more business-like.

The Minister and the hon. Member for Eastbourne have completely missed the point. Although the Government are entitled to pass their business if they have a majority in the House, which they clearly have, and to set what they believe should be the target date for completion of that business, they have no right to set in stone the way in which that business should be considered in Committee or on Report.

In our report to the House, which it accepted, the Modernisation Committee proposed that programme motions should be used as I have just described, but that has not happened in this case or in several recent cases. Consequently, my colleagues and I have voted against those motions. Liberal Democrat Members are still very much in favour of programming our business, but the Government have imposed those motions on the Opposition parties rather than allowing us to say precisely how we should consider each of the Bills.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: No, I shall not take any interventions. There is very little time because of the long interventions by the hon. Gentleman and the long speech of the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson).

This programme motion raises another issue. As has already been acknowledged, the Bill is an important measure with two very important parts. The first part deals with changes to the overall procedure by which we buy and sell houses, which is very important to our fellow

[Mr. Tyler]

citizens. The introduction of seller's packs is extremely important to individual citizens. Although there might a good case for introducing some elements of the provisions as suggested, other elements are still extremely controversial. I am sure that that view is shared by Members on both sides of the House. Liberal Democrat Members oppose, for example, the idea that the failure to have a seller's pack should be a criminal offence. Such a provision seems outrageous.

The second part of the Bill—it has had insufficient attention until now, but it will certainly require attention today—deals with the preparation and implementation by local authorities of homelessness strategies. Those provisions will require very careful consideration.

As hon. Members have said, the time being provided to discuss eight groups of amendments—74 amendments and new clauses—is insufficient. I really do wonder why the Government thought that it was necessary to complete this business by 10 pm. Liberal Democrat Members would be quite happy to be here until midnight. The business that we are considering is extremely important. It is far more important than some of the debates that we have had to listen to, when the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) has kept us here on intrinsically less important issues.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Tyler: No.

Of the 74 amendments, 28 are Government amendments, demonstrating the Government's acceptance that the measure is unfinished business. Although we may welcome many of those amendments, we do not welcome others and believe that they should be carefully considered.

Previously, the Minister has referred to the measure as work in progress. It is unsatisfactory that, all too often, the House does not complete proper consideration of its legislation and sends that unfinished business to the other place. That is intrinsically inefficient and not a good way of handling our business. This motion does not reflect the Bill's importance, and my colleagues and I shall vote against it.

4.8 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I have not been following the Homes Bill in great detail, but I have been following in considerable detail the Government's practice of tabling programme motions. I have spoken to five or six such motions since the practice began and I wish to renew my protest.

The House will have only four and a half hours to consider the Bill on Report. There are eight groups of amendments. On any view of the matter, some of those amendments are important. There is no point in the Minister saying that some or most of the amendments are but a reflection of what was said in Committee. Although that may be true, this is the first opportunity on which the House as a whole will have an opportunity to discuss the amendments. It is quite wrong that a practice should be adopted by which the House as a whole does not have the opportunity either to discuss or to vote on a number of substantive amendments.

Although I do not usually agree with the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), he is right on this issue. The consequence of this programme motion is that some substantive amendments will be discussed first in the other place and will return to this place, if at all, essentially as Lords amendments. That cannot be right. It is an abuse of the process of democracy.

My final point is one that I have made before, but it is of cardinal importance. Democracy depends on the electorate believing that legislation has been carefully scrutinised by their representatives in Parliament. That is the assumption on which the political compromises of life stand. If parliamentary representatives are not able to carry out that scrutiny, that assumption falls. If we fail in our duty of scrutiny of legislation and the consequences of Government action and policy, we undermine the basis of accountable government.

4.10 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The Minister has repeated Ministers' habitual refrain—that our obligation is merely to tidy up the Bill and engage in a little minor drafting. We are also told that the Government amendments have been tabled to meet Opposition concerns expressed in Standing Committee or on Second Reading.

Mr. Raynsford: That is not the case.

Mr. Bercow: The Minister chunters from a sedentary position, but he appears to be in disagreement with himself. Members of the Government often disagree with each other; more often than not, Ministers disagree with Conservative Members, and it is not entirely unprecedented for members of Opposition parties to disagree with each other. However, when a Minister on the Treasury Bench disagrees with himself, it signals a new departure. The Minister said that the amendments cover relatively minor matters accommodating drafting changes and Opposition concerns: for him to deny that is, even by the Government's standards, spectacularly foolish and contradictory.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): One group of amendments deals with energy efficiency. The amendments concerned strike me as bureaucratic, interventionist and regulatory nonsense. I should not be surprised if they had been penned by Friends of the Earth. I hope that we shall have an opportunity to debate this rubbish and vote against it.

Mr. Tyler: They are Conservative amendments.

Mr. Forth: I know. I simply want to illustrate the point being made by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow)—that the assumption that our task involves merely routine and trivial tidying up could not be more wrong. The amendments contain some real nonsense, to which we should give detailed attention.

Mr. Bercow: There are important matters to be considered, and much nonsense. There is probably a superfluity of nonsense in the Bill, for the simple reason that it has been devised by a discredited, nanny-state, interventionist, mollycoddling Labour Government of the worst variety.

I apologise sincerely to the House for my understatement. My abiding problem is that I do not speak clearly or loudly enough so that my message is unmistakeable. I am sorry if my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) thinks that I have displayed a certain inhibition and wetness in what I have said, but he will know that I do not propose to disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), even to the extent of the dotting of an i or crossing of a t.

As a member of the Conservative Front-Bench team, I sign up with enthusiasm and alacrity to the principle of collective responsibility. Therefore, it is to be assumed that I am in agreement with my Front-Bench colleagues in every particular and at all times. However, I am but one small and humble—*[Interruption.]* Whether or not I am humble, I am certainly small. I am only one of the 659 hon. Members in this House, and I repeat the important point that other hon. Members should be able to consider the amendments—Government, Conservative and Liberal Democrat—that have been tabled. That is especially true for hon. Members who did not have the privilege of belonging to the Standing Committee. I feel sure that my right hon. Friend has views on each of the 74 new clauses and amendments, and he should have at least a modest opportunity to express those views.

It is both salutary and illustrative of the attitude of the new robots who pepper the Labour Benches that the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love), who said that we need not trouble ourselves with any significant consideration because these matters had been debated in detail in Committee, has—entirely appropriately, in one sense—absented himself from the Chamber. He was apparently on the Standing Committee, and we congratulate him on the status he thereby acquired. He thinks that the Government have got it right. He thinks that there has been enough discussion. He thinks that his assessment should suffice as the assessment of the House as a whole.

If other right hon. and hon. Members take a different view, what do the Government propose? Do they seek to persuade and convert by power and argument? No. What are those pigs I see flying before my eyes? Instead, they propose to ram through their intended truncation of debate on the strength of a whipped vote, with all the new robots going through the Lobby on the strength of the payroll vote, the knuckle-crunching, the threats, the favours, the offers and the denials that are within the power of the right hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor)—the Patronage Secretary—and her underlings on the Treasury Bench.

The majority of Labour Members of Parliament are probably aware of, at best, one tenth of the contents of the Bill—generosity tends to get the better of me. The betting is that they care about an even smaller proportion of the provisions than that. Some of us do care about the provisions, however. Some of us are inclined to pursue—it is relevant to homes, the involvement of local authorities and the state of local government expenditure—the implications of measures that the Government might take for the state of local finances.

I would welcome the opportunity to express a view and to hear that of the Minister on, for example, the effect of the change in the rules governing the use of capital receipts from the sale of council houses on the size of interest repayments on local authority debt. I might be tempted to expatiate on that subject because it is important to council tax payers, the future of housing provision, the credibility of local government and the relationship between local and central Government. About that, I suspect, unless the Government reconsider their draconian proposal, we will have very little opportunity, if any, to say much of significance.

The Government's attitude is, "We have our view; we have the majority; we simply do not care what you think." I emphasise that whenever we mention the public, who might be interested in our proceedings, the unfailing reaction of Members on the Government Benches is to snort and say, "How many?". They do not think that members of the public are interested in our debates. If they are not, it is because of the sheer disdain, indifference and contempt with which this anti-parliamentary, new Labour, quack Administration treat right hon. and hon. Members. Quite frankly, their attitude is plastic, supercilious—

It being forty-five minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Order [7 November 2000].*

The House divided: Ayes 285, Noes 169.

Division No. 109] **[4.19 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Coaker, Vernon
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark

Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Greg Pope and
Mr. David Clelland.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver

Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Luff and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Homes Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 8th January 2001;

Consideration and Third Reading

1. Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading shall be completed at today's sitting.

2. Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Nine o'clock.

3. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Ten o'clock.

4. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Consideration of Lords Amendments and further messages from the Lords

5. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any programme motion to supplement this order or to vary it in relation to—

(a) proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments; or

(b) proceedings on any further messages from the Lords,

and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

Orders of the Day

Homes Bill

As amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

New Clause 15

'APPLICATION OF PART VI OF 1996 ACT TO EXISTING TENANTS

'For subsections (5) and (6) of section 159 of the 1996 Act (application of Part VI of that Act to existing secure and introductory tenants, to existing tenants of registered social landlords and to certain other tenants) there is substituted—

'(5) The provisions of this Part do not apply to an allocation of housing accommodation to a person who is already a secure or introductory tenant unless the allocation involves a transfer of housing accommodation for that person and is made on his application.'.—*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

4.33 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendment No. 46.

Amendment No. 56, in clause 27, page 17, line 34, at end insert—

'( ) In any scheme, the local housing authority shall state its policy for ensuring that people in need of a move on any of the grounds listed above, and who are existing tenants shall, all other things being equal, have prior claim to new built property over those who would be first time tenants of the local authority, provided that first time tenants can still be offered adequate accommodation.'.

Government amendment No. 51.

Mr. Raynsford: Government amendments Nos. 46 and 51 and new clause 15 seek to simplify the provisions in the Bill that ensure that existing tenants in the social housing sector who seek a transfer of accommodation from a housing authority must have their application considered under the allocation scheme. In other words, they have a right to have their application considered, a right for reasonable and additional preference to be considered, and a right to seek a review of decisions about their application.

The policy intention has not changed, but we have identified a simpler way of achieving it. Amendment No. 46 removes clause 24, which is unnecessarily complex. It is replaced by new clause 15, which in turn substitutes for the current subsections (5) and (6) of section 159 of the Housing Act 1996 a new subsection (5).

Amendment No. 51 will make a minor consequential change to schedule 3.

Under amendment No. 56, tabled by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), existing tenants would be given priority over new tenants in the allocation of new-build accommodation. I find it extraordinary that he considers such detail appropriate to the Bill. We are setting up a robust framework in which local authorities can operate choice-based lettings

[Mr. Raynsford]

schemes. The framework will provide authorities with the discretion to make local decisions, based on local knowledge, and appropriate to local circumstances.

The framework sets out the principal issues that authorities should take into account in drawing up their priorities and preferences. They are, in the main, closely related to need, but the framework is not prescriptive—nor should it be. Local authorities should have discretion. It makes no sense to direct every nuance, to insist on every detail and dot every i and cross every t. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats' suggestion is curious because considerable discretion would be removed from local authorities by amendment No. 56, yet the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) speaks frequently about diktats from Whitehall and the Government's centralising tendency.

Hon. Gentlemen should be clear about their objective. Do they wish to allow local authorities more discretion, or do they wish to be centralisers? I am afraid that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey shows himself to be a centraliser, and amendment No. 56 is inappropriate. I hope that he will not press it to a Division, and that the House will support new clause 15 and the Government amendments.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): I do not wish to detain the House. I shall deal first with amendment No. 56, tabled by the Liberals. For once, I agree with the Minister. The amendment would include in the Bill an incredibly detailed, micro-managed proposal, despite the Minister's reluctance to include many other proposals that we think should be in it. However, the last thing I want to do is to intervene in an argument between the Government and their Liberal Democrat allies. Of course, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) will make his own case in a moment.

As for the unlamented demise of clause 24, we agree that new clause 15 represents a much less clumsily drafted approach to what the Government want to achieve. We have no difficulty with new clause 15 or Government amendments Nos. 46 and 51—the second of which is a drafting amendment, so far as I can tell—and we shall not therefore seek to divide the House on any of them.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I shall speak to amendment No. 56. There is of course no difference of opinion between my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) and me, on any occasion, in any circumstance. The Minister knows that that is true, but he likes making the odd bit of mischief, so I shall forgive him.

I represent—I still think that the figures are accurate—more council tenants as a proportion of my constituents than any other English Member of Parliament. Therefore, this debate and these provisions are of crucial interest to my constituents and me. The Minister may not have spotted the fact that amendment No. 56 was not intended to determine what the policy should be, but to ensure that local authorities state their policies. I am keen to ensure that each local authority puts out its policy clearly in the shop window.

The objective of the proposal is slightly different from the one that the Minister suggested. Importantly, amendment No. 56 deals with

"people in need of a move on any of the grounds listed"

elsewhere in the Bill. There is no argument about those grounds. People may need to move if they are overcrowded, or on medical grounds, or whatever. However, when existing local authority tenants need to move,

"all other things being equal"—

that is an important phrase—they shall

"have prior claim to new built property over those who would be first time tenants".

The reason why I tabled the amendment—I shall not press it to a Division—was to get the Government to think about such issues, and to ensure that local authorities are required to address the controversial question of how they choose between long-standing tenants who live in accommodation that is inadequate by the local authority's own definition, and people who would be new tenants.

From his experience in his present constituency, and from the one that he previously represented—they are both in inner London—the Minister will know of one of the great complaints that tenants who live in overcrowded and damp accommodation frequently make. They desperately need to move because they are ill, or they live in an upstairs flat with no lift. However, people then come off the housing list; the existing tenants do not begrudge those people being housed, but they move into brand new properties. Meanwhile, the existing tenants remain on the fourth floor of a block with no lift, or in a flat that is damp, overcrowded and inadequate for them. They have no chance of moving into the new properties, and that is the cause for their complaint. It is a matter of equity.

I accept that this is not the time and place to be over-prescriptive, and that local councils should be able to exercise their discretion. That is why people vote councils in and out; they choose between policies. I merely ask that the local authority publish its policy on this matter, so that people know what its policy is, and can decide whether to vote against the party in power at the next election. I ask for clarity so that we can remove one of the major causes of grief, aggravation and concern that existing tenants, many of whom have paid their rents for 20 or 30 years, feel towards local authorities.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): Like my hon. Friend, I represent many council tenants, and many of them have great problems understanding the housing policy that governs their ability to transfer. My hon. Friend's amendment is a good one, apart from the use of the words

"all other things being equal".

The point is that things are not equal, and there is not a great deal of transparency. Most housing authorities fail to explain the transfer system, what the criteria for existing tenants are, and how new applications are dealt with.

Mr. Hughes: I know my hon. Friend's constituency quite well, and I have visited the flats there when supporting his election campaigns. We are all the same boat, in that we are dealing with people who are trapped in a home and want to move.

The purpose of the debate is to get the Government to consider the issue, and I accept my hon. Friend's proposition. Provided that adequately sized accommodation with adequate facilities is offered, the best system would not offer the best properties to first-time tenants. They should start with the old property and work their way up the quality ladder. Long-serving tenants should get the new properties as a reward for their years in the old property wilderness. That is a matter of equity, irrespective of people's background, culture or anything else.

The Minister understands that I do not intend to divide the House on the amendment, but I hope that he will consider the issues involved.

Mr. Hancock: People find themselves in a trap when, having been on a housing waiting list, they are made an offer of accommodation. The problem is particularly difficult for homeless people who, in the main, are made only one offer. Invariably, they take the first available property, and in many instances, it is not suitable. They remain in that property for several years, and inevitably, their family circumstances change. However, they are trapped in a property that they have little or no hope of leaving.

My local authority has a housing transfer list nearly as long as its housing waiting list. Fifteen years ago, it had 30,000 council properties at its disposal, but it has fewer than 18,000 today. As one can imagine, the vast majority of good properties have been sold off and the rump that remains is, in the main, made up of pre-war properties that require major renovation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said, many families have been trapped in a property for a long time, with little or no hope of ever getting out. That is because—quite rightly in some respects—the housing authority believes that they are adequately housed. However, many authorities refuse to recognise the conditions in which many of those families live.

Surely the Minister has a responsibility to recognise that the Bill should offer hope to people who are trapped in properties while their children grow up. I hope that when he replies, he will tell us that the Government are considering the issue realistically and sympathetically, and that they intend to do something to help.

4.45 pm

Mr. Raynsford: This short debate has identified two main issues. First, it has shown the importance of simplifying the provisions, which is what the Government amendments will do. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) for his support. Secondly, the debate has highlighted the position of existing tenants against that of new tenants.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) emphasised that there were two parts to amendment No. 56. First, the council should state its policy. The Bill provides for exactly that. It requires authorities to prepare a detailed policy that will apply to people who seek transfers. The measure gives them greater involvement in the allocation of accommodation than is currently the case.

The hon. Members for Southwark, North and Bermondsey and for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) both made an important point about the respective needs of existing tenants and new tenants. We all know the sense of extreme injustice that many existing tenants feel when they are trapped in properties in poor condition, yet see new tenants getting more attractive properties ahead of them. That is worrying. We therefore want to make two important changes to the allocation system.

First, we want to ensure that, unlike what happened under the Housing Act 1996, the allocation process takes full account of the needs of those who want a transfer. Secondly, we want to make a significant shift from bureaucratic allocation systems in which officials make the decisions, often with little regard for the feelings and interests of the tenants, to a more choice-based system. We acknowledge the constraints that are inevitable in areas of high demand. Nevertheless, we want to try to involve those who apply for council or housing association homes more in decisions about their future.

It is important to give more choice to the public and more respect to their views. That will probably lead to the results that the hon. Members for Southwark, North and Bermondsey and for Portsmouth, South want. When the public exercise more choice, the system has to respond to the wishes and aspirations of people who are aggrieved about the current arrangements. I hope that both hon. Members realise that the Bill is in line with their objective, but that we do not propose to achieve that objective through centralising diktats from Whitehall. We are providing the framework, but each local authority must develop its own system.

Mr. Hancock: The Minister has made a helpful point, provided that local housing authorities take note of the framework and intend to introduce transparent policies. An existing tenant has the right to know that his or her application for transfer has been considered according to proper criteria. Tenants should also have the right to know why applications are rejected. How does the Minister intend to ensure that local authorities effect that policy?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman is fairly new to the debate; he was not a member of the Standing Committee. We had detailed debates in Committee about methods of ensuring that the new allocation policies were made available and that people had an opportunity to appeal against the assessment of the facts on which their allocation had been determined. It is not appropriate for every allocation to be subject to an appeal; that would not be feasible. However, every applicant must be confident that the basis on which his or her priority is being assessed can be challenged. We have provided for that.

We have invited bids from local authorities for imaginative new choice-based lettings systems. We have received substantive bids from 94 local authorities, and we will make decisions in the near future about the allocation of the £11 million in funding to support those initiatives.

Mr. Hughes: Will it be possible for the Department to state the new policy in simple, easily accessible form? Anyone who wants to take part in a tenants organisation debate on the subject can then obtain from a common website details of comparable systems, and be well informed for a local discussion. Tenants will be able to

[Mr. Hughes]

say, "This is what we've got at the moment, but we'd like you to do what Leicester, or Liverpool, does." Can the information be readily accessible?

Mr. Raynsford: I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman two undertakings. First, we certainly want to ensure that the new policy introduced by the Bill is fully understood, and we will arrange for appropriate publicity to ensure that tenants groups, local authorities and registered social landlords throughout the country are aware of the new arrangements.

Secondly, one issue that is exercising us at the moment is how we ensure that, with the great interest that I have described—94 bids for new innovative choice-based lettings schemes—information is shared throughout the country, and good practice in one area can be understood by others. We are giving a great deal of thought to that, but we have not yet reached conclusions about how best to achieve it. I hope that, having heard that assurance, the hon. Gentleman will accept that his amendment is flawed and agree to withdraw it.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

Mr. Waterson: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You may recall that a week or two ago we had a debate in this House on the Government's new regulations on secrecy in local government, on a prayer tabled by Conservative Members. The Liberal Democrats tabled a prayer in the Lords, which we supported, and which was to be debated tomorrow. It has just come to my attention that the prayer has been withdrawn. I wonder whether you have had a request from the Minister for Local Government and the Regions to come to the House to make a statement as a matter of urgency, explaining the Government's attitude, and whether this is another example of Lib-Labbery in action.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have had no such information, and in any case this House cannot be concerned with procedures in another place.

New Clause 16

PERSONS CLAIMING TO BE HOMELESS WHO ARE AT RISK OF VIOLENCE

'(1) In section 177 of the 1996 Act (cases when it is reasonable to continue to occupy accommodation)—

(a) in subsection (1), after "domestic violence" there is inserted "or other violence"; and

(b) for the words following paragraph (b) of subsection (1) there is substituted—

"(1A) For this purpose "violence" means—

(a) violence from another person; or

(b) threats of violence from another person which are likely to be carried out;

and violence is "domestic violence" if it is from a person who is associated with the victim."

(2) In section 198 of the 1996 Act (conditions for referral of case to another local housing authority), for subsection (3) there is substituted—

"(2A) But the conditions for referral mentioned in subsection (2) are not met if—

(a) the applicant or any person who might reasonably be expected to reside with him has suffered violence (other than domestic violence) in the district of the other authority; and

(b) it is probable that the return to that district of the victim will lead to further violence of a similar kind against him.

(3) For the purposes of subsections (2) and (2A) "violence" means—

(a) violence from another person; or

(b) threats of violence from another person which are likely to be carried out;

and violence is "domestic violence" if it is from a person who is associated with the victim.".'.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Robert Ainsworth): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss new clause 19—*Whether it is reasonable to continue to occupy accommodation—*

'( ).—(1) Section 177 (whether it is reasonable to continue to occupy accommodation) of the 1996 Act is amended as follows.

(2) After subsection (1) there is inserted—

"(1A) It is not reasonable for a person to continue to occupy accommodation if it is probable that this will lead to violence on racial or other grounds against him, or against—

(a) a person who normally resides with him as a member of his family, or

(b) any other person who might reasonably be expected to reside with him.

For this purpose "violence on racial grounds" in relation to a person, means violence from another person by reason of a person's race, nationality or ethnic or national origins, or threats of violence from such a person which are likely to be carried out.".'.

Mr. Ainsworth: In Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) moved an amendment aimed at strengthening the homelessness safety net in respect of people forced to leave their homes through no fault of their own because of racial harassment.

This is a matter of genuine concern and I undertook to review the current provisions in part VII of the 1996 Act and table an amendment to make it clear that a risk of violence towards someone, or threats of violence which were likely to be carried out, would be grounds for a decision that it would not be reasonable for that person to continue to live in their current home.

The current legislation provides in general terms that a person is to be treated as homeless if it would not be reasonable for them to continue to live in their present home. There is specific provision concerning people who would face a risk of domestic violence if they continued to live in their present accommodation. The latter provision, introduced by the 1996 Act, is important, since every support must be given to those who are vulnerable because of domestic violence. However, on reflection, it could perhaps be construed rather narrowly as implying that while it would not be reasonable for someone experiencing domestic violence to remain in their home, it might be reasonable for someone to do so where faced

with a different kind of violence. Of course that would be nonsense, but the possibility of that construction is a weakness in the current provisions.

All forms of antisocial behaviour ruin people's lives. The Government are committed to tackling the unacceptable level of antisocial behaviour in our communities. Through crime and disorder partnerships we are working with local authorities and the police to achieve that, and encouraging best use of antisocial behaviour orders and injunctions. We are combining effective prevention with tough enforcement.

At the same time, we want to provide adequate protection for victims of antisocial behaviour, including racial harassment. As part of that, it is important to make it absolutely clear that it would not be reasonable for anyone to remain in their home if continued occupation would bring with it a real risk of any kind of violence, or a threat of actual violence. That must include not only domestic violence but all other forms of violence, including racially motivated violence. That is what new clause 16 does.

The clause will amend section 177 of the Housing Act 1996 to make it clear that it is not reasonable for someone to continue in their present accommodation if to do so would result in violence or a real threat of violence towards them. As with the current provisions concerning applicants at risk of domestic violence, the new broader provision will apply whether there is a risk of violence, or threat of actual violence, to the applicant himself or to a member of his household.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow moved an amendment that would have amended section 198 of the 1996 Act with the aim of ensuring that people who flee from harassment in one area and make a homelessness application in another are not referred back to the area where they would be at risk.

There are specific provisions in the 1996 Act that prevent such a referral taking place if the applicant, or a member of his household, would run the risk of domestic violence in the other area. Currently, there is no provision to prevent referral where there is a risk of some other form of violence in the other area. The new clause will make that necessary provision.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) tabled new clause 19, which has the same broad intention as new clause 16, although his proposal focuses rather more specifically on racially motivated violence. As I have said, the Government's proposals will embrace all forms of violence, and that must be the right approach. That includes racially motivated violence, which unfortunately is far too often the type of violence that hounds people out of their homes.

In light of the fact that we have tabled new clause 16, I hope that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey will withdraw new clause 19.

Mr. Simon Hughes: All parties in the House and individuals will be grateful to the Government for responding positively to the suggestion made by the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) by bringing forward a new clause. That is welcome. The Minister was right to say that the general thrust of new clause 16 is in the same direction as new clause 19, which I tabled. I accept that the Government's new clause goes further than mine because it amends both sections 177 and 198 of the Housing Act 1996. Properly, in my view, the Government have added to the domestic violence provision, which gave protection before, the wider violence category, which is described in the new clause. I welcome that and I am grateful. The intention was exactly the same from my perspective, from that of the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow and from that of the Government.

We are dealing with a huge and real issue. Far too many people are receiving threats in their own homes. These are most frequently threats of a racial character or are the result of a domestic dispute. Occasionally, there are other sorts of threat. There are occasional threats—happily, they are not made nearly as often as the others—of homophobic violence. Every year since I have been a Member of Parliament, people have come to me and said, "I cannot stay in my home. I am being persecuted on the ground of my race"—or of their sexuality or for some other reason. I am grateful to the Government for responding positively.

I am keen to ensure that the tenant, the normal resident, is covered. I have also included,

"a person who normally resides with him as a member of his family"—

and, because it raises a specific issue,

"any other person who might reasonably be expected to reside with him."

I ask for that to be included, again from practical experience. On two recent occasions, the threat has been not to the tenant but to the tenant's partner. In one case, the tenant was safe while alone, but when the partner, who was of different race and had a home elsewhere, came to stay at weekends, the violence occurred. The other case is familiar to us all, and occurs when there is shared custody or responsibility for children. Occasionally, difficulties and threats arise because of a domestic breakdown in the past. People may feel that, if the child of the family stays with them, they will be under attack because the other partner has never accepted the child's right to stay with that parent or grandparent.

5 pm

I am happy not to press my new clause, but I am keen that, by end of the process of getting the legislation right, we should have covered the tenant, the normal resident and people who, perfectly properly, come to stay. Ministers will understand that it is fine and good to protect the tenants themselves, but if their sons, daughters, parents, partners, wives or husbands are under attack when they come to stay, then a tenant's right to stay and to be protected is no good. Tenants need protection for their household, which should be properly defined. I am therefore keen to make sure that the legislation covers the household in all circumstances in which there is a threat of violence, whether domestic or otherwise.

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): In common with other speakers, I welcome the enlargement of the provisions in new clause 16. However, there is an issue that I would like to raise with my hon. Friend the Under–Secretary. Some of my constituents have suffered from domestic violence, racial harassment or harassment because of their sexual preferences. They feel strongly and deeply that they are being made to move from their

[Ms Glenda Jackson]

home and from an area which they and their children know well and—certainly in cases of domestic violence—where the children are attending school and have made links with other children.

While welcoming the potential for a place of safety for people who suffer the worst excesses of mindless violence, I should like to raise with my hon. Friend the need to examine the possibility of ensuring that the victims of violence can be properly protected in homes in which they may have lived for a considerable period. There should be rather more joined-up action across what I acknowledge is a wide range of statutory responsibilities, to ensure that those who would do those people harm are precluded from doing so.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): I wish to make a brief point. The Under-Secretary will know that I did not have the opportunity to serve on the Standing Committee, and my point—which, I hope, he does not think pedantic—may have been dealt with exhaustively then. As I understand it, new clause 16, which I support, amends section 177 of the Housing Act 1996, by adding the words "or other violence" after the words "domestic violence". It then goes on to define what violence—not "other violence"—means.

Why is it necessary to add those words—I fully agree that the concept should be added—rather than deleting "domestic"? The new clause could just refer to violence, which could be domestic, racial or any other violence. I have a little campaign to try to ensure that legislation is no longer than it need be. In this case, that small point may just help.

Mr. Waterson: May I begin by congratulating the Under-Secretary on what, I think, is his first ministerial appearance at the Dispatch Box? Of course, he was promoted during the Bill's Committee stage—one of the many events that enlivened our debates.

We support new clause 16. There was a debate on the general subject in Committee and there was general cross-party support for the proposal that we should be clear that we are addressing all types of violence. We agree with the Under-Secretary that it is certainly possible to put a narrow construction on the existing wording. As the hon. Gentleman said, it would be quite wrong for people to be disadvantaged in housing priority terms if they were in genuine fear of violence, whatever the cause of that violence was said to be. We heard an eloquent speech in Committee from the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) on the issue.

Whether we represent Bermondsey, Eastbourne or anywhere else, we all know of the problem of violence and the threat of violence in social housing in some parts of our constituencies, and of the fact that people can be systematically terrorised over a long period. We recognise that there are different types of violence and different reasons for it.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) noted that the reasons for the violence may be domestic, and that all too often, the flash-point is access to or custody of children, or marital discord. Equally, the reasons may be racial or homophobic, or we may be talking about neighbours who simply do not like each other. We will discuss later the so-called neighbours from hell. That issue should be addressed more than it has been in the Bill.

Antisocial behaviour bordering on the violent, and sometimes turning into violence, is an increasing problem in estates, blocks of flats and so on across the country. We agree that no distinction should be made between different types of violence.

It is bad enough that people may be forced to flee their homes because of violence or the threat of violence, but it would be absurd if they then found themselves at the back of the queue for housing. I doubt whether there are housing authorities that apply the rules so narrowly, but the Minister is right: we should not leave it to chance. We are therefore happy to support new clause 16.

Mr. Hancock: I welcome new clause 16, but I see in it problems that could persist into the future. Those of us who represent large numbers of council tenants have encountered cases involving all types of violence. Sadly, domestic violence is usually one of the easier cases, as it is clear who is perpetrating the violence and who is on the receiving end.

Other types of violence are not so straightforward—for example, the threat of violence from the drug dealer in the block of flats against other tenants. I have a block of flats in my constituency where the Post Office has refused to deliver mail because of the intimidation and the hypodermic needles that are discarded almost daily around the block. It is a scandal that people in the block knew what was going on, but were so frightened to come forward because of the fears of violence that the matter went unattended to for a considerable length of time.

There are many instances in which the threat of violence is a compelling reason for people not to say anything about what is going on, and to allow the criminal elements and the neighbours from hell to continue to make other people's lives a misery.

A further issue is the malicious claim of violence. On more than one occasion, people have come to me with a fairly plausible story about a threat of violence, in the hope that that would be sufficient to get them rehoused. It is extremely difficult to prove such a thing, and the assertion was subsequently shown to be malicious. The people concerned were simply trying to work a scam to get rehoused. People may be desperate, but that is not acceptable.

There should be a mechanism that allows people who have a genuine fear of violence to ask the local housing authority to move them because they are at risk. The housing officer may ask what proof they have and how often the police have been called. In most cases, the mere fact of the police turning up would be enough to ensure that violence ensues—perhaps not that day or the next, but within a short period.

We need to assist local authorities in obtaining proof of what is going on, and we should give them some guidance about how to collect evidence of the violence that has supposedly been threatened. That is a very difficult issue that must undoubtedly be addressed. How right the Government are to have tabled new clause 16, but that will not be the end of the process. Sadly, the problem is going to get worse. On some estates, the threat of violence has become an epidemic, and is an essential part of the way in which those estates are run. We must find a mechanism to free people from the fear of violence.

Any hon. Members who grew up on council estates where violence was the norm will know how awful it is to live with that fear hanging over them. Fear accompanies people on their journey home from school; parents worry about whether their children will arrive home, because of the threat not of abduction but of violence being dished out; people come home late in the evening and are afraid to go upstairs: some go and stay the night somewhere else because they are afraid to enter a block of flats and go up four flights of stairs, because gangs of violent youths are sitting on those stairs. The police cannot respond to every phone call from someone asking to be escorted home. We must find a mechanism to deal with the problem. New clause 16 starts the process but, sadly, does not end it.

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) asked whether other people in a household would be covered by the measure. He will find the definition that he seeks in section 177 of the Housing Act 1996, which the new clause will extend. The present definition includes

"(a) a person who normally resides with him as a member of his family, or

(b) any other person who might reasonably be expected to reside with him."

The definition that the hon. Gentleman asked for is therefore covered by the original Act and by the extension proposed in the new clause.

The hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) asked why we could not simply use the word "violence", rather than the terms "domestic violence" and "or other violence". The reason is that we have to comply with the requirement for referrals under section 198 of the Housing Act 1996, in circumstances in which it applies to domestic violence. It is far easier to identify the perpetrators of domestic violence—and their places of abode—than other perpetrators of violence, so there is a different procedure in such cases.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) and the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) largely spoke on the same subject. On that issue, we are proposing that a person living in a home where they have been subjected to violence or are clearly under threat of violence—no matter what the reason or motive—can be classified as homeless and given priority if it is necessary to move them from their home.

Many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate, will know that a complaint we often receive is that the victims of violence, rather than the perpetrators, have to be moved. Furthermore, there is always an issue of proof. The Government are trying to introduce other measures to deal with those problems. In relation to that, we must consider the adequacy and enforcement of tenancy agreements and the use of antisocial behaviour orders.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South clearly illustrated that it is not always possible to prove allegations of violence. Sadly, it is all too often necessary to move the victim out of the way of the threat because the allegations against the perpetrator cannot be proved.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Does the Minister also agree that another important strategy—to which more publicity could perhaps be given—is the role of third parties in giving evidence, to preserve the anonymity of a neighbour who might otherwise have to give direct evidence, with all the consequences that that might have?

5.15 pm

Mr. Ainsworth: Some of the measures that the Government introduced recently were designed to introduce a working relationship between police and local authorities, to enable third parties to give evidence in many cases of this kind. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

Ms Glenda Jackson: The point I wanted to make is that in some areas an individual local authority cannot tackle the problem. In the case of certain acts of violence, there should be a strategy involving several authorities.

When one local authority tenant visits violence on another tenant of the same authority, although the difficulties that have been enunciated are very real, it is in some ways easier for the authority to deal with the problem. When the violence is perpetrated by a tenant of a contiguous authority, however—or even an authority further away than that—there should be a strategy that a group of authorities can define.

Mr. Ainsworth: What my hon. Friend says is inevitably true. Wherever possible, we are trying to encourage cross-border co-operation between authorities, as well as co-operation within them.

As we all know, this is a difficult issue. It is often not possible to prove violence or threats of violence, which means that victims go on suffering needlessly. We are introducing a provision enabling such people, in extremis, to be classed as homeless, and to move away from the threats or the actual violence that they face.

Ms Jackson *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that the Minister has probably finished.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 2

CO-OPERATION BETWEEN REGISTERED SOCIAL LANDLORDS AND LOCAL HOUSING AUTHORITIES

'.—( ) For section 170 of the 1996 Act (co-operation between registered social landlords and local housing authorities) there is substituted—

"Where a local housing authority so request, a registered social landlord shall co-operate in offering accommodation to people with priority under the authority's allocation scheme, if to do so is compatible with their constitution and does not unduly prejudice the discharge of any of their functions".'.—*[Mr. Don Foster.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Don Foster: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: New clause 3—*Co-operation between relevant housing authorities and bodies—*

'( ).—(1) Section 213 (co-operation between relevant housing authorities and bodies) of the 1996 Act is amended as follows.

After subsection (1) there is inserted—

"( ) Where a local housing authority request a registered social landlord to assist them in the discharge of their functions under this part, the landlord to whom the request is made shall co-operate in rendering such assistance in the discharge of the functions to which the request relates, if to do so is compatible with their constitution and does not unduly prejudice the discharge of any of their functions."

(2) In subsection (2)(a) the words "a registered social landlord or housing action trust" shall cease to have effect.".'.

Amendment No. 57, in clause 16, page 10, line 27, at end insert—

'(8) In formulating its homelessness strategy, a local authority shall be required to show that its policies meet housing needs before meeting housing demands.'.

Amendment No. 18, in clause 17, page 10, line 30, after "homelessness", insert "including rough sleeping".

Amendment No. 19, in clause 18, page 11, line 45, after "organisations", insert—

'people living within the authority's area including those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.'.

Amendment No. 15, in page 11, line 46, at end insert—

'to include organisations recognised by the Secretary of State as specialists in representing people with physical and mental disabilities.'.

Mr. Foster: We are now dealing with the important issue of the strategies and reviews of homelessness for which local authorities are to be responsible. As I said on Second Reading and in Committee, Liberal Democrats are very supportive of the Government's proposals, although I am sorry that they were not prepared to accept the importance of uniting authorities housing and homelessness strategies.

In Committee, we made a great deal of progress in determining what should be the content of the reviews and strategies. The new clauses and amendments are intended to make further improvements. I shall not comment on the Conservative amendments, but I commend them—particularly amendment No. 15, which suggests that consultation during the development of strategies should include consultation with organisations representing people with mental and physical disabilities. We discussed that issue in Committee. Amendment No. 19 concerns another issue that we discussed then: the importance of involving homeless people in the development of strategies. I especially commend amendment No. 57, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), which suggests that the primacy of housing need should be stressed in all allocation strategies.

New clause 2 and new clause 3, which is intimately linked with it, raise an issue that was touched on during our Committee deliberations. However, because it was linked with many other issues, we perhaps did not have the opportunity to give it the attention that we might have liked.

The Committee became aware during its deliberations, as I am sure the House is aware, that the registered social landlord sector is playing an increasing role in the provision of affordable housing. As we discovered from information provided by various organisations, by 2004, because of continued progress by local authorities in selling their council houses to RSLs, the majority of affordable houses will be in the control of RSLs. Therefore, if a local authority's homelessness strategy is to be successful, it is important that there be an intimate relationship between the local authority and the RSLs in its area.

The existing legislation, the Housing Act 1996, requires co-operation between RSLs in a local authority's area and the local authority, but the problem is that, within that legislation, the nature of that relationship is largely based on the RSLs deciding what it shall be reasonable for them to do in respect of that co-operation.

Clearly, if an RSL is not prepared to co-operate in the provision of affordable housing for people in need in a local authority's area, there can be serious consequences. Some people will stay longer in temporary housing. It could mean that some people are in less satisfactory housing. It might even mean that some people are not housed at all. The test, however, is whether that co-operation is deemed by the RSL to be reasonable. It is clear that the RSL would decide whether the relationship was reasonable. Indeed, the Minister, in relation to advice and assistance given by a local authority, said:

"the legal advice that I have received is quite clear that the courts would be likely to take such 'advice and assistance as is reasonable..' to be reasonable in the eyes of the local authority."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee D*, 1 February 2001; c. 429.]

Under the current legislation, co-operation between the two is expected, but it is for RSLs to decide whether the level of co-operation that they are providing is reasonable.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: I happily give way to the hon. Gentleman, whose contributions we so enjoy.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that unsought compliment.

If a local authority changes its social housing priorities in the course of one financial year, either because of a change of administration or for any one of a number of possible reasons, how quickly will the hon. Gentleman expect a registered social landlord to respond in terms of the provision of accommodation?

Mr. Foster: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It raises a more complicated point than I suspect even he is aware of. A large number of local authorities have transferred their housing stock to RSLs. At the time of the transfer, it was assumed that the RSL would abide by the allocations and priority procedures of the local authority. Over time, however, as local authorities change, registered social landlords have not been required to change their procedures. Therefore, there is not even a requirement for RSLs to change their procedures, let alone to change them quickly.

I acknowledge entirely the concern that the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) may have that registered social landlords will be required to make changes overnight. Consequently, if he carefully reads new clause 2, he will see that I have included various

caveats to ensure that although registered social landlords will be required to co-operate more fully with the local authority, they do not have to do so if that is against their constitution or if they can demonstrate that it would in some way subvert their main purpose and key activity. I am grateful to him for making that point and allowing me to expand on it.

Some people may argue that registered social landlords will certainly want to co-operate. In a majority of cases, they do want to co-operate. Unfortunately, however, evidence from across the country has shown that some RSLs are not as co-operative as one might hope. In Committee, we heard of research done by Shelter that demonstrated that of the 61 large-scale and partial transfer authorities with which it was in discussions, 26 per cent. said that, after the stock transfer, it was less easy to house homeless households and people on the register. Interestingly—although I do not think that we should make too much of that relatively small sample—89 per cent. of the authorities surveyed said that they would favour greater statutory powers in the matter.

The purpose of the two new clauses is clear. They would strengthen the current statutory arrangements for registered social landlords to co-operate in offering accommodation under the authority's allocation scheme and assisting in the discharge of the authority's homelessness function. As registered social landlords are an increasingly important part of the affordable housing sector, that relationship is vital. That relationship needs to be strengthened, and the new clauses propose ways of doing just that.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I should like to speak first to new clauses 2 and 3, and then to our own amendments Nos. 18, 19 and 15.

The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) is right to recognise the increasing importance of housing associations and other non-local authorities in providing housing. He is also right to welcome, as Conservative Members do, provisions that provide homelessness strategies and encourage local authorities to take a more preventive approach to homelessness. Our objection to the Liberal Democrats new clauses is their rather vague—I probably should not be surprised at that—way of approaching the relationship between local authorities and registered social landlords. We do not know why we need provisions "to strengthen co-operation", as the hon. Gentleman describes it, between registered social landlords and local authorities. We trust registered social landlords to decide what is reasonable.

I echo the concerns expressed by the National Housing Federation about new clause 2. It states:

> "Whilst it is right that RSLs offer assistance in meeting local housing needs, it is also important that they remain able to offer housing to people in need through other routes. By offering referrals to specialist agencies, RSLs are able to ensure that a wider spectrum of needs is met. Vulnerable single people or couples on low incomes, for example, are often helped into affordable housing in this way.
>
> It is also vital that RSLs are able to consider whether a property on offer is suitable for the applicant, given their household's needs and the available support."

We want to avoid a move towards sink estates, and so cannot support the new clause.

5.30 pm

Mr. Don Foster: I agree on all the matters that the hon. Gentleman has raised. There is great diversity among registered social landlords, and it is important to allow them to have regard to their constitution and key purposes. The new clause provides that those criteria can be used as exceptions, enabling RSLs not to co-operate if they believe that to do so would not be in their interests.

Mr. Loughton: I do not disagree with much of that, but the new clause would not guarantee that local authorities could not press registered social landlords to act in a way that would be unreasonable and prejudicial to the provision of housing for other potential tenants. We believe that section 170 of the Housing Act 1996 is adequate for the task. It states:

> "Where a local housing authority so request, a registered social landlord shall co-operate to such extent as is reasonable in the circumstances in offering accommodation to people with priority on the authority's housing register."

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that, despite the emollient advocacy of the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) and his helpful reference to the caveat in the new clause that a registered social landlord should not be obliged to prejudice the discharge of its other functions, it is important to know who will arbitrate disputes when they arise? As yet, that is unclear.

Mr. Loughton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The flow of complimentary language between him and the hon. Member for Bath is most unseemly and unexpected. However, Conservative Members will not support the new clause.

Far more important is the matter of the three amendments that we tabled in Committee. The Government greeted them with warm words then, but do not appear tempted to make those warm words more explicit in the Bill. We therefore feel it necessary to tease from Ministers more action and commitment than they have so far offered.

Amendment No. 18 would add rough sleeping to homelessness as a requirement for housing authority reviews. In Committee, we discussed at length the problems faced by rough sleepers, which are different from those faced by other homeless people. Rough sleepers' problems include dependency on drugs or alcohol and difficulties with social services, and their requirements with regard to the housing authority's review policy should be included in the Bill.

In Committee, we also discussed the role of the rough sleepers unit. We used the example of the rough sleepers initiative so ably introduced by my right hon. Friends the Members for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) and for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) when they were housing Ministers in the early 1990s. They did a great deal to tackle the problem of rough sleepers.

We believe that devoting a budget of £200 million to a quango filled with well-paid people is not the best way to concentrate resources on rough sleepers, and that it would be better to endow local authorities with the task. That is why we want the Bill to specify that rough sleeping should be part of a homelessness strategy. I hope that the Minister will reconsider his unwillingness to accept the amendment. We are not convinced by the reasons that he has produced so far.

[Mr. Loughton]

Amendment No. 19, which is perfectly sensible, deals with homelessness strategies and whom local authorities should consult. The issue was covered in Committee at some length, and we congratulated the Government on the more holistic—that ghastly word, which we all vowed not to use—and comprehensive approach to including other partners in formulating homelessness strategies and using partnerships to execute policies to deal with homelessness. We thought it was simply an error or drafting omission that nowhere in the Bill is there an undertaking that when formulating or modifying homelessness strategies, the very people those strategies are to help—homeless people—should be consulted.

I mentioned in Committee the work done by organisations such as Shelter, which we all congratulated. It has been very supportive with regard to the homelessness measures in the Bill. Its report, "Closing the Gap", is a prime example of good practice and the way in which needs are translated into action. For that report, Shelter consulted the victims of homelessness. To consult homeless people seems a straightforward proposal. I should be grateful if the Minister explained to the House why he has not felt able to include such a provision in the Bill thus far.

Amendment No. 15 deals with local authorities consulting specialist organisations that represent people who have physical and mental disabilities. As chairman of the Conservative disability group, I spoke with some concern in Committee. I think that what we are trying to achieve fits in neatly with what the Government are trying to achieve and with the spirit of the Bill. I cannot see why such a provision has not been included.

Statistics show that more than 40 per cent. of homeless people, including rough sleepers, are over the age of 50. They are therefore much more vulnerable to the mental and physical effects of poor accommodation or rough sleeping and have a higher proportion of physical or mental disabilities. They have less easy access to mainstream advice services.

In terms of physical accommodation, it is straightforward stuff—wheelchair and door access, ramps and rails. People in wheelchairs should not be put in flats on the fifth or 15th floor of a tower block, making them prisoners in their own home. We have all seen people at our surgeries who have been offered wholly inadequate accommodation.

It is also a question of the area in which physically disabled people are housed. They need accommodation where an eye can be kept on them—where sympathetic neighbours, be they wardens or others, will look out for them or provide them with companions.

When people with mental disabilities are able to go back into the community, where they are placed and whom they live next to are very important. Families with young children will be less understanding and sympathetic to their situation. Organisations such as Mencap raise the problems of the resettlement of people with learning disabilities who remain in long-stay hospitals due to the absence of suitable accommodation for them when they come out—another form of bed blocking, effectively.

The Local Government Association report, "No Place Like Home", made certain proposals. It stated:

> "Social services and, where relevant, health authorities should be involved in the allocation plan for households deemed to be in particular need of settled accommodation on medical or welfare grounds in order to ensure that the need for support is both assessed and provided as part of the allocation process . . . Housing, social services and health authorities should jointly agree hospital discharge planning arrangements . . . Local housing authorities should maintain a register of wheelchair adapted properties in the council and housing association stock and, where feasible, in the private sector."

So on, and so forth. We agree with those proposals.

In Committee, we were given undertakings that argument A, which was cited by the hon. Member for Bath right at the beginning of the Committee proceedings, would not be trotted out as the all-encompassing excuse for not including measures such as those proposed in the new clause and amendments in the Bill. Argument A is essentially that if we mentioned certain groups of people, we would have to mention everyone—but we are talking not about a small special interest group, but about a large proportion of the population.

According to DSS figures, up to 8.5 million people have disabilities of varying severity. That is one in five adults. Even if we think that that is too broad a qualification, we should remember that there are 700,000 wheelchair users in England and Wales alone. That is 700,000 people for whom special accommodation must be provided. If it is not, they will have varying degrees of problem in gaining access to and egress from the homes allocated to them.

Why the Minister cannot concede on reinforcing the necessity to have regard to people who are specialists in dealing with people who have mental and physical disabilities, I do not know. We do not want to place enormous restraints on housing providers; nor are we asking for an enormous amount of extra resources. All we are asking for is that the Bill should state that regard must be had to the particular needs of a large part of the population—possibly the largest special interest in the population.

During our consideration of people with mental disabilities, the Minister quoted the Housing Act 1996. That Act was panned by the then Labour Opposition when it was introduced. It was remarkable how much of it the Minister was able to cite as the reason why our amendments should not be accepted. He said that our points were already adequately covered by the 1996 Act. The Minister said that mental illness was a priority category under the 1996 Act. We are talking about delivering strategies on including physically and mentally disabled people—not just acknowledging as a priority that they exist.

Our amendments are straightforward and not contentious. We mostly agree with the thrust of what the Bill is trying to achieve. However, we cannot see why the Minister, despite the warm words that he trotted out in Committee, has not felt able to stipulate in the Bill first, that the victims of homelessness should be consulted, and secondly—and perhaps more important—that local authorities should have greater regard to disabled people of various descriptions in formulating their homelessness strategies. On that basis, I commend the amendments to the House.

Mr. Simon Hughes: My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) was kind enough to refer to the amendment in my name. I should be grateful to know whether the Government support the view that local authorities should be required to meet housing need before housing demand. I shall give an example that prompts my concern.

Local authorities own land. There is often pressure on them to sell it to realise the value of the land. Land is often needed for social housing, whether it is owned by the council or by a registered social landlord. I often get the impression that the Government are putting pressure on local government to get rid of housing and land. The result is that housing for those who need it, which does not bring the dowry that housing built by developers might bring, is squeezed out because land is developed for houses for those who may love them, but do not need them. Second and third homes should never be a priority when housing need remains unmet. When about 14,000 people are on the waiting list, as they are in Southwark, we should not be developing land in the borough for second or third homes.

I have a question about the perfectly acceptable Conservative amendment No. 18. Under the Bill, or under the amended Bill if the amendment is accepted, will local authorities have to take into account the circumstances of people who, because they are single adults or are not rough sleepers, are not priority homeless? I offer two examples of people in my constituency who have fallen through the net in the past three months. The first was a young, single woman, aged 21, who was sleeping in a car. She was training as a nursery nurse. She did not have housing priority as a homeless person. As she could find nowhere to live, her training was at risk; training and undertaking placements when one has to sleep in a car every night are hardly an easy life style. During the wet and cold winter period, she was extremely vulnerable.

5.45 pm

The second case involved a young man, aged 19, who was also sleeping in a car, in Camberwell. He was holding down a cleaning job for four hours a day—his first job. He was unable to live in his home with his mother and her new partner because the partner would not accept him. He was unable to stay at his girlfriend's home because he had once committed self-harm there—a suicide attempt, or a call for help. Understandably, the family were nervous about that and told their daughter, "No, you can't have your boyfriend here".

Neither of those people had priority for local authority housing, nor did they qualify under the rough sleepers initiative, because they were not unemployed and had not been rough sleepers for six months. We must ensure that we do not leave that category of people in such a predicament.

When I went back to the local authority, it accepted, to its credit, that the case of the young man was a priority. As someone whose father and uncle had committed suicide and who had himself attempted self-harm, he should have been categorised as vulnerable and thus given priority need status. Thankfully, he has now been awarded that status—at my request—and has been given accommodation while his needs are assessed properly.

Sometimes, however, going through those hoops for six months, three months—even one month—might be too much for such people. Both those people were in dire circumstances. My colleague in my constituency office, who daily copes with such cases—as do the constituency staff of many parliamentary colleagues—will testify to the acute urgency of ensuring that people in such desperate circumstances are not left homeless, because of the great risk of suicide and other problems.

Ms Glenda Jackson: I declare an interest inasmuch as I am the adviser on homelessness in the cabinet of the London Mayor—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ooh!"]

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) describes his amendments as uncontentious. As he is a member of a party that, in government, was almost singlehandedly responsible for the huge explosion in the number of rough sleepers on the streets of London and for the large number, within that group, of people with serious mental health problems, and as that party constantly turned its face away from creating any rights for people with disabilities, I find much of his argument unbelievable. I am delighted that perhaps he is beginning to acknowledge that those matters warrant everyone's consideration. As in so many matters that have to do with compassion, the Conservatives are late to the party, but if they have arrived, that is good.

Mr. Loughton: The hon. Lady can be forgiven as she was not a member of the Standing Committee, but perhaps she will acknowledge the figures that were eventually accepted by Ministers. Between 1991 and 1996, under the Conservative Government's rough sleepers initiative, the number of rough sleepers in central London alone fell from more than 1,000 to 286. Does she agree with those figures? If so, her argument is completely bogus.

Ms Jackson: I did not serve on the Committee, but I have read all the *Hansard* reports of its proceedings, and it seems to me that what was essentially wrong with the previous Conservative Government still characterises the Conservatives' approach. They still get bogged down in putting their faith in figures that, in the main, compare unlike with unlike, which the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) were so keen to do. No, I do not accept the reading of the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham of the policies that the Conservative Government instituted to try to tackle the problem that they had created—too little, too late and, in my view, grudgingly.

I am astonished by the hon. Gentlemen's grudging response to what the present Government have done, and especially to the work of the rough sleepers initiative. If they are worried about this issue, they should offer firm thanks to Louise Casey and that initiative, who are on target to reduce rough sleeping in the capital by two thirds by the date that they have set.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham argues that the additional funding that the Government have given should be returned to local authorities when the RSI winds up in 2002. That would simply increase the burdens of rough sleeping that are borne, in the main, by only four boroughs in this city. We should consider ways to prevent, not encourage, rough sleeping.

I heard the story about the two constituents of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) who had to sleep in their cars. I was

[Ms Jackson]

surprised that the first example that he cited was not immediately recognised by his local authority as requiring prioritisation on the grounds of vulnerability.

I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that there are holes in the fabric. They result from the previous Government's failure to replace, or to allow local authorities to replace, housing stock that had been lost, and their failure to allow local authorities to enter into partnerships or even to repair and maintain their existing stock. We have too few affordable properties in this city. In the medium and long term, steps must be taken, but there is also a need in the short term.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey does not need my advice, but he might be interested to know that organisations that have received contracts from the rough sleepers initiative tell me that an increasing number of young people who are coming into the centre of London—thank God, no longer from other parts of the United Kingdom, but certainly from the outer London boroughs—are under the misapprehension that if they take up rough sleeping they will be prioritised for housing. We must make it abundantly clear that that is not, nor will it be, the case. The purpose of the rough sleepers initiative was, rightly, to prioritise the most vulnerable of those who are on our streets. The initiative is working effectively and well, and that is the strong view of the majority of those long-established charities that have worked in the area for many years.

However, in London at least, there will have to be an integrated policy that takes account of the fact that, in many instances, rough sleeping by people who are particularly vulnerable, either as a result of mental illness or physical disability, is not a problem exclusively of bricks and mortar. It is also a problem of maintaining people when they eventually achieve a form of permanent housing.

In my constituency it is not unusual for a person who has been rough sleeping, and for whom one has eventually managed to find permanent housing, to run away when the first electricity or gas bill arrives, because they cannot yet take absolute control of their life. It is not unusual for those in the older category of rough sleeper especially—many of whom have been in the armed forces, so they have been used to camaraderie and a life in which the individual does not necessarily have to take day-to-day responsibility for living—to be overwhelmed, when they are in their own property, by the sheer loneliness. Someone said to me the other day, "You look at a wall at 4 o'clock in the morning and there is no one to talk to; I go back to the street."

For that reason, there is great need for a pan-London strategy, to ensure not only additional affordable housing but additional support. I am not arguing, and those organisations that already have excellent schemes in place would not argue, that the most vulnerable people must have someone living in their flat or bedsit 24 hours a day, to ensure that they know how to turn the gas off and the light on, pay the bills and wash themselves. I am arguing that there are schemes that work well and that, as has been said at other stages of the Bill's progress, it is important that central and local government start to disseminate across a much wider field examples of best practice so that we do not go through the pointless, time-wasting and expensive process of reinventing the wheel. Equally, to return to the point that I made in response to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, I am arguing that to disburse the additional funding that the Government have put into the rough sleepers initiative among, in the main, the four local authorities that carry the largest rough sleeping burdens is not the way that we can most actively and cohesively prevent people from returning to our streets.

In response to the point made by the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), I do believe that there will be difficulties for local authorities, because in some there will be an element of nimbyism. They may not necessarily want people who have been rough sleepers, who may be recovered alcoholics or recovered drug users, in their locality but, speaking exclusively from the perspective of a London Member of Parliament, we simply must ensure that there is a cohesive, integrated strategy that ensures that we never again have people with nowhere to rest their head other than a shop doorway, and that those who are mentally ill are properly supported: a long-term strategy that ensures that we create truly integrated communities where local authorities, registered social landlords and anyone and everyone that we can attract into this field will provide the housing that, at least in London, we desperately need.

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Our proposals for homelessness reform require local authorities to take a more strategic approach to tackling and preventing homelessness. Such a strategic approach will be effective only if it harnesses the efforts and activities of all the organisations operating in each authority's area that provide services and assistance to homeless people.

We have made it clear that a partnership approach is central to our proposals. We require local housing authorities to take a multi-agency strategic approach to preventing and responding to homelessness. There is a logical corollary: other agencies, statutory, voluntary and private, will have to play their part, and the voluntary sector includes registered social landlords.

Registered social landlords will be central to the development and implementation of homelessness strategies. In some areas, they provide the majority of social housing, and the transfer programme is increasing their importance in delivering services to tenants and in supporting local authorities in the performance of their statutory duties.

The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) quoted what my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning said in Committee, but he quoted him on a different point. Registered social landlords are subject to the Housing Corporation. If registered social landlords do not co-operate with the strategies drawn up by local authorities, the Housing Corporation can ensure that they do.

New clauses 2 and 3 seek to strengthen the statutory duties on registered social landlords to co-operate with local authorities in offering accommodation to people with priority under the authorities' allocation scheme, and to assist authorities in the discharge of their homelessness duties by depriving them of their discretion to consider what is reasonable in the circumstances. We have covered that ground pretty thoroughly now and in Committee. Registered social landlords are already under a duty to co-operate with local authorities to such an extent as is reasonable. That allows some discretion, but the provision is given teeth by the sector's regulator—the Housing Corporation.

6 pm

In guidance and through its policies on investment, the corporation can influence and provide incentives to associations to ensure that they work constructively with authorities. The corporation is reviewing its guidance and will ensure that local authorities' strategic roles are highlighted and that registered social landlords should endeavour to help authorities to deliver that role.

Registered social landlords serve an important social purpose, but they are independent, voluntary bodies even if regulated and monitored under statute. I do not believe it appropriate, or necessary, to prevent them from exercising their discretion in relation to their statutory duties. It is essential that we respect their independence, but we certainly will look to them fully to support local housing authorities in the development and implementation of homelessness reviews and strategies, and the Housing Corporation will strengthen its guidance in that respect.

It is odd that those hon. Members who generally welcome the greater freedoms that we are giving to local authorities in carrying out their functions are seeking to place stronger statutory duties on registered social landlords. There is real value in the sector's independence and diversity. That has come about not by Government diktat, but by steady evolution, with associations informing and voluntarily supporting and contributing to the social housing agenda. Independence allows self-motivation, greater innovation and a vision that goes beyond statutory duties. In seeking to limit that vision, the hon. Member for Bath risks losing much of what is best in the sector. I believe that new clauses 2 and 3 would do more harm than good, so I ask him to withdraw the motion.

Mr. Don Foster: I apologise to the Under-Secretary for not joining the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) in congratulating him on his first outing at the Dispatch Box, but many of us in Committee had the opportunity to congratulate him on his promotion. Having said that, I found this outing rather disappointing, because he claims that, under new clause 2, some of the freedom and flexibility of registered social landlords would be removed, which would be appalling, and that we should respect the sector's diversity and flexibility. However, at the same time, he categorically told me that I need not worry because, in fact, all registered social landlords were under the control and dominion of the Housing Corporation.

The Under-Secretary admitted that such landlords were regulated by statute and that they have statutory duties, but he now tells us not only that the Housing Corporation will issue new guidance but that there will be strengthened guidance. I want to provide a mechanism to strengthen the relationship between local authorities and registered social landlords. However, having told me that I could not do that, he now describes an alternative by which that will be done. Of course, in doing so, he generously answered—so avoiding my having to do so—the question about who would have control over such issues, asked by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). The answer is that those who hold the purse strings control the issues. Given that the Under-Secretary has given that response, I intend to withdraw the motion.

Mr. Ainsworth: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I confused him; I certainly did not mean to do so. I thought that he wanted to intervene, so I gave way to him. Although I am new to the Dispatch Box, I hope that I never fall into the habit of making such long interventions.

Mr. Foster *rose—*

Mr. Ainsworth: Does the hon. Gentleman want to intervene, or does he want to make a speech?

Mr. Foster: I am most grateful to the Under-Secretary for giving way now. I assumed, by the way in which he ended his previous remarks, that he had finished his speech and was seeking to persuade me to withdraw the motion.

Mr. Ainsworth: It is not at like the hon. Gentleman to be so self-centred; he should realise that the group contains other amendments, which have been tabled by other hon. Members.

Amendment No. 57 is misconceived. It would set up false alternatives and suggests that meeting need is not compatible with meeting demand. However, meeting need does not preclude promoting choice. For example, facilitating transfers within an authority's stock does not increase demand for social housing, but it does increase choice. Offering choice to homeless applicants is not incompatible with meeting need—they can occur together. The Bill will establish a robust framework for prioritising claims on social housing. It will allow need to be met and choice to be promoted.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) cited a couple of examples from his constituency. He will be aware that we are extending the priority categories to cover all 16 and 17-year-olds and all 18 and 19-year-olds leaving care. I should have thought that those categories, as well as a properly used definition of vulnerability, could cover those examples in a reasonable, caring and thorough local authority and that such people should be considered in those priority categories.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the Under-Secretary give way?

Mr. Ainsworth: At least the hon. Gentleman makes it clear that he wishes to intervene.

Mr. Hughes: On the Under-Secretary's response to amendment No. 57, in the Government's view, should local authorities meet need before demand?

Mr. Ainsworth: As I have said, we do not see a contrast. Local authorities must not only meet need, but provide choice. That is the core purpose of our proposals. We do not believe that there is a conflict between those matters.

Under amendments Nos. 18, 15 and 19, we need, yet again, to consider what should, and should not, be included in the Bill. We expect local authorities to seek the views of tenants, residents and those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including rough sleepers. Their views will be central in informing, from a consumer perspective, the homelessness reviews and in helping to draw up the strategies. We expect local government to engage people in the area, to work in partnership and to

[Mr. Ainsworth]

be customer focused, but such matters need not be stated in the Bill. Homelessness includes rough sleeping, so adding rough sleeping, as suggested under amendment No. 18, would be meaningless. There is no need to imply, by including one group, that its needs were necessarily more pressing than another's.

I share hon. Members' concern about the welfare of those with mental health needs, but we shall ensure that such needs are carefully addressed in the code of guidance. I repeat that, no matter what problem a group faces, or how large the group may be, it is not necessary to state every detail in the Bill. Indeed, that is not always desirable, as we have discussed elsewhere.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) refers to the fact that such people are not mentioned in the Bill, but the Housing Act 1996 states that they are exactly the people who need to be looked after. Section 189(1)(c) of the Housing Act 1996 defines exactly the categories of people that he wanted to include in the Bill. The issues are covered, and I hope that he will accept that assurance.

Mr. Loughton: The Minister appeared to be perorating, but I wish to intervene on his reference to section 189(1)(c) of the 1996 Act. That section refers to identifying people in priority need, but it has nothing to do with consulting specialist groups that represent people with mental and physical disabilities on the best strategy for dealing with them. As I pointed out in Committee, they are two entirely different issues, so my point is not covered by referring to a section in the 1996 Act.

Mr. Ainsworth: In drawing up their strategies, local authorities will be obliged to consult groups representing those with priority needs. As the hon. Gentleman can see, the groups are identified in section 189(1)(c). As he rightly said, we are back to what was known in Committee as argument A. If we include one group in the Bill, that might relegate the priority given to every other group. That might be an unforseen consequence of including one group without making the broader provision that is needed.

Mr. Bercow: In the context of amendment No. 18, and assuming the veracity of the Minister's words about local discretion, how can he seriously suggest that the inclusion of the words "including rough sleeping" would either circumscribe that discretion or, still less, prove justiciable?

Mr. Ainsworth: Homelessness is covered and rough sleeping is a part of homelessness. To mention it separately in the Bill would be superfluous and would achieve absolutely nothing. On that basis, I hope that that amendment will not be pressed.

Ms Glenda Jackson: There is an obsession with the phrase "rough sleeping", although I accept it gives rise to real needs. Many rough sleepers have multiple needs, and one could argue that they could be covered by every single category that one might care to name. However, the bottom line is that they are homeless.

Mr. Ainsworth: My hon. Friend makes the point perfectly. Rough sleepers are already covered within the category of homelessness. As I said, to include them separately in the Bill would be superfluous and would achieve nothing.

Mr. Don Foster: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 4

DUTY TO PERSONS WITH PRIORITY NEED WHO ARE NOT HOMELESS INTENTIONALLY

'.—( ) In section 193 of the 1996 Act (duty to persons with priority need who are not homeless intentionally) after subsection (7) there is inserted—

"(7A) an offer of accommodation under Part VI is a final offer for the purposes of subsection (7) if it is made in writing, states that is a final offer for the purposes of subsection (7) and states that the offer shall remain available to the applicant for not less than three working days from the date of the offer, or such longer period as the authority consider reasonable in all the circumstances.".'.—*[Mr. Don Foster.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Don Foster: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: New clause 5—*Right of review of eligibility for allocation of housing accommodation—*

'.—( ) If a local housing authority decides that an applicant for housing accommodation is ineligible by virtue of subsection (3) and (5) of section 160A for an allocation by them, they shall inform him of his right to request a review of the decision and of the time within which such a request must be made.'.

New clause 6—*Interim duty to accommodate in case of apparent priority need—*

'( ).—Section 188 (interim duty to accommodate in case of an apparent priority need) of the 1996 Act is amended as follows.

(3) After subsection (3) for the words "The authority may continue to secure that accommodation is available for the applicant's occupation pending a decision on a review" there is substituted—

"The authority shall, if the applicant requests a review of the decision, consider whether to continue to secure that accommodation is available for the applicant pending a decision on a review, and shall take into account all the circumstances and in particular—

(a) any new information provided by the applicant since the authority's decision was notified to him;

(b) whether a decision not to continue to secure that accommodation is available for his occupation will substantially affect his ability to pursue his request for a review;

(c) the merits of the request for a review, as they appear to the authority at the time the request is made.".'.

New clause 7—*Right of appeal to county court on point of law*—

'.(1) Section 204 of the 1996 Act (right of appeal to county court on point of law) is amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (2), after the words "decision on review" there is inserted "or such longer period as the authority and the applicant may agree or as the court may allow.".

(3) For subsection (4) there is substituted—

"(4) where the authority were under a duty under section 188, 190 or 200 to secure that accommodation is available for the applicant's occupation, they shall consider whether to continue to secure that accommodation is so available—

(a) during the period for appealing under this section against the authority's decision, and

(b) if an appeal is brought, until the appeal (and any further appeal) is finally determined

and they shall take into account all the circumstances and in particular—

(a) any new information provided by the applicant since the authority's decision was notified to him;

(b) whether a decision not to continue to secure that accommodation is available for his occupation will substantially affect his ability to pursue his request for a review;

(c) the merits of the request for a review, as they appear to the authority at the time the request is made.".

(4) After subsection (4) there is inserted—

"(5) A county court may, in any case where an applicant appeals under this section, require the authority to continue to secure that accommodation is available until the appeal (and any further appeal) is determined.".'.

New clause 10—*Guidance by the Secretary of State*—

'.—( ) In section 169 of the 1996 Act (guidance by the Secretary of State) after subsection (2) there is inserted—

"(3) Without prejudice to subsection (2) of this section, a local housing authority or social services authority shall exercise their functions relating to the allocation of housing accommodation in accordance with such directions as may be given to them under this section by the Secretary of State.

(4) Directions under this section—

(a) shall be given in writing; and

(b) may be given to a particular authority, or to authorities of a particular class, or to authorities generally.".'.

New clause 11—*Guidance by the Secretary of State (No. 2)*—

'.—( ) In section 182 of the 1996 Act (guidance by the Secretary of State) after subsection (2) there is inserted—

"(3) Without prejudice to subsection (1) of this section, a local housing authority or social services authority shall exercise their functions relating to homelessness and the prevention of homelessness in accordance with such directions as may be given to them under this section by the Secretary of State.

(4) Directions under this section—

(a) shall be given in writing; and

(b) may be given to a particular authority, or to authorities of a particular class, or to authorities generally.".'.

New clause 12—*Provision of advice and assistance*—

'( ).—(1) The Secretary of State may by order specify matters to be taken into account in providing (or securing the provision of) advice and assistance under sections 190(2)(b) and (3), 192(2) and 195(5) of the 1996 Act, and make provision as to the procedure to be followed in the provision of that advice and assistance.

(2) Before making such an order the Secretary of State shall consult with such associations representing relevant authorities, and other persons as he considers appropriate.

(3) No such order shall be made unless a draft of it has been approved by resolution of each House of Parliament.'

New clause 17—*Persons with priority need*—

'.—( ) In section 193 of the 1996 Act (entry to persons with priority need who are not homeless intentionally) after subsection (7) there is inserted—

"(7A) An offer of accommodation under Part VI is a first offer for the purposes of subsection (7) if made in writing, states that it is a first offer for the purposes of subsection (7) and states that the offer shall remain available for five working days from the date of the offer or such longer period if the authority consider reasonable and shall include an opportunity for the person receiving the offer and an independent adviser to inspect the property.".'.

New clause 18—*Independent review*—

'.—( ) If a local housing authority decides that an applicant for housing accommodation is ineligible by virtue of subsections (3) and (5) of section 160A for an allocation by them, they shall inform him of his right to request and receive an independent review of the decision and of the time within which such a request must be made.'.

Amendment No. 52, in clause 20, page 12, line 31, at end insert—

'(6A) People unable to stay in or who are obliged to leave the previous home owned or rented solely or jointly by them and where after relationship breakdown it is agreed that they are the partner to leave the home and the other partner will continue to live in the home are not to be held intentionally homeless.'.

Government amendment No. 47.

Amendment No. 16, in clause 27, page 17, line 24, at end insert—

'to include particularly families with dependent children'.

Amendment No. 60, in page 17, line 24, at end insert—

'in particular, to provide for those who need to be allocated new accommodation, whether or not they have previously been local authority tenants, either on the grounds that they are at risk for their mental or physical safety or that their rehousing is a precondition of them being able to give evidence in criminal proceedings.'.

Amendment No. 53, in page 17, line 24, at end insert—

'( ) It shall be the duty of the local housing authority to provide or secure accommodation for people who need it for their personal protection within 28 days of a request by the police for such accommodation to be provided.'.

Amendment No. 21, in page 17, leave out lines 25 to 40 and insert—

'(2A) A local housing authority may defer an allocation of housing accommodation to a person falling within section 160A(2) of this Act where they have reasonable grounds to believe that—

(a) an allocation of housing accommodation to that person would cause significant hardship to other persons;

(b) if allocated housing accommodation, a person would fail to comply with his obligations as a tenant, having regard to resources and services which may be available to that person in the authority's district (whether available from the authority or otherwise);

(2B) An allocation of housing accommodation shall not be deferred in accordance with subsection (2A) above where to do so would be unreasonable having regard to all the circumstances and to the need of the person for an allocation.'.

Amendment No. 17, in page 17, line 34, at end insert—

'( ) any record of behaviour of a person (or a member of his household) which has affected the terms of a previous tenancy he has held.'.

Amendment No. 55, in page 17, line 34, at end insert—

'(d) the length of time people have been occupying insanitary or overcrowded housing, or otherwise living in unsatisfactory conditions, or that they have needed to move on medical or welfare grounds, or who need to move to another locality.'.

[Mrs. Sylvia Heal]

Amendment No. 20, in page 18, line 12, at end insert—

'(2G) The authority shall be able to suspend subsection (3) where it can reasonably show that to operate its term would have a detrimental effect on the provision of local housing needs.'.

Mr. Foster: The time that it took you to read out the items to be debated, Madam Deputy Speaker, shows just what a long and complex group of amendments and new clauses this is on the subject of housing applications and allocations.

The group covers three themes. First, some of the amendments and new clauses seek to ensure that the law is applied in practice, and in ways that meet policy intentions. Secondly, others seek to apply minimum standards to ensure that bad practice improves, and that there is more consistency, where appropriate, between local authorities. Thirdly, others seek to achieve a proper balance between local authority discretion and meeting housing need.

6.15 pm

Some of the new clauses and amendments are in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), but others have been tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). I shall draw the House's attention to some of the issues raised by my hon. Friend's amendments that were not discussed in Committee.

For example, amendment No. 52 deals with the level of support that should be given when a relationship breaks down and one party is left without accommodation. Equally, amendments Nos. 60 and 53 raise the important issue of the level of support that should be given to people whom the police believe need protection because they have reason to fear violence to their person. No doubt my hon. Friend will air those issues should he catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker.

New clauses 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11 and 12 were tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington and myself. New clause 4 deals with the minimum time that a homeless person should be given to consider the final offer of accommodation made by a local authority. The issue was debated in Committee, and I pointed out that a homeless person, when presented with a final offer, needs time to consider the offer and to take into account the implications of accepting it for working arrangements, and the effect on the arrangements for his children's education. He also needs to be given time to find out whether the local authority is prepared to carry out any repairs to the property that might be required.

During our deliberations, the Minister for Housing and Planning and the Under-Secretary suggested that they would not accept such an amendment. However, the Committee clearly took the view that the practice of many local authorities, which allows only 24 hours for a homeless person to make a decision, was unacceptable. We referred to several authorities, including my own, that operate such a 24-hour policy. The Under-Secretary described it as unreasonable and said:

"in the overwhelming majority of cases, three days is too short a period in which to expect a person to decide on a final offer."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee D*, 30 January 2001; c. 356.]

His argument was that if three days appeared in the Bill as a minimum period, it would in many cases become the maximum.

I do not accept that argument. Many of us might prefer a longer period, and in new clause 17, my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey suggests a minimum period of five days. That suggestion is attractive. However, a minimum of three days, provided that it is backed up with strong guidance making it clear that it is a minimum, will at the very least ensure that the practice of allowing only 24 hours, which is currently followed by far too many authorities, is outlawed.

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman has drawn attention to an amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey. He said that it proposed a period of five days, but did not explain why that relates to the first, not the final offer. Why do Liberal Democrats believe that five days should be allowed for a first offer but only three days for a final offer? Can the hon. Gentleman explain that curious logic?

Mr. Foster: That is a matter for my hon. Friend. Indeed, we look forward to his explanation. However, it will not have escaped hon. Members' attention that all too often, the first offer and the final offer are the same. Too many local authorities do not provide homeless people with the range of choice that the Minister would like. Perhaps my hon. Friend will make that point when he replies to the Minister's question.

New clause 5 deals with the right of review. I place on record our gratitude to the Minister for agreeing, under pressure from Liberal Democrat Members, to include a review period in the Bill. We have tabled new clause 5 to clarify the Minister's exact intentions for the review. In the original measure, people's eligibility for housing assistance and the priority that they would receive were not subject to review. It provided for the local authority to decide; there was no review period to deal with cases in which someone did not agree with the decision and did not believe that the correct information had been used to make it. The Government have now acceded to our request for a review.

Did the Minister mean what he said in Committee when I asked whether the review period covered eligibility? He replied:

"The right of review provided by the amendment will extend to such a decision, which will have to be the first decision that an authority makes in the process of deciding whether to allocate accommodation to an individual applicant."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee D*, 1 February 2001; c. 419.]

I took that at face value. I hope that I am right, and that it means that the review process covers eligibility.

Decisions about eligibility are made under clause 25 whereas the right of review has been included in clause 27, which covers priority. I hope that the Minister will make it clear that the same opportunity exists for reviewing eligibility as for ascertaining the priority of an eligible homeless person. Such a clear statement would persuade me not to press new clause 5, at least.

New clause 6 deals with another issue that we discussed briefly. What happens to homeless people during the review period? Will the local authority ensure that they are given accommodation? Section 188 of the 1996 Act provides that local authorities have the power, but not a

duty, to provide accommodation for a person who is undergoing a review. In most cases, the power is not exercised. When I raised that in Committee, the Minister said that requiring local authorities to provide such accommodation in all circumstances would place too great a burden on them. I hope that he has noted that I have taken his anxieties about my earlier formulation into account in new clause 6, which would place a less stringent duty on local authorities. It would require them at least to consider whether to accommodate the individual who is undergoing a review. Given that significant watering down, I hope that the Minister will support the new clause.

New clause 7 relates to a review or an appeal in a county court. It deals with the length of time that should be allowed before an appeal is made to a county court, accommodation during the appeal and the period for the appeal. Under the 1996 Act, those who are dissatisfied with a decision about support from a local authority can take the matter to a county court, but must make the appeal within 21 days. I do not intend to repeat the lengthy debate that we had in Committee, but there are good reasons why a 21-day period may not be long enough for a person to assemble the details that are required for an appeal to be heard, let alone to succeed.

Mr. Bercow: Notwithstanding the brickbat that I received from my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) for my tribute to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), I genuinely enjoy his advocacy of the argument. However, given the preponderance of cases in which local authorities choose not to provide accommodation pending the outcome of an appeal, what assessment has he made, in his constituency or more widely, of the financial and logistical burden that falls on others?

Mr. Foster: Thereby hangs an interesting tale. It is difficult to make such a calculation because current arrangements, whereby local authorities often do not even provide accommodation for the period of the review, let alone for the time required to develop an appeal, mean that many people cannot prepare for a review or an appeal because they have to worry about the more urgent matter of trying to get a roof over their heads.

Research shows that few appeals have taken place. It would be difficult in current circumstances to assess the increase in the number of appeals and thus in the cost. I regret that I cannot help the hon. Gentleman. However, he knows that there will be hundreds of appeals throughout the country. If accommodation is to be provided for a few weeks in each case, he can calculate the approximate magnitude of the figure. He has made an interesting point, which shows that a 21-day time limit can put people off.

The Minister was worried about over-prescription. He will note that new clause 7 shows much greater flexibility than a previous amendment that I tabled. Under current legislation, it is not possible to extend the period beyond 21 days even if both parties want to do that. At least new clause 7 provides for an extension with the agreement of both sides. It also deals more flexibly with providing accommodation during the appeal period.

6.30 pm

As for new clauses 10 and 11, I suspect that the Minister has been honing his quotes to demonstrate how my hon. Friends and I frequently stress the importance of giving freedom to local government. No doubt he has a third quote up his sleeve. He will say that the problem with the new clauses is that Liberal Democrats want to impose things on local government, which is contrary to what we say on other occasions.

The new clauses would give the Secretary of State the power to issue directions to housing and social services departments to ensure that there is an adequate level of service, and consistency in key areas of practice. New clause 10 would apply to the allocation of social housing by an authority under part VI of the 1996 Act, and new clause 11 would apply to a local authority's homelessness functions under part VII.

During our deliberations in Committee, the Minister referred frequently to the crucial importance that he attached to the guidance that will be issued by the Department. Yet he will acknowledge that where the law is incredibly complex, as it is concerning homelessness and allocations, guidance is a vital instrument for implementing policy intentions. Unless there is direction on some of the specific issues contained in the Bill, there is a real danger that some authorities will ignore the guidance. In some authorities, therefore, the quality of provision would be well below a minimum acceptable standard.

Before the Minister tries to jump down my throat to tell me that it is wrong to issue directions and guidance to local authorities, I ask him to be careful. Were he to say such a thing, I would remind him of occasions when the Government have done just that, not least with social service departments. Were he to challenge me, I would say that often such directions are given to social service departments without any additional resources being provided to enable them to carry out the functions demanded of them.

Finally—the House will no doubt be pleased to know—I shall talk about new clause 12, which deals with the importance of setting out a basic minimum set of standards in regulations, to ensure that the provision of advice and guidance to certain groups of homeless people by a local authority is acceptable. That is a key issue.

In Committee, the Minister was more than willing to accept that the level and quality of advice and guidance offered by local authorities varies enormously. He acknowledged that the research findings in reports undertaken for the Department, and by organisations such as Shelter, have demonstrated that huge variability. I hope that, as it has been accepted that this should appear in the Bill as one of the duties of a local authority, he will also accept that it would be sensible specify minimum standards of service delivery.

I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the House, for having taken a fairly long time to introduce the new clauses. I am sure that you will be aware that there are many important issues involved. The House will be aware that there are more to come, and no doubt we shall be hearing about some of them from the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), should he catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Waterson: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) for dealing so fully—I might almost say exhaustively—with his various new clauses and amendments. I hope that he will forgive me if I do not express a view on every one of them—at least not in any detail.

Mr. Bercow: Go on.

Mr. Waterson: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) is eager to do just that.

I hope that the hon. Member for Bath has not been persuaded by any behind-the-scenes deal not to press new clause 4 to a vote. If he does press it, as I hope he will, we shall be supporting him. That is not because the new clause represents an earth-shattering change to the Bill. It is because, if we divide on it, my right hon. and hon. Friends and I will be able to register our support for those of our amendments that are included in this group. If we do not, they will fall, and will have to be voted on later under the programme motion, taking up time that might otherwise be used in debate.

Mr. Don Foster: I have always believed that our procedures mean that we listen to the debate before deciding whether to press a matter to a Division. However, having heard the Minister's response to similar amendments in Committee, I doubt whether I shall be persuaded to withdraw the new clause.

Mr. Waterson: Let us hope that the Liberal Democrats stick to that resolution. They will have our support in the Lobby if they do so.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): That is a back-room deal.

Mr. Waterson: It is a front-room deal. It could not be more open—though it has been said that the best way of keeping something secret is to make a speech on it in the House. I am sure that, even these days, that is untrue.

I will be speaking to amendments Nos 16, 17 and 20. Before doing so, I shall comment briefly on two of the more significant new clauses that the hon. Member for Bath has tabled. In Committee, when we debated the substance of new clause 4, I think everyone was horrified at the prospect that authorities were giving people 24 hours to make up their minds on a housing offer. The Minister took the view that that was unreasonable, and so did we. It is perhaps not untypical of the Liberal Democrats that they seem to be proposing two different periods, one of three days and one of five. We seem to be in period inflation. If the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) has the opportunity, I have no doubt that he will explain the merits of five days. I shall not trespass on that internal argument among Liberal Democrats.

Turning to new clause 5, people such as Chris Holmes, the director of Shelter, and the London Government Association have expressed their concerns about removing rights of review and rights of appeal. In Committee, we consistently supported the argument that these rights should be preserved in such circumstances. We said that the Government could be going too far in sweeping away the position that is set out in the Housing Act 1996.

It will be most useful if I touch on amendments Nos. 16, 17 and 20, which feature a range of concerns that we debated in Committee. It is right that we should return to those issues on Report because the Minister did not take them on board in Committee. I know that there are Members in the Chamber who were also members of the Committee and who may wish to speak on these matters.

Amendment No 16 to clause 27 would insert the words,

"to include particularly families with dependant children."

I know the argument that the Minister will advance. I can almost hear it now. He will say that we should not be too prescriptive in Bills, particularly when dealing with categories of people who are given priority. However, we felt strongly that messages should be sent out. In Committee, the debate on allocations and priorities, for example, was driven by a series of press leaks by the Department to the effect that released prisoners would be given some sort of priority in terms of homelessness.

Mr. Raynsford: Not true.

Mr. Waterson: The Minister made that clear in Committee; that is why there is not an amendment that touches directly on the matter. We are taking the Minister's assurances at face value, as is only right. We are pleased that there has clearly been a rethink on the issue within the Department, and that the Government have backed off, no doubt having received much critical comment. This matter has featured in the media on at least two occasions. I am happy to accept the Minister's assurance that that was nothing to do with him but, as the Government think they are good at the art of spinning, somebody obviously thought that it was worth spinning.

Mr. Raynsford: Will the hon. Gentleman accept, once again, my clear and categorical assurance that not only is there no intention to give prisoners a direct priority in housing allocation—a point I have made repeatedly—but there was no leak from the Department on the issue? If the hon. Gentleman thinks about it, he will probably recall that one bout of press speculation followed a press release that he himself put out making that unfounded allegation. When we are thinking about where press stories come from, Conservative central office is probably the answer.

Mr. Waterson: I do not think the Minister can get away with that. First, I have accepted his assurance, but if it makes him feel better, I will say again that I acknowledge that that is not now the Government's intention. Whether it ever was is perhaps academic. We certainly did not think the issue up; it featured in the media, which is why we commented on it. In fairness, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions said in a debate in the House that, if the matter was going to be spun, it was an odd thing for the Government to spin. Sometimes, though, as we have seen in recent weeks, spin doctors get out of control. In any event, we are delighted that, at this point, the proposition does not form part of the Government's proposals. Perhaps we can leave it at that.

We still think, as we did in Committee, that we should not move away from a principle set out in the Housing Act 1996. The Minister will say that this is an opportunity to simplify matters in the light of that Act, which we accept. Under the Act, authorities are required to produce allocation schemes that give "reasonable preference" to numerous categories, including families with dependent children. I say again that I see the argument for making some simplification. However, we take the view that if only one category is to be singled out, it should be families with dependent children. Parliament is entitled to send that sort of message.

I referred in Committee to the useful work of the Catholic Housing Aid Society. I shall not refer to it again in any detail, except to say that, among other things, it shows that, of all local authority acceptances of priority need, nearly 60 per cent. are households with dependent children. That chimes with my mailbag and surgery and is a perfectly legitimate issue which could be included in the Bill.

Amendment No. 17 raises the important issue of so-called neighbours from hell. There was near unanimity in Committee that perhaps the most difficult sort of issue in which we are asked to get involved as Members of Parliament concerns people who behave antisocially. It is often significantly easier to deal with the problem if such people are in social housing rather than in private housing. Having said that, we all face such problems in our constituencies. The Bill should send out a much clearer message that people should not and cannot behave antisocially.

Earlier, we talked about violence and the threat of violence, and the effect that that can have on neighbours. We are now talking about a range of activity from the mildly antisocial through to genuine violence, which encompasses people breaking windows or making a lot of noise and encouraging their children to be noisy and difficult with certain neighbours. Such activity may even involve repairing cars and motorcycles on the front lawn or hanging out washing in a certain area. All those things can make a difference to a neighbourhood and to people's neighbours. There are also problems of racial abuse and other issues, which we have already discussed in relation to a different group of amendments. Such activity is one of the biggest causes of unhappiness in many estates throughout the country.

6.45 pm

Schedule 2 of the Housing Act 1988 gives landlords grounds to evict people from shorthold tenancies. Section 162 of the 1996 Act gives local authorities the power to apply for injunctions against antisocial behaviour. The Government have introduced antisocial behaviour orders but, on any view, their use to date has been disappointing. I will not repeat the experience of the Irwell Valley housing association in Salford, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) dealt with it at length in Committee. The association's approach, which involves being tough with antisocial people and trying to reward those who behave as good neighbours, produces high levels of customer satisfaction and low levels of arrears, and so on.

The Committee also discussed a scheme by Wandsworth council—so often the trailblazer in these matters—for contracts between it and its tenants to cut down on criminal and immoral acts in council housing.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the difficulty that many local authorities face with the kind of tenancies that he described. There was considerable cross-party agreement on that in Committee. However, does he not accept that the wording of amendment No. 17 is rather woolly and open to interpretation?

Mr. Waterson: Like everything in this Bill or in any other piece of legislation, the amendment is subject to interpretation. We hope that local authorities will apply the measures reasonably. However, the point of the amendment is that we need to give them a steer so that they can—and should—take account of people's previous behaviour.

If people have a record of bad behaviour, rent arrears or whatever—we went into that in detail in Committee, as the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) will remember—that could and should be taken into account. That does not mean taking into account a criminal conviction such as a speeding fine, as some councils do. It means taking into account the fact that there are genuine grounds for concern that tenants who have behaved badly vis-à-vis their neighbours in the past may well do so again.

Mr. Bercow: It is right that my hon. Friend should focus, as the Committee did, on obviously antisocial and, in some cases, even criminal behaviour. In that context, will he take the opportunity to distinguish between behaviour which, we all agree, should be denounced and counteracted by public agencies—and, possibly, be the subject of police investigation—and cases of honest disagreement and dispute between neighbours? On the latter, would he not commend the important contribution to the resolution of those conflicts that can be made be mediation services, of which there is an excellent example in Aylesbury?

Mr. Waterson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. There is another excellent example in Eastbourne. We discussed in Committee—and I am sure that this will have wider resonance across the House—the problem of receiving one set of neighbours at one's advice surgery one week and then, to one's horror, seeing on one's list of appointments the next the people about whom they were complaining. I am sure that my hon. Friend shares my experience: we are seen as arbiters of these problems, which are extraordinarily difficult to resolve.

Mr. Bercow: They are invidious.

Mr. Waterson: Indeed. We should set aside the situation in which two perfectly respectable and responsible sets of neighbours, neither of whom are behaving criminally or particularly reprehensibly, simply do not get on with one another. Whatever they do, there will always be a dispute about something—whether an overhanging tree, an uncut lawn or a badly parked car. We all know of such cases—I certainly have experience of them—which have gone on for years, blighting the

[Mr. Waterson]

lives of both sets of neighbours and sometimes costing them an enormous amount in legal fees and causing other problems to no eventual purpose.

Finally, I wish to speak briefly to amendment No. 20 which, on the face of it, would provide a dramatic power for an authority effectively to suspend the operation of a certain provision when it can show that continuing to operate it would have a detrimental effect.

I explained in Committee, but perhaps I should do so again, that we have in mind the clear distinction that exists between authorities that have an excess of supply over demand in respect of social housing, and those where the opposite is the case. I understand that there are parts of the country, particularly but not exclusively in the north, where someone looking for a new flat or house will go to the local council and be shown two or three nice options that afternoon.

I discussed the situation in Eastbourne recently with Councillor Mrs. Ann Murray, who is the lead cabinet member for housing under the new and highly successful Conservative administration of Eastbourne borough council. The average wait in Eastbourne can be three to four years, which is phenomenal. When people contact me and come to my surgery, it is extremely depressing to write off to the housing department knowing that one will get a letter back stating that those people will have to wait three to four years.

The council hopes to reduce the waiting time to two to three years, which may not seem like a great leap forward, simply by changing the rules so that children can be put into council flats, which has not been allowed so far.

May I take the opportunity to remind the Minister that Eastbourne is one of the 90-odd authorities that have applied for the pilot scheme for choice-based allocations? As I recall, the arithmetic was rather depressing. It seemed that only about a third of those that had applied would be eligible for the scheme. None the less, it is an interesting concept. We had a longish discussion in Committee about the so-called Delft system. Closer to home, Harborough is ahead of the game, having undertaken a particular pilot scheme.

My only comment—and this is the point of our amendment—is that a choice-based system is all very well and up-to-the-minute and trendy, but how is it to operate in a place such as Eastbourne, where there is a vast excess of demand over supply? I can see that it would make a difference in some cases. That is why I am particularly keen that Eastbourne should be successful in becoming part of the pilot scheme and getting some of the dosh out of the Minister—we get precious little else in Eastbourne.

It will be fascinating to see how the scheme would work in such places. If I were the Minister trying to decide on a wholly dispassionate basis how to allocate the resources for the pilot schemes, I would consider Eastbourne a particularly good example of one end of the scale, where there is great demand and a thoroughly inadequate supply. I hope that the Minister will look warmly and encouragingly on the Eastbourne bid, although there is a more serious general issue at stake.

Mr. Don Foster: Will the hon. Gentleman encourage the Minister also to look favourably on the bid from Bath and North-East Somerset, where there is a much greater mixture of housing provision than I imagine is the case in Eastbourne?

Mr. Waterson: Before we get to that stage, I recommend that the hon. Gentleman's local council electors do what the voters of Eastbourne have done, and get rid of a thoroughly incompetent, inept Liberal Democrat administration. I shall not go further down that path, as you, Madam Deputy Speaker, probably would not allow me to do so. There are questions about how a choice-based system would work in areas such as Eastbourne. That is the point of the amendment.

I commend our three amendments to the House. As I explained, because of the quirks of our procedures, it is unlikely that we shall press those amendments to a Division. Hence my support—breaking the habit of a lifetime—for the Liberal Democrats' new clause 4.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I am grateful to be called, and I shall speak to the new clauses and amendments in my name.

However, I begin by observing that the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) started his speech by having a go at my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) for speaking for 20 minutes on seven new clauses. The clock shows that the hon. Member for Eastbourne spoke for 20 minutes on three amendments. We must take care not to be over-critical of colleagues doing their job.

On new clause 17, the Minister again sought to make mischief, but I shall disappoint him. Unless the Minister responds positively, I shall happily support new clause 4 moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath, and I am glad to hear that the Conservatives will do so too.

New clause 17 is entirely compatible with new clause 4, for three reasons. First, unfortunately—because of my own bad handwriting, I concede—the text as printed is not the same as the text as drafted. It should have read "final offer", not "first offer". We always speak of the final offer in this context, so I hope that the Minister will accept my explanation.

Secondly, new clause 4 refers to a minimum of three days for an offer to be considered. I suggest in new clause 17 that a period of five days should be set. That is not inconsistent. The important thing is that there should not be a 24 or 48-hour turnaround. People are often on a list for a long time, and the offer may come with no warning. They may be away, visiting family or on holiday, so they must be allowed a reasonable period within which to receive the offer and respond to it. That should be at least three days, potentially five days, and possibly longer, if the local authority considers that appropriate, after consultation with tenants.

In many cases, people receive only one offer. The Minister must know from his personal experience that it is entirely unfair to give them a ridiculously short time within which to accept it. I hope that he will be positive and accept the new clause moved by my hon. Friend.

The third specific point that I included in new clause 17—I had seen new clause 4 before I drafted it—allows people to inspect the premises with an independent adviser. It is no good expecting them to accept the offer without looking at the premises, or, if they are allowed to

go in, to be accompanied only by the housing officer, who will clearly be determined to tell them that the property is acceptable and that that is the only offer that they will get. People must be allowed to inspect the premises, to be accompanied by an independent adviser and then to judge whether the offer is reasonable.

That leads to new clause 18, which would require the local housing authority to inform applicants of their right to request a review, independently of the local authority, if they are told that they are ineligible for housing. One of the great causes of complaint is that people make an application, the local authority decides and that is the end of the matter.

I have tabled four amendments, all of which derive from issues regularly raised by people who come to my surgery and to others. It is often the case that people who experience a relationship breakdown in a home that they rent or, much more frequently, in a home that they own are told that they cannot be housed by the local authority and that they are intentionally homeless.

If, for example, people bought their home under the right-to-buy scheme and the marriage comes to an end, one partner will usually stay in the home. The other partner may leave, possibly with some finance. However, it may not be possible to raise any finance. The partner staying in the home cannot raise it, so there is no money available at that moment.

I ask Ministers to accept that, when the family home can no longer be the family home, the person who leaves should be able to look to the local authority for housing. Such people may or may not have children, but if they are parents, they may want the child or children to stay with them for a weekend, the school holidays or whatever, yet they find that they have nowhere to go. I hope that the Minister will respond positively to those amendments.

7 pm

Amendments Nos. 53, 55 and 60 relate to a later part of the Bill.

Mr. Love: I have listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman's comments on the new clauses and amendments that he has tabled separately from those of his Front-Bench colleagues. Given that there is no Liberal Democrat Whip available in the Chamber at the moment, will he answer the question that the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) passed over to him as to why he is tabling a separate set of amendments? Is this another example of Liberal Democrat anarchy?

Mr. Hughes: I knew that I should not have given way to what was clearly going to be a silly intervention.

People are entitled to table amendments from the Back Benches. Our Front-Bench colleagues do their job and all my hon. Friend's new clauses and amendments have my support. However, I represent more council tenants than any other Member of Parliament in England, including all the Labour Members, and I hope that the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) will accept that these issues are of huge interest to my constituents. I have t bled amendments, as the hon. Gentleman could have done, although I notice that he did not.

Mr. Don Foster: Is my hon. Friend aware that, in Committee, a number of amendments were tabled by Labour Back Benchers? That seems to be a perfectly appropriate way for all hon. Members to contribute to the debate.

Mr. Hughes: My hon. Friend must have been blessed in that Committee, because I have served on many Committees in which not a peep comes from Labour Back Benchers and they all happily toe the Government line.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right to make the point that it is legitimate for Back Benchers and Front Benchers to table amendments and new clauses. If the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) is unfamiliar with that basic constitutional fact after spending nearly four years in the House, it is about time he became aware of it.

Will the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) at least accept that, while there is a case for the three-day period and for the five-day period, it is stretching a point to say that they are not incompatible with each other? Will the hon. Gentleman, who is rather self-effacing, accept from me that his preference for a five-day period proves that, by comparison with his hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), he is simply more liberal?

Mr. Hughes: Those are judgments that must be made by others.

The Government have a policy that all the Opposition parties find unacceptable. The good thing is that they now have two alternative proposals that they could buy off the shelf. One contains a word that was misread, and the other has the endorsement of those on the Conservative Front Bench. The Minister has no excuse for saying that he has no choice, and I sincerely hope that he will buy one of our options. I seriously look forward to that happening.

The other amendments relate to serious matters, and have been referred to supportively by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath. Some people need personal protection, often urgently. I am trying, with the help of my local authority, to have someone in that predicament re-housed. Indeed, four families who are trying to get re-housed are on the books in my constituency office, having visited my surgery.

I would like it to be the law that, when the police say to a local authority that people must be moved for their own safety, and that their safety cannot be guaranteed where they are because there is a serious risk to their life, the local authority must have a duty to move them within 28 days. That should have an priority overriding other responsibilities. I know that such a proposal would have the support of the police, who get very frustrated in these circumstances, as do local authority officers trying to juggle all kinds of competing priorities.

Amendment No. 60 is linked to that proposal. The issue of people at risk from violence has been dealt with and we have received a positive response from the Minister. However, people whose mental or physical safety is at risk sometimes need to be moved. Those circumstances might involve threats rather than actual violence.

I am dealing with a case at the moment involving a serious assault that took place not far from the Elephant and Castle. The youngster who was seriously injured is not able or willing to give evidence if he still has to live in the area in which he was assaulted. That is perfectly

[Mr. Hughes]

reasonable. The family will not support him in giving evidence, and the police understand that. The Crown Prosecution Service's clock is ticking away, and it insists that there is a date by which it will have to decide whether it can proceed. The prosecution will not be able to proceed without the evidence of that individual. My proposal is that, if re-housing is a precondition of someone's being able to give evidence in criminal proceedings, he should be re-housed within the time limit required by the criminal justice system.

Amendment No. 55 relates to the circumstances in which councils have to juggle competing priorities—as they all struggle to do—and requires that they assess the length of time someone has been in a particular category of need, in their list of considerations. They would have to form their own view about that; I am not trying to dictate to them. For example, account should be taken of the length of time someone had been ill, suffering from the after-effects of a stroke, and therefore been unable to go up and down stairs, or of the length of time that a family of seven had occupied a one-bedroom flat.

The amendments relate to practical matters, and I hope that the Minister will give a positive response to all of them. I also hope that he will accept a new clause in the form of—or similar to—that tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I support the amendments and new clauses tabled by my hon. Friends the Members for Bath (Mr. Foster) and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), in so far as they are compatible.

I want to raise a specific point with the Minister, relating to agricultural tied cottages and the effect that the Bill will have on them. A couple came to see me in my constituency surgery in Wincanton last week—my constituency could not be further removed in character from that of my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey. Mr. Brice and Ms Parsons came to see me because they had been served notice to quit an agricultural tied cottage. Mr. Brice had previously been made redundant from his post at a farm.

The difficulty in the case is that the landlord is trying to introduce a market rent, having given notice to quit in the interim. The local authority would normally have a duty to re-house the couple as homeless, and there is some urgency about the situation because the lady in question is due to give birth within two weeks. However, they cannot be re-housed because the matter has to be reviewed by the agricultural dwelling homes advisory committee under the terms of the Rent (Agriculture) Act 1976. The notice to quit is not valid until that review has taken place.

That is a conundrum to which the Minister may not have an answer immediately and, if that is the case, I would be glad if he wrote to me on the matter. It seems perverse that a provision intended to give protection to tenants is, in this instance, doing precisely the reverse by preventing the local authority from doing what is clearly necessary—that is, re-housing a couple in need as priority cases because they are effectively homeless. I would be grateful if the Minister gave the matter his consideration.

Mr. Raynsford: We have had an interesting debate involving a considerable number of amendments and new clauses, and a number of speakers. I shall try to do justice to all of them in the shortest possible time that I can. However, I hope that the House will forgive me if I take a little time to deal with the large number of issues raised.

On the point raised by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), he will understand that I cannot comment on individual cases but I will look into the circumstances surrounding the issue and write to him.

New clauses 4 and 17—there are some interesting textual problems here—return to an issue discussed thoroughly in Committee. As I said then, I sympathise with the intention behind the amendment to ensure that people accepted as unintentionally homeless and who are temporarily accommodated by a local authority have a reasonable period in which to consider a final offer of an allocation under Part VI. That is important because by making it a final offer the authority will have in effect given notice that they intend to bring the homelessness duty to an end.

Applicants will need time to give the offer careful consideration. If they are not immediately taken with the offer, they may well feel that they want to consult with family, friends or, in some case, their legal advisers. They should be given a reasonable time in which to do so.

As I said in Committee, my genuine fear is that specifying a minimum of three or perhaps five days would make that period the yardstick according to which many authorities might decide to operate. It could, in effect, be construed as a Government-approved maximum period for consideration, which, in my view, would be an unhappy outcome. In some cases, three or five days will not be enough. Flexibility is required, so that account can be taken of the circumstances of individual cases: the situation does not lend itself to narrow prescription.

I shall not comment on the lack of clarity on the part of the Liberal Democrats, who have specified both three and five days. If I had not understood from the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) that he had intended his new clause to refer to a final offer, I would have asked him why he thought it reasonable for a time limit to be placed on a first offer but not on a second or third offer.

New clause 5 requires authorities to notify applicants of a right to request a review of a decision that they fell within an ineligible group, and of the time allowed for the making of such a request. The Bill gives applicants the right to request a review of any decision about the facts of their case. That includes decisions about eligibility based on the applicant's personal circumstances, including immigration status.

I can tell the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) that there is no confusion about the scope of the review. As I made clear in Committee, the eligibility issue is covered. There cannot, of course, be a dispute about circumstances in which someone is validly deemed ineligible, but the basis on which the decision is reached—the facts of the case—will be open to the review.

The hon. Gentleman's proposal would take that two steps further. It would ensure first that when an applicant was made aware that he had been deemed ineligible he would be informed of his right of review, and secondly that a time limit would be imposed on that right. I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman's intention, but I would like to consider further whether the ends we both wish to achieve might be better achieved through an

amendment or through guidance. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will withdraw his proposal, in return for my undertaking that I will give further thought to the issues that it raises.

As for new clause 18, I have begun to wonder whether, as a child, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey was ever caught copying at school—and copying rather sloppily too. He and his hon. Friend the Member for Bath seem to agree strongly about some things, but not about everything. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey is clearly keen to assert his independence, and appears to be trying to shift his party's housing policy from the policy to which his shadow Home Office responsibilities relate.

Amendment No. 18 seeks to give applicants a right to be informed when a decision on eligibility has been made, but also requires such a review to be independent. Let me say a little about the conduct of reviews. When undertaking a review, a local authority must provide for a proper or appropriate review in the light of the circumstances. It must take into account the laws relating to human rights and to judicial review; it must pay attention to what rights it is considering, and what procedures are appropriate. Having considered all those matters, it will be able to decide what is right in the circumstances. In his amendment, the hon. Gentleman seeks again to determine the minutiae of arrangements. We think it right to leave the authority a measure of discretion, and I therefore do not propose to support the amendment.

New clause 6 provides for circumstances in which a local housing authority has decided that it no longer owes an interim duty to accommodate, and notifies the applicant. It would place a specific duty on the authority to consider continuing to secure accommodation for those seeking a review of the decision.

The current legislation gives authorities powers to ensure that accommodation remains available to applicants pending a decision on a review, but does not place an obligation on them to do so. It is for an authority to consider—on the basis of the facts of the case, and with regard to the resources available—whether to exercise those powers. The authority must exercise its discretion reasonably and with consideration, but the new clause seeks to specify in some detail how it should exercise its discretion.

7.15 pm

In Committee we discussed, on many occasions and in different contexts, the need to strike the right balance between giving authorities discretion in the carrying out of their functions and specifying in detail what they must do. It is never easy to draw the line, but our approach in the Bill has been to establish a clear framework in which authorities can make their own judgments, informed by local knowledge—knowledge of the facts of individual cases, in the context of the many pressures that authorities have to balance. I believe that, ultimately, the exercise of local judgment will lead to better outcomes than detailed, inflexible instructions set out in statute.

It is not that the issues for consideration specified in the clause are inherently implausible; they are not. They could be incorporated in guidance to authorities on issues that they may wish to take into account. Important factors have been missed out, however—not least the other pressures on accommodation in an authority's area. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey will probably be more aware of those than most hon. Members.

The new clause would also have unwanted and adverse effects. It would perversely encourage appeals against authorities' decisions even when there was no realistic chance of success, simply because that would guarantee a continuation of accommodation for the period of the appeal. It would have resource implications for authorities, which could in some cases result in cases of lesser need gaining priority over those in greater need.

As I have said many times, it is a question of getting the balance right, and we do not believe that the new clause gets it right. It is too prescriptive; it would encourage vexatious requests for reviews; it would add to bureaucracy; and it would take away an important discretionary power from local housing authorities.

In a recent press release headed "Whitehall tanks are still on town hall lawns", the hon. Member for Bath said:

"Whitehall tanks are still on town hall lawns. Labour's centralising tendency is undermining local democracy."

I must say to the hon. Gentleman "Get your Liberal Democrat tanks off local government lawns".

New clause 7 seeks to amend the provisions on right of appeal to the county court on a point of law under section 204 of the Housing Act 1996. It would allow an extension of the current appeal period of 21 days. Like new clause 6, it would place a detailed duty on authorities to consider continuing to ensure that accommodation was available to applicants who sought a review of the decision under section 202.

I have just dealt with the issue of consideration, and I believe that the arguments here are the same. Authorities should be given the tools with which to do their job and discretion to make difficult judgments, and they should be accountable for those judgments.

We dealt in Committee with the proposal to extend the appeal period beyond 21 days. As I made clear then, I do not think that the current 21-day period is unreasonable, and it is important for appeals to be dealt with quickly. The new clause, however, raises one point that I think merits further consideration. Part VII of the 1996 Act introduced a right of review of homelessness decisions, and a right to appeal to the county court on a point of law if the applicant was not satisfied with the authority's decision on review. The aim—rightly, in my view—was to allow grievances concerning homelessness decisions to be heard locally by the county courts, rather than the applicant's having to go through the more costly and remote processes of judicial review in the High Court.

My understanding is that in considering appeals against homelessness decisions by a local authority, the county court has powers equivalent to those of judicial review by the High Court in every respect, save the power to require an authority to accommodate the applicant pending the appeal. That means that applicants are required to make a separate claim for judicial review to the administrative court in London, if they wish to seek an injunction requiring their local authority to accommodate them on an interim basis.

As I have said, authorities currently have discretion to decide to continue to accommodate pending an appeal to the county court, if they wish. Any court would need very

[Mr. Raynsford]

clear evidence that an authority had acted unreasonably before granting a mandatory injunction; indeed, it would be inappropriate for a court to do otherwise. Nevertheless, there will always be a number of applicants who seek leave to apply for judicial review, and the court must give careful consideration to such cases. I should like to consider whether there is a case for giving the county court power to require an authority to accommodate, so that consideration of homelessness cases need not be taken to the High Court. As I am sure the hon. Member for Bath will appreciate, that will require discussions with colleagues in other Departments, but I undertake to engage in such discussions. On that basis, I invite him to withdraw the motion.

New clauses 10, 11 and 12 seek to provide the Secretary of State with the power to give directions to local authorities on the exercise of their powers in relation to homelessness. Again, that raises the question of how to balance local discretion against central policy. I am surprised that hon. Members are so attracted to provisions that give powers to the Secretary of State to determine how local authorities shall conduct their business. I have already referred to one quote from the hon. Member for Bath. I give him one more:

"Our problem derives from the decision by the current Government and the previous Conservative Government to adopt a model that is designed to keep as many hands on the tiller as possible, denying local authorities freedom."—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2001; Vol. 362, c. 369.]

Get those Liberal Democrat hands off the tiller. Give local authorities more discretion.

On amendment No. 52, the breakdown of a relationship can be one of the most distressing and traumatic events in a person's life. If children are involved, it may be especially wretched—for each partner and, above all, for the children—but whether, on break-up, either partner is intentionally homeless is surely a matter of particular circumstance. Relationship breakdowns vary in their emotional impact, their financial impact and in the way they impact on each partner. Some can be amicable, but not all are, as we know. That surely is the point. No two cases are alike and there is a need for each circumstance to be assessed on the individual merits of the case.

I do not agree that it should necessarily fall to the local authority to accommodate one of the partners in every case of relationship breakdown, particularly where the relationship may have been a casual one and has not lasted for any length of time, but that would be the effect of the amendment. It would place an unacceptable and unreasonable burden on local authorities and send the wrong signals to people who were experiencing difficulties in their relationships, but were capable of resolving their problems and housing themselves. I hope that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey will accept that the amendment is not appropriate.

On Government amendment No. 47, one of the Bill's aims is to facilitate the development of allocation schemes that can be framed so as to give more choice to applicants. That should include, wherever possible, more choice about the properties that they wish to apply for, and more choice to make a trade-off between holding out for a more desirable property and opting for something perhaps less desirable, but more easily available.

For applicants to be in a position to exercise that choice, letting schemes will need to offer as much transparency as possible. People in the housing queue, particularly in areas of high demand, should be given an idea of how long they are likely to have to wait for particular properties in particular areas.

To facilitate that, it will be important that authorities provide as much feedback as possible about the level of priority and length of waiting time of successful applicants. That will help others to make a judgment about how long they may have to wait for a similar property. Such feedback can, of course, be couched only in the most general terms. It is essential that there are safeguards against the release of confidential and sensitive personal information.

As drafted, clause 26 does not quite achieve that policy. That amendment will allow authorities to let applicants have general information about those households who have been successful in their application. It will not, however, allow authorities to divulge the fact that someone is currently applying for accommodation. The Data Protection Act 1998 will ensure that authorities cannot divulge sensitive personal information.

At first sight, amendment No. 16 seems reasonable, although a little thought rapidly shows it to be flawed. It seeks to give additional preference to families with dependent children. Its effect would be always to place the needs of families with dependent children above those of the elderly, the disabled or other groups. In Committee, we heard the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) make an eloquent plea for the needs of elderly people to be met. In the House, we have heard the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) make a passionate plea for the needs of people with disabilities to be met. We recognise the wide range of needs. I hope that they will recognise that, if we give additional priority to one group, by definition, it downgrades the others. Many families with children are not in need. Many affluent families with children would not deserve priority over a poor or disabled household. Therefore, it is not appropriate to pursue the amendment.

I am sympathetic to the intention behind amendments Nos. 53 and 60, which are to ensure that authorities respond quickly to the immediate rehousing needs of people whose personal safety may be at risk. However, the Bill already facilitates that. Clause 27 requires that allocation schemes must be framed, so that reasonable preference is given to people who need to move on welfare grounds. That will include people who need to move to alternative accommodation because they are at risk or are under police protection. The clause also gives authorities the power to give additional preference to particular descriptions of applicants who fall within the reasonable preference categories.

The provisions will ensure that authorities continue to be in a position to respond promptly to requests for housing assistance from the police. I would be very concerned if an authority did not respond positively to a formal request from the police to assist in the rehousing of someone whose safety was known to be at risk, whether as a result of agreeing to testify in proceedings, or otherwise. From my experience in my constituency, there was close and quick collaboration between the police, the local authority and the Home Office to rehouse the families whose identity was unintentionally and unfortunately revealed in the annexe of the Stephen

Lawrence inquiry report and who might have been put at risk by that disclosure, so I know that the arrangements can work. I would be alarmed if they were not working. I invite hon. Members who have evidence that they are not working to let me know.

Amendment No. 21 addresses the case of an applicant whose behaviour is so unacceptable that an authority, taking account of the rights of other residents, refuses to allocate accommodation. I make it clear that the Bill, as amended in Committee, already provides authorities with the right to refuse an application in such circumstances. Section 167(2A) to (2D) will make it clear that such a person need not be awarded any preference whatever. Therefore, there is no need for any further amendment.

Amendment No. 17 seems superfluous. It proposes that account be taken of any record of behaviour that has affected the terms of a previous tenancy. That is already covered by subsection (2A)(b), which deals with behaviour that affects a person's suitability to be a tenant.

Amendment No. 55 seeks to place further statutory prescription on allocation schemes. It would add a fourth factor to the three already specified in the Bill. We know that unsatisfactory housing conditions or medical or welfare considerations are currently taken into account a great deal by local authorities, which already consider the length of time that applicants have been waiting. It is probably one of the most common factors used by housing authorities throughout the country. Because of that, it is not necessary to make particular provision to make it clear that that factor may be incorporated by local authorities. It is already widely known by authorities that they may do so.

Amendment No. 20 is unnecessary and, if accepted, would be open to abuse. It would, in effect, allow an authority to suspend the framework for allocating preference and priority to needy groups and to individuals within those groups. I am not sure that that was the intention in tabling the amendment—I sincerely hope it was not. Although some authorities in high-demand areas face real challenges in managing applications, all are still able to allocate some housing through the register. Under the Bill, transfers within the authority will be handled through the provisions of the allocations or lettings schemes. I cannot think that hon. Members want to remove that sensible framework. Therefore, we cannot support the amendment.

I apologise for the length of my response, but the number and detail of the amendments made that necessary. I hope that hon. Members recognise that the amendments are unnecessary and that none should be accepted, with the one exception of Government amendment No. 47, which I commend to the House.

Mr. Don Foster: I congratulate the Minister on that tour de force, but there would have been no need for him to rush if we had had a decent programme motion. I thank him for his willingness at least to reconsider aspects of new clauses 5 and 7. However, I am completely horrified by his lack of confidence in the Government's legislation, which is such that he believes that provision for a minimum of three days could be interpreted as the Government agreeing to a maximum of three days. If that shows the faith that he has in this Labour Government, it is all the more reason why we should press the new clause to a vote.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 151, Noes 255.

Division No. 110] **[7.29 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*

Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Adrian Sanders and
Sir Robert Smith.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

DEFERRED DIVISION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Order. I now have to announce the result of a Division deferred from a previous day.

On the motion on Companies, the Ayes were 329, the Noes 7, so the motion was agreed to.

[The Division List is published at the end of today's debates.]

Homes Bill

New Clause 13

ENERGY EFFICIENCY REPORT (NO. 1)

'. The Secretary of State shall by regulations bring Schedule (Energy efficiency reports) into effect within twelve months of the passing of this Act.'.—*[Mr. Loughton.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

7.43 pm

Mr. Loughton: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: New clause 14—*Energy efficiency report (No. 2)*—

'. The Secretary of State may by regulations bring Schedule (Energy efficiency reports) into effect within twelve months of the passing of this Act if in his judgement it would assist, or provide information relevant to, the marketing of residential properties in England and Wales.'.

Government amendments Nos. 22 and 23.

New schedule 1—*'Energy Efficiency Reports*—

'1.—(1) Subject to the provisions of this Schedule, it shall be the duty of any person in whose favour a mortgage of any legal estate in a dwelling is granted (in this Schedule referred to as "the lender") to ensure that, if any qualifying survey of the dwelling has been undertaken by him or on his behalf in connection with that mortgage—

(a) a report on the energy efficiency of the dwelling (in this Schedule referred to as "an energy efficiency report") has been prepared by or on behalf of the lender in accordance with regulations under paragraph 5 on the basis of the physical inspection undertaken for the purpose of the qualifying survey, and

(b) the person granting the mortgage (in this Schedule referred to as "the borrower") has been provided, before the grant of the mortgage, with a copy of the energy efficiency report.

(2) No duty arises under sub-paragraph (1) unless—

(a) the mortgage relates only

(i) to a single dwelling, or

(ii) to a single dwelling together with premises occupied or intended to be occupied for business purposes,

(b) the loan to which the mortgage relates was made in pursuance of an application made to the lender by the borrower, and

(c) the dwelling is occupied by, or is intended for occupation by, the borrower as his residence.

(3) The lender may, in fixing the amount of any fee to be charged for a qualifying survey, take into account any additional costs reasonably incurred in preparing the energy efficiency report, but the duty in sub-paragraph (1) arises whether or not the borrower has paid, or agreed to pay, any such additional costs.

(4) In sub-paragraph (1) a "qualifying survey", in relation to a dwelling, means any survey or valuation which includes a physical inspection of both the exterior and the interior of the dwelling.

2. The duty in paragraph 1 does not arise in relation to any dwelling which was provided (by construction or conversion) less than three years before the date on which the borrower applied for the loan to which the mortgage relates.

3. The duty in paragraph 1 does not arise where, before the grant of the mortgage, the borrower has obtained, or been given a copy of, a report which—

(a) relates to the dwelling,

(b) complies with regulations under paragraph 5, and

(c) was prepared less than twelve months before the date on which the borrower applied for the loan to which the mortgage relates.

4.—(1) The duty in paragraph 1 does not arise where—

(a) the lender is a member of the borrower's family and is not lending in the course of a business carried on by the lender, or

(b) the lenders are the trustees of a trust created by an individual for the benefit of members of his family and their descendants.

(2) For the purposes of sub-paragraph (1) a person is a member of another's family if—

(a) he is the spouse of that person, or he and that person live together as husband and wife, or

(b) he is that person's parent, grandparent, child, grandchild, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, nephew or niece.

(3) For the purposes of sub-paragraph (2)(b)—

(a) a relationship by marriage shall be treated as a relationship by blood,

(b) a relationship of the half-blood shall be treated as a relationship of the whole blood, and

(c) the stepchild of a person shall be treated as his child.

5.—(1) The Secretary of State shall make regulations specifying the requirements which must be met by the lender in relation to the preparation of an energy efficiency report.

(2) The regulations may, in particular, require a report to include—

(a) information as to the presence or absence in the dwelling of specified measures for improving energy efficiency, and

(b) a statement recommending measures which could be taken for the purpose of improving energy efficiency.

(3) Regulations under this paragraph may make different provision for different cases and different areas.

(4) Regulations under this paragraph may not require an energy efficiency report to contain any information in respect of the dwelling which is not readily ascertainable on a visual inspection of so much of the exterior and interior of the dwelling as is accessible without undue difficulty to the person undertaking the inspection.

(5) Regulations under this paragraph may not require an energy efficiency report in respect of a flat to contain information about the common parts of the building in which the flat is situated.

(6) Before making regulations under this paragraph, the Secretary of State shall consult—

(a) such mortgage lenders or persons appearing to him to represent mortgage lenders as he considers appropriate, and

(b) such other persons as he considers appropriate.

(7) In making regulations under this paragraph, the Secretary of State shall have regard to the cost of preparing an energy efficiency report.

(8) Regulations under this paragraph shall be made by statutory instrument subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.

(9) In this paragraph—

"common parts", in relation to a building, includes the structure and exterior of the building and common facilities provided, whether in the building or elsewhere, for persons who include the occupiers of one or more flats in the building;

"flat" means a dwelling which is a separate set of premises, whether or not on the same floor, divided horizontally from some other part of the building;

"mortgage lender" means a person who, in the course of a business, lends money secured by mortgages of dwellings.

6.—(1) If the borrower suffers loss by reason of the failure of the lender to comply with his duty under paragraph 1, the borrower is entitled to compensation for that loss from the lender.

(2) In determining for the purposes of this paragraph whether the borrower has suffered loss as mentioned in sub-paragraph (1) and, if so, the amount of that loss, a court—

(a) shall assume that the borrower would have taken every measure that would have been recommended in a report complying with paragraph 5,

(b) shall have regard to the cost that would be likely to have been incurred in taking those measures if they had been taken immediately after the grant of the mortgage,

(c) shall determine the likely expected life of each measure and apportion that cost rateably over that life, and

(d) shall calculate the savings that would have been made during the relevant period if the measures had been taken.

(3) In sub-paragraph (2) "the relevant period" means the period beginning with the day on which the mortgage was granted and ending immediately before the sixth anniversary of that day or, if earlier—

(a) in relation to any measure falling within sub-paragraph (2)(a) which has in fact been taken by the borrower, with the day on which the taking of the measure is completed,

(b) in a case where the lender provides the borrower with, or with a copy of, an energy efficiency report complying with paragraph 5 prepared not less than 12 months before the day on which it is provided, that day,

(c) the day on which the borrower ceases to own any interest in the dwelling,

(d) the death of the borrower, or

(e) the day on which any proceedings under this paragraph are first determined by a court or by the award of an arbitrator.

7. In this Schedule—

"the borrower" and "the lender" shall be construed in accordance with paragraph 1;

"dwelling" means a building or part of a building occupied or intended to be occupied as a separate dwelling, together with any yard, garden, outhouses or appurtenances belonging to it or usually enjoyed with it, but does not include a mobile home;

"energy efficiency report" shall be construed in accordance with paragraph 1;

"mobile home" means a caravan within the meaning of Part I of the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960 (disregarding the amendment made by section 13(2) of the Caravan Sites Act 1968);

"mortgage" means any mortgage or other charge on property for securing money or money's worth which is made by deed.

8.—(1) Paragraph 5 and this paragraph shall come into force on the day on which regulations made under section 7( ) take effect.

(2) The remaining provisions of this Schedule shall come into force on such day or days as the Secretary of State may by order made by statutory instrument appoint, and different days may be appointed for different purposes or different areas.

(3) The power to make an order under sub-paragraph (2) includes power to make such transitional provisions and savings as the Secretary of State considers appropriate.

(4) The Secretary of State shall consult the National Assembly for Wales before making any regulations under this schedule which relate to Wales.

(5) This schedule extends to England and Wales only.'.

Mr. Loughton: At long last, we reach the part of the Bill that deals with the seller's pack. There has been great cross-party consensus on the matter, although not unanimity. Some progress has been made. The Committee as a whole—including the Minister for Housing and Planning—supported the proposals regarding energy efficiency. We discovered that the right hon. Gentleman had been a member of the Environment Select Committee and that, long before this Bill came along, he had endorsed the idea of energy efficiency ratings for buildings.

It was all the more strange, therefore, that the Minister was unable to support the points made by Labour Members about energy efficiency on Second Reading and in Committee. However, at this late stage, two Government amendments have mysteriously appeared, and they are very welcome. There is room in the heaven that is the Homes Bill for every sinner who truly repenteth. We congratulate the Government on amendments Nos. 22 and 23, which we will support, but we want the Minister to go further.

Conservative Members claim no small amount of credit for having cajoled, bullied and pushed the Minister to come up with these last-minute amendments. We are therefore reintroducing new schedule 1. To make it easy for the Government to accept that, we are also proposing the multiple options presented by new clauses 1 and 14.

The subject of energy efficiency was the source of great debate in Committee, and it has a long pedigree in the House. The energy efficiency measures that we propose had their origins in the 1980s, when my noble Friend Lord Walker of Worcester was Secretary of State for Energy.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): My hon. Friend referred to the multiple options presented by new clauses 1 and 14. However, new clause 1 deals with social security. Did my hon. Friend intend to refer to new clause 13? Will he later explain the consistency between new clauses 13 and 14?

Mr. Loughton: I am not sure whether I misspoke, or whether my hon. Friend misheard me. However, I am dealing with new clauses 13 and 14. New clause 1 does not feature in this group of amendments. I will explain why we are proposing two slightly similar new clauses contingent on new schedule 1.

7.45 pm

The pedigree of energy efficiency goes back to a private Member's Bill first introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo). The subject was then taken up in this Parliament by the hon. Members for Eltham (Mr. Efford) and for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett). The subject has a cross-party pedigree, although there are one or two exceptions among hon. Members.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Thank you.

Mr. Loughton: It is also slightly mysterious that, although Conservative Members were happy to put our names to new schedule 1 in Committee, when it was tabled by Liberal Democrat Members, Liberal Democrat Members have not seen fit to add theirs to the new schedule 1 under consideration today.

New schedule 1 is supported by many people—by the Council of Mortgage Lenders, the Association for the Conservation of Energy and other groups concerned with energy efficiency, and by the many hon. Members who have signed early-day motions on the subject. In his written answer to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) on 21 December, the Minister made it clear that he supported the proposal.

The proposal in new schedule 1 is also a hot favourite in Denmark, a country to which the Minister alluded several times on Second Reading. Denmark was held up time and again as the place where the seller's pack is an enormous success. I have been there with the Select Committee on Environmental Audit, and have seen that some success has been achieved with the energy rating of buildings. It has led to a reduction in carbon emissions as part of Denmark's Kyoto targets.

In his written answer, the Minister told the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton:

"It is currently intended that Regulations prescribe the inclusion of an energy report in the seller's pack, and that this will include generic advice on measures to improve energy efficiency, and an indication of the cost and pay back period of each of those improvements."—[*Official Report*, 21 December 2000; Vol. 360, c. 313W.]

We have not quite got that, and such provisions did not exist in the Bill when we considered it in Committee. However, the two Government amendments in the group are a start in that direction.

Mr. Raynsford: Will the hon. Gentleman accept that I gave a clear and categoric assurance, in the House and in Committee, that an energy efficiency report along the lines that he has set out—including indications of how energy efficiency could be improved and the pay-back period—would be part of the home condition report? That has always been the Government's intention. It was part of the trial in Bristol, and there has been no change. We are absolutely committed to the proposal, and the amendments simply give effect to a policy intention that has been clearly stated.

Mr. Loughton: There was no promise to include the proposal in the Bill. In Standing Committee, the Minister was asked to do so, and he replied that the matter was extremely complex, involving strong differences of opinion among technical experts, including those involved in house construction and renovation. He said that there was a potential conflict with other building regulations, not least those on noise transmission between properties. He added that those facts were matters of concern, and that it would be inappropriate to proceed over-hastily with measures that might have both desirable and undesirable consequences. The definition of "over-hastily" in the Minister's lexicon would appear to be "less than three weeks".

Mr. Raynsford: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept that the comments that he has read out referred to a quite different debate. We were discussing the reasons for the delay in issuing part L of the building regulations, which are to do with energy efficiency, and I was

[Mr. Raynsford]

explaining the interrelationship between those and the part that deals with the sound separation between buildings. The issuing of building regulations is very different from the provision of a home energy efficiency report in the seller's pack. There is a distinction between the two, and I hope that now that the hon. Gentleman has checked *Hansard*, he will recognise that he was wrong.

Mr. Loughton: My recollection of the debate is that the Minister was using that as an example of how he could not be rushed into producing energy efficiency measures. That said, we now have them—just under three weeks after the hon. Gentleman led us to believe that we would not have them—and we welcome that. We welcome the fact that the Bill refers to energy efficiency and that it will be a desirable part of a seller's pack, if we are to have such packs.

Because of the Government's amendments, we did not wish to appear churlish by tabling again amendments that we originally tabled in Committee. They added greater detail to what was required of the energy efficiency part of the seller's pack. We hope that the Minister can assure us that these matters will be covered. For example, will the energy efficiency rating for buildings—be it a standard assessment procedure rating—have more detail about comparisons with other buildings? What will the energy saving advice entail? Will it simply be slight and generic advice? Those are key questions, bearing in mind the fact that most authorities have estimated that proper energy saving advice can save an average of £250 per annum for the sort of buildings at which it would be directed. What about advice on the costs and pay-back periods for the improvements? The Minister said that energy efficiency reports were included in the Bristol pilot, although we have received no details. We would like to know how meaningful the information gleaned was.

We realise the problem with many old buildings in particular, but if the Government are determined to proceed with the seller's pack involving surveys, the best place and time to do it is at the point of sale where the cost would, we hope, be relatively minimal. After all, this is not rocket science. Energy ratings for white electrical appliances, which we discussed in Committee, have been used increasingly for some years. To achieve our Kyoto targets is a key commitment of the Government, and we support it. However, we take issue with the means by which they are seeking to do it and with measures such as the energy tax, which they seem to be using to achieve those targets. We are talking about cavity wall insulation, condensing boilers, loft insulation, the efficiency—or otherwise—of lights and heating, double glazing, damp, and so on.

Previous Government schemes such as the energy efficiency standards of performance, run by the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, have put the structures in place, obliging public suppliers to achieve energy savings. There is a wealth of expertise and advice on the subject. Therefore it is easy to put these measures into effect, and to do so relatively soon. It is also essential to the economic sustainability of people buying homes that they can afford to finance those homes, and one of the key components of expenditure each year is on energy.

All that will take time. We are promised that it will take until 2003, at the very soonest, for the seller's packs to come in. There is no reason for not doing something in the interim—hence, new schedule 1 and the two new clauses that we have tabled. The mortgage companies can institute the proposals, which have the support of the Council of Mortgage Lenders, in fairly sharp order.

I want to touch on some of the Government's previous arguments. They said that the scheme would not cover all house sales, only those with a mortgage where the lender required a survey. That is a ridiculous argument. It is a matter of fact, not argument, that before the seller's pack comes into force, hundreds of thousands of people will buy homes and pay for a mortgage survey or will be required to have a mortgage valuation on the property, yet they will receive no advice on how to save money on fuel bills.

We have discussed how about 1.5 million properties a year are sold—more than 1 million with a mortgage to back them up. By 2003, more than 3 million properties will have changed hands. The savings on energy that could be encouraged in those properties from day one rather than day 700 is considerable.

The Government also argue that it would be costly to implement the measures for a short period before the introduction of the seller's pack and that there would be training problems for the surveyors. We have taken issue with training with regard to the survey reports required in the seller's pack, although we agree that the energy efficiency requirements are relatively straightforward and that people can put them into effect sooner rather than later.

The Government's arguments are mistaken. In Committee, the Minister described two separate training and accreditation schemes running in parallel as "a nightmare". However, it would be an unnecessary nightmare, as the energy efficiency advice given as part of the buyer's survey could be identical to that which would eventually be required in the seller's pack. The same surveyors would do both jobs and would not need training twice.

The Government also argued that there would be implementation problems for mortgage companies, which would need to set up systems to check that their duties were being fulfilled. That is hardly onerous. Mortgage companies already have very sophisticated systems and there are many providers, thanks to the deregulation of the market for which the previous Government were responsible. Mortgage companies check the survey valuations or valuation on the mortgage and would merely have to ascertain that energy efficiency advice was included, as well as checking the value that the surveyor had placed on the property. So the Government's reasons for not accepting schedule 1 do not hold water and, as I have said, 1.5 million properties a year are involved.

It is with great optimism and hope that we table new schedule 1 again. On the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon), we are giving the Government two options to make it easier for them, and are prepared to take whatever action the Government choose to facilitate the inclusion of new schedule 1 in the Bill.

If the Minister is true to his principles about the desirability of energy efficiency reports, he will have no problem in accepting new clause 13. It facilitates new

schedule 1 by stating that the Secretary of State shall by regulations bring the schedule into effect within 12 months of the passing of the Act. No ifs, no buts—let us go for it.

I know that the Minister agrees with that. I know that, in principle, he has done things that would make it difficult for him not to accept new clause 13. However, just in case he is getting cold feet—in case the pressures from civil servants, other colleagues or Back Benchers are getting the better of him—we have provided a multiple choice, in the form of new clause 14, which makes it a little bit easier. It says:

"The Secretary of State may—"

not shall—

by regulations bring Schedule (Energy efficiency reports) into effect within twelve months of the passing of this Act if in his judgement it would assist, or provide information relevant to, the marketing of residential properties in England and Wales.

That fudges things a bit, but the Government like to do that on issues on which they have to forsake previous principles because this is the hard and fast aspect of Government and legislation.

We are offering the Government an easy ride and a simple choice. Like the vast majority of Members on both sides of the House, we are keen to see energy efficiency moved up a speed. This is the obvious time to do it. We are keen that the Government should come fully on board. They have done so with two small amendments. I am glad that they have tabled them now. They could have done so earlier, but we realise that the Minister had one hand tied behind his back. Will he put his money where his mouth has been for many years by saying yes to new schedule 1 and adopting whichever new clause he feels more comfortable, or perhaps less uncomfortable, with in order to facilitate it? The vast majority of hon. Members, especially on the Labour Benches, will certainly congratulate him and praise him to the rafters for having had the courage to do so.

8 pm

Mr. Don Foster: I rise to give full support to Government amendments Nos. 22 and 23. I suspect that there is no need to go into the detail of the amendments. I am sure that we will shortly hear a detailed exposition of them from the Minister. I hope that he will point out the remarkable similarities between amendments Nos. 22 and 23 and amendments that my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) and I tabled in Committee.

I remind the Minister that in Committee he said not only that such amendments were unnecessary but that they could be positively dangerous because they could preclude information relating to other matters such as noise or disabled access. I am delighted that he has seen the light and is willing to change his views. He can be assured of our full support for the two amendments.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) can be assured of our support for new schedule 1 and either new clause 13 or new clause 14—whichever the Minister chooses. He asked why we had not seen fit to put our names to the new clauses and the new schedule. They are rather like a baton in a relay race passed on from one group to another. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will have the grace to admit that his new schedule is identical to the one that I tabled in Committee. However, even I am honest enough to admit that I was not its originator. The originator could be said to be the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford), but if he was honest he would admit that he was not the originator either. He got the idea from my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett). Even my hon. Friend would be willing to admit that he was not the originator—the new schedule went back as far as the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo).

The ideas in the new schedule and new clauses are not new. They have been supported by hon. Members of all parties, and rightly so because they touch on important issues. I am sure that the Minister supports their principle. I suspect that his reason for not accepting them will be the same as the one that he gave in Committee—that he will include energy efficiency reports in the seller's packs, which will come into force relatively quickly, and that there is no need for an interim measure.

I hope that the Minister will reflect again. All the evidence is that, however keen the Minister is to introduce seller's packs—if they are accepted by both Houses of Parliament—the chances are that it will be a long time before they are fully implemented. The evidence is clear to see. His attempt to introduce the energy efficiency aspect of building regulations has been agreed for only 18 months, yet we know that it has already slipped by a further 18 months. I suspect that the same fate will befall the seller's packs. That is why it is important not only to accept amendments Nos. 22 and 23 but to introduce an interim measure, as proposed in the new schedule. I hope that the Minister will be prepared to consider it.

Even if new schedule 1 is defeated today, many Members of the other place are keenly interested in it and have tabled amendments in the same vein, and they will start all over again. The Minister could save a great deal of time and debate by simply accepting the new schedule.

Mr. Fallon: I am puzzled by the new clauses and new schedule tabled in the name of the Opposition. I assumed that they were some means of lightening the burden of the proposed seller's packs, but after my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) had spoken I realised that they added to the seller's packs. As I said in my intervention, I am a little confused about the consistency between new clauses 13 and 14 and new schedule 1. I understand that new clause 13 requires the Secretary of State to bring the schedule

"into effect within twelve months of the passing of this Act."

That seems a little odd.

Either we believe in this energy efficiency gimmick, or we do not. Why we should wait 12 months to bring it into force, I am not clear. New clause 13 is not compatible with new clause 14. New clause 14 seems to suspend judgment on whether energy efficiency reports are necessary and simply suggests that we do not really know, but that we are prepared to trust the judgment of the Secretary of State. That is an extraordinary way in which to legislate. Either we as a party believe that energy efficiency reports are necessary, or we do not.

Mr. Forth *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Fallon: My right hon. Friend indicates that he does not. I happen to share that view, but we cannot say credibly as an Opposition that we are not sure and that

[Mr. Fallon]

we will leave it all up to the Secretary of State to decide. Neither new clause 13 nor new clause 14, in the multiple choice that my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham is offering the Government, stands up.

Mr. Loughton: I thought that I had made it clear that we are offering a multiple choice because there is a long history of frustration of the legislation; we want to make it easier for the Government to adopt something. Even in a weakened form, that is better than nothing. That is the view that we have taken. We are in favour of the Bill and, rather than reject the whole lot, we have tried to make it as easy as possible for the Government to accept something.

Mr. Fallon: I am no clearer. Either we are in favour of energy efficiency reports or we are not. If we are, we should surely add them to the seller's packs. I am not in favour of doing so, because I am not in favour of seller's packs. My hon. Friends might disagree with me. They might have come round to the idea that seller's packs are a wonderful thing. I have never been convinced about seller's packs, and I certainly do not want to add to them, but even if I did want to add to them, I would like to think that I was clear whether I wanted to or not. It seems perverse simply to leave it to the judgment of the Secretary of State.

Mr. Bercow: I am listening with interest to my hon. Friend's explanation of the position as he sees it. Is it his understanding that the regulations would be subject to the affirmative procedure or simply nodded through the House?

Mr. Fallon: I am not clear any more about the difference between the negative and affirmative procedures. It seems to me that the House does not have a handle on either procedure any more. I deeply deplore that. If we are to table amendments, we ought to be clear whether we are in favour of them; simply to leave their implementation to a future Secretary of State seems to be fudging the issue.

Three pages of legislation are proposed in new schedule 1. I have some difficulty with the proposals. First, there is the problem of definitions. The definition of energy efficiency is not clear; it is to be construed under paragraph 1. I have searched that paragraph high and low, but I can find no specific definition of the words "energy efficiency report". If we are to put three pages of legislation on to the statute book, thereby imposing a new burden on every seller of a house, we should be a little clearer about what an energy efficiency report is.

Perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham can tell us. Perhaps he has news from Denmark about what an energy efficiency report comprises. He will have seen that his new schedule states, in paragraph 7, that

"'energy efficiency report' shall be construed in accordance with paragraph 1".

I cannot find any definition of those words in paragraph 1. When my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham winds up the debate, perhaps he will assist me. Perhaps there is some definition by reference to another statute, but I cannot find it.

What I can find, however, is a series of definitions of matters that I had not previously realised related to energy efficiency. There are definitions of half-blood relationships, of the likely expected life of the qualifying measures and of relevant periods. I am not at all clear what the definition of half-blood relationships has to do with energy efficiency reports. If we must legislate on who should be bound to carry out energy efficiency reports, why must we define in paragraph 4(3)(c) that

"the stepchild of a person shall be treated as his child."?

I am not clear what that has to do with the definition of energy efficiency or the improvement of the housing market.

I have some difficulty with the way in which the new schedule has been constructed. I am at a loss to understand the definitions of various terms in it.

My second difficulty is the catalogue of supporters of the proposal read out by my hon. Friend. In essence, they are lobby groups. There is nothing wrong with lobbying for particular measures, but we should ask why this measure has been frustrated for so long. It is an extremely specialist measure for which some highly specialist lobby groups have campaigned for a long time. I am not at all convinced that it is the role of Opposition Front Benchers to pander to such groups without considering the overall effect—the cost and the additional bureaucracy. After all, that is probably why, when we were in government, our Secretary of State did not introduce such provisions.

The third of my hon. Friend's arguments with which I have some difficulty is his statement that such provisions have been implemented in Denmark. I am not sure that that offers a persuasive argument for any piece of legislation being presented to the House. Indeed, one might be tempted to ask why these provisions apply only in Denmark and why they have not been implemented in the major European states or in other European countries. I am not sure that we should adopt this proposal simply because it has been done in Denmark. Some things might be done in Denmark of which I do not particularly approve. On the other hand, some things might be done in Denmark whose introduction in this country I should welcome. However, it is not transparently obvious to me that we should support the new schedule simply because "it is done in Denmark". I hope that when my hon. Friend tries to sum up this somewhat miserable new schedule he can do better than that.

Fourthly, I am not clear about my hon. Friend's central argument: that if we do not like seller's packs, we can somehow make them better by adding to them. Surely, if the Opposition do not like them, we should do our best to minimise the bureaucracy and cost involved and to make the packs as simple as possible, better to aid the functioning and transparency of the housing market.

8.15 pm

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's point on seller's packs. Does he agree, however, that if we are to have them in the mortgage and house-purchase business, they should at least be useful to property buyers? The amendments proposed by his hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) would at least provide useful information for property purchasers.

Mr. Fallon: That is a perfectly reasonable point, although I am becoming more and more suspicious of an amendment advanced by my own Front-Bench team that seems to attract support from every party but my own. That does not necessarily distinguish the proposals.

The hon. Gentleman's thesis is probably right. If seller's packs are to be foisted on us, let us make them as sensible as possible, but I am not convinced that we would do that by adding to the requirements. On the contrary, it would be perfectly possible to simplify some of the ideas for seller's packs. I am a bit surprised that my hon. Friends on the Front Bench have not proposed a series of amendments that would reduce the bureaucracy involved.

I have made my position clear. I do not believe that the case for seller's packs has been established, but if we are to have them, I do not want them to be added to. I certainly do not want them to be added to by my hon. Friends on the Front Bench.

Fifthly, I think that my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham said that the measure was supported by the Council of Mortgage Lenders. That raises the rather important point that if mortgage lenders think that a seller's pack is an essential feature of house buying, it is perfectly possible for them to require it. It is perfectly possible for the House to enable them to make that requirement by ensuring that, if they want to lay down various conditions for a mortgage, a seller's pack could be one of them. However, why that should involve any of the parties in the House making additions to the statute book simply escapes me. If mortgage lenders think that a seller's pack should be a key feature of the loan that they advance, they already have it in their power to make such a requirement or, indeed, the production of any other report, a condition of their lending—as I hope that the Minister for Housing and Planning will confirm.

None of those arguments justifies the case for adding to legislation. I point out to my hon. Friend that there is a further consideration. Over the next few weeks, I understand that we shall argue that, as a party, we stand for the reduction of bureaucratic requirements—for making it easier for markets to function and for reducing compliance costs. We cannot have our cake and eat it. If we say that we stand for less interference, less government—for not fussing around, requiring people to produce reports—we cannot, in the same breath, produce three pages of laborious detail, including a definition of a half-blood child in the compilation of an energy efficiency report, and expect to be taken seriously as advocates of less government.

I urge my hon. Friend to think again.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to take part in the debate. I shall now destroy the career of my fellow member of the Select Committee on Environmental Audit, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton), by speaking in support of his amendments, but I shall also welcome the Government amendments.

As I said when I intervened on the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon), if we are to have seller's packs and go ahead with this somewhat cumbersome process, let us make them useful for the purchaser and the seller of property and for the mortgage lender, and let them contain information that can be useful to them in deciding what properties they will buy, what work needs to be done on the properties and how much to pay for them. That is a key question, which needs to be addressed here.

As the hon. Member for Sevenoaks said, mortgage lenders could require energy efficiency reports now, just as they require surveys—I am not aware of any legislation that provides that people must have a survey on their home before taking out a mortgage on it, but lenders insist on that—but they have not done so. The requirement needs to be embodied in legislation, because there are wider Government objectives—energy efficiency, reaching our Kyoto targets and ensuring good housing stock—that could be addressed if the requirement was on the face of the Bill. Although I accept that it could be achieved by permissive legislation, it would be far better if we included provision in the Bill, so that mortgage lenders, purchasers and sellers would all work from the presumption that one should know the energy efficiency of the property that one is considering purchasing.

I should like all properties—especially new homes, which are easy to assess for energy efficiency—to display something similar to the fridge sticker, enabling purchasers to know straight away how much energy they consume, how much it is likely to cost to run them and how much might need to spent to make them energy-efficient. Enacting such a requirement could be a huge step towards achieving some of the Kyoto targets and improved energy efficiency in this country.

Most home energy-efficiency measures are relatively cheap. Cavity wall and loft insulation are quite cheap to install. Even condensing boilers are relatively cheap and grants are available for them. Vendors, knowing that their homes would be assessed for energy efficiency, might choose to spend £500 or £600 on home improvements and improved energy efficiency instead of buying a new item of white goods, which would enable them to tell prospective purchasers that the house would save money and energy in the long term. That would contribute to people's increasing awareness when they buy large items such as cars—and homes, these days—of the impact of their spending on the environment.

The Minister should be congratulated on at least moving at this late stage and agreeing to include energy efficiency on the face of the Bill. Will he tell us what details emerged from the experiment in Bristol and what details can be included in such a report, because new schedule 1 has been criticised for not setting out what the energy efficiency report may cover? That might be a fair criticism at one level, but no one in this country, other than in the experiments in Bristol, has tried to compile an energy efficiency report, so we need at least an idea of what one might cover.

If the Minister rejects new schedule 1, I should like him to tell us what else the Government are likely to propose. I take it that the Minister will produce regulations, so it is important that the House be given an inkling of what might be in them. As has been said, such regulations are likely to flow through the House and we shall not get an opportunity to view them or scrutinise them.

What consultation will the Minister undertake with the National Assembly for Wales on the regulations? I am afraid that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is incorrect. I believe that under part I the Minister will be forced to consult the National Assembly.

Mr. Raynsford: We are already doing so.

Mr. Thomas: That is good.

It is a well-known fact that housing conditions in Wales are worse than those in England, although there are regional disparities in England. Is there a way of using

[Mr. Thomas]

the energy efficiency reports from the purchase and sale of homes to supplement the information in home condition surveys?

At the moment, home condition surveys are carried out all too irregularly. We have not had one in Wales for more than 10 years. Therefore, much of the housing expenditure in Wales is based on inaccurate statistics, so money might be wasted. Would the format of the energy efficiency reports under the regulations be useful in developing the statistical information on the condition of homes?

We should either accept Government amendments Nos. 22 and 23—which represent the minimum—or consider the imperfect but considerable virtues of the Conservative party's proposals. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham made it clear why we should go down this route. It would be hugely beneficial not only to those purchasing properties, but to the Government's thinking on how they will achieve their joined-up Kyoto and environmental improvement targets. I hope therefore that energy efficiency reports will be included in the seller's packs, irrespective of their final format.

Mr. Forth: I share the bewilderment of my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon), because I am proud to be a member of a party that espouses the principles of non-interventionism, anti-regulation and opposition to the nanny state. I thought that that was my party's position on such matters. I thought that we were also opposed to old-style patronising paternalism, in which it was assumed that people were generally so cretinous that they required legislation to protect their interests.

I thought that new schedule 1 contained a printing error—apparently, some of my hon. Friends were its authors. I thought that that could not be so because my party espouses the principles of deregulation and the free market and does not patronise individuals, but it seems to have produced three pages of garbage. I thought that that was a mistake until I heard Conservative Front Benchers say that they were the measure's authors and allege that the party supported it. I shall take new schedule 1 at face value and spend a little time examining it to find out whether it is deregulatory and non-interventionist, whether it measures up to the principles that we espouse and whether it will benefit our society.

Mr. Raynsford: Perhaps I can shortcircuit this debate and make time available for the other amendments that hon. Members are keen to debate by making it clear that the Government have the greatest reservations about new schedule 1. We do not intend to support it and, therefore, the right hon. Gentleman need not fear that it will become part of the Bill. If that helps to overcome the slight difficulty in the Conservative party and allows us to move on to other matters, I hope that the House will have been done a service.

Mr. Forth: I am pleased that my limited eloquence has already persuaded the Minister of the position to take on new schedule 1, but I want to carry some more of my hon. Friends with me if I can. So despite the Minister's blandishments, I shall take just a few more minutes to deal with some of the measures in new schedule 1, on which, happily, the Minister and I share a view. I welcome him to the world of deregulation and non-intervention, in which we honour the good common sense of the people of this country and assume that they know what is best for them, and do not need the nanny state to guide them.

Under the proposals, we would interfere in the long-standing relationship between lenders and borrowers, and between the buyers and sellers of property. We would somehow attempt to tell people what it was in their interests to judge when considering a property transaction. The assumption is that something called a report on energy efficiency would add to that process. I am not sure how many people think about an amorphous concept such as energy efficiency when considering the sale or purchase of a house. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks said, the concept is defined nowhere in new schedule 1, and is therefore of only limited use, if any.

I am not sure whether people should take much account of something called energy efficiency when considering the location of a property, or its accommodation, garden, garage, or whatever. They may choose to take account of that, but they may deliberately set it to one side. However, the new schedule would not only make it mandatory for the new process to be interposed in the normal transaction, but its inevitable additional cost would be added arbitrarily, without any choice, to what until now has been a freely undertaken transaction between buyers and sellers.

8.30 pm

That disturbs me at a number of levels. It disturbs me because of the assumption that we in this place—and the lobby groups to whom my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks referred—know better than the 1.5 million people who undertake such transactions in this country every year. That assumption is, at the very least, worth querying or challenging.

Mr. Bercow: For the avoidance of doubt, will my right hon. Friend confirm that, even if he were persuaded that energy efficiency reports were on the whole germane as a factor in the purchase price of properties, he would not think that they should be obligatory on that account?

Mr. Forth: That is right. We have been told that the Council of Mortgage Lenders is very keen on all this. I do not understand that because—following what my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks said—if mortgage lenders were as keen as is alleged, they would already make it a condition of loans that something called an energy efficiency report be carried out as part of the transactions that now take place. Why these excellent people do not do that now, yet say that they would like it to be imposed by statute or by regulation, is a question that only they can answer. I cannot answer it for them. I am puzzled by their approach, because it suggests a duality of attitude—I shall put it no more strongly—that requires an explanation.

Paragraph 1(3) of the new schedule states:

"The lender may, in fixing the amount of any fee to be charged for a qualifying survey, take into account any additional costs reasonably incurred in preparing the energy efficiency report".

The trouble is that it appears that even if the buyer and the seller were mutually to decide, for whatever reason, that they did not want an energy efficiency report, they would be obliged to meet the fee set by the lender in accordance with that sub-paragraph.

That strikes me as unreasonable. Surely if adult citizens who wish to undertake a purchase or sale mutually agree that it is not in their interests, or not part of their requirement, to undertake this extra cost, they should be free to make that decision. I find the mandatory element of the provision—not to say the assumption that people cannot make their own judgment about how far something known as an energy efficiency report will be germane or relevant to the transaction—utterly offensive.

The new schedule gets worse than that. In an attempt to answer the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks so sensibly posed, I draw the House's attention to paragraph 1(4), which attempts to be helpful. It says:

"In sub-paragraph (1) a 'qualifying survey', in relation to a dwelling, means any survey or valuation which includes a physical inspection of both the exterior and the interior of the dwelling."

That raises a question that runs all through the schedule. If the report is to be a cheap, cheerful and easy estimate of energy efficiency, I doubt its value. If it is to be of real value, I suspect that it should properly be detailed, comprehensive, lengthy and probably fairly costly.

The whole concept falls at the very first hurdle. If those who support it argue that it would not cost anybody much more, and would not be long or burdensome, I suspect, as a layman, that it would probably not be of much value. Conversely, if an energy efficiency survey were to be of use to the buyer or seller of the property, I would have thought that, in all reason, it would have to be an expert, detailed, lengthy and necessarily fairly expensive business. That suggests a parallel with the surveys that are either for valuation purposes only or for structural purposes.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): I am trying to grasp the contours of the anarchic landscape that the right hon. Gentleman portrays so eloquently. I am sure that he knows that gas safety and electricity safety certificates must be provided for properties. Does he believe that there is no room for assessing safety factors when selling or renting out a property?

Mr. Forth: That would be my starting point. I would have to be persuaded on a case-by-case basis. I enjoyed lunch with the hon. Gentleman today, and it is good to see him back in the Chamber, albeit not in his usual place. However, he tries to suggest a symmetry between safety and energy efficiency. The two factors are different. Safety is important, and we can legitimately argue, case by case, about whether regulations should try to guarantee it. We cannot make the same argument for alleged or real energy efficiency. I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's parallel.

We are obliged to plough through the new schedule, because that is what Report stage is all about. It gets hopelessly bogged down. I make the point to illustrate the horror of what we are attempting to do, and of what my hon. Friends believe will add to the general joy of life. Paragraph 4(1) states:

"The duty in paragraph 1"—

that of undertaking a survey or assessment—

"does not arise where . . . the lender is a member of the borrower's family".

I suppose that that shows some flexibility. We are relieved of the burdensome requirement if we make a transaction with someone else in the family.

Paragraph 4(2) states:

"For the purposes of sub-paragraph (1) a person is a member of another's family if"—

and it lists spouses and people living together as husband and wife. It does not refer to "partners"; at least we have not gone that far. I suppose that I should be grateful that the new schedule talks about good old husbands and wives. I am surprised that no one has tabled an amendment to try to make it more inclusive. My hon. Friends have fallen down badly on that; there are no gender or ethnicity points here.

The new schedule goes on to list:

"parent, grandparent, child, grandchild, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, nephew or niece."

It is becoming more inclusive. It continues:

"a relationship by marriage shall be treated as a relationship by blood".

I shall not go into all that in detail; it is becoming gruesome. However, for the avoidance of all doubt, my hon. Friends, who are trying to help those who are buying and selling houses, state in the schedule:

"a relationship of the half-blood shall be treated as a relationship of the whole blood".

This is becoming pretty bloody. It also states:

"the stepchild of a person shall be treated as his child."

I assume that my hon. Friends were trying to be helpful. However, the new schedule shows the reasons for the Conservative party's opposition to regulation, intervention and patronising claptrap. We get bogged down in the sort of nonsense that the new schedule represents. We start by imagining that we will help people to buy and sell houses and end by saying that

"a relationship of the half-blood shall be treated as a relationship of the whole blood".

That is desperate stuff. The new schedule is the essence of modernist nonsense.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): By going through the detail of the new schedule, my right hon. Friend may have revealed a weakness, especially in paragraph 4(3)(c), which states:

"the stepchild of a person shall be treated as his child."

If the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) had adopted the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), he would have been able to escape the provisions of the schedule when he offered him the loan for the house in Notting Hill.

Mr. Forth: How much those two were worried about energy efficiency, I shall leave to my hon. Friend's imagination. We had better pass over that fairly quickly.

I do not want to be diverted, as I am determined to get through the new schedule in the time available, so as to do full justice to it; I would not want my hon. Friends to feel short-changed. It deserves the full attention of the House, and I am trying to be helpful.

As a deregulatory, non-interventionist party—I note the identities of some of my hon. Friends in whose names the new schedule stands—we provide in paragraph 5 that the

"Secretary of State shall make regulations".

It is in the open that the new schedule requires the making of regulations—no doubt all in the best possible spirit and with the best of motives, as such requirements usually are.

[Mr. Forth]

However, let us be under no illusion about the purpose behind the schedule. The regulations will specify the requirements

"which must be met by the lender in relation to the preparation of an energy efficiency report."

We still do not have the details that were asked for earlier, but at least we can understand the mandatory element. The requirement is there for all to see.

Intriguingly, paragraph 5 adds that these

"regulations may . . . require a report to include . . . a statement *recommending measures which could be taken for the purpose of* improving energy efficiency".

Some doubt arises. I shall make a few comments about energy efficiency, and ask whether it is as important as is claimed in respect of taxation measures, because I do not want to be completely negative. I want to try to be helpful. I shall make some suggestions about how things could be tackled better, in the spirit of seeking to improve the life of our fellow citizens.

The provision before us simply requires a statement that recommends measures. Presumably we shall have a rather expensive analysis—if it is to be any good—of a quick, cheap and cheerful look around. It will say, "We really think that you should have cavity wall insulation or double glazing." The individual will not have to follow that advice, but he might think about it. We shall spend a great deal of money on stating why a building is not energy-efficient, only to say rather mildly, "We think that on balance it might be quite a good idea if you followed our advice."

The provision falls between two stools. Either we insist on people becoming energy-efficient or we leave them to their own devices, which would be my preference. We are as near as we shall get to what my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks said that he would expect. Paragraph 5(4) states:

"Regulations under this paragraph may not require an energy efficiency report to contain any information in respect of the dwelling which is not readily ascertainable on a visual inspection of so much of the exterior and interior of the dwelling as is accessible without undue difficulty to the person undertaking the inspection".

I suspect that that means that someone might not quite make it into the loft. He certainly will not squeeze himself into the cavities of the wall. He may not even get into the basement.

What will be the use of the provision if the requirement is for someone, even if he is relatively expert, to stroll round the building to have a quick look at it, followed by a quick stroll inside, and then make an assessment of energy efficiency? I fail to see the point. Either the process should be undertaken properly or it should not be undertaken at all. The very words of this long and complicated schedule seem to undermine its purposes at almost every turn.

The one piece of good news that I have found so far—I hope that this helps my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton)—is that sub-paragraph (7) states:

"In making regulations under this paragraph, the Secretary of State shall have regard to the cost of preparing an energy efficiency report."

I suppose we should regard that as moderately good news, but what does it mean? Will the Secretary of State say, "If the report costs more than 25 quid to prepare, I would not do it", or will he say something else? That is the only way in which I can read the provision. If it means anything, it is that if the report is expert, comprehensive and very expensive, we probably should not have it, but if it is cheap and cheerful, that should be all right. Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps we shall learn more about such matters in this little debate.

The bad news returns, because paragraph 6(1) states:

"If the borrower suffers loss by reason of the failure of the lender to comply with his duty under paragraph 1"—

that is the beloved bureaucratese—

"the borrower is entitled to compensation".

Here we go. There is a serious problem developing in this country with the blame and compensation culture, and the fact that it is encouraged and written into a new schedule—and therefore, potentially, into statute—is to be deprecated and discouraged. I should not like to see much more of that sort of thing.

8.45 pm

There is a better solution to the problem. However, I shall pose a question to those on the Government and Opposition Front Benches before giving it. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) mentioned the Kyoto protocol, which seems to absorb many people for many of their waking hours. Not that long ago—and I say this strictly in the context of energy efficiency—it was argued that the answer to wicked vehicle emissions was to increase tax on vehicle fuel, which would reduce those emissions. At the same time, in some people's book, another argument said that domestic fuel caused even more environmental pollution than vehicle emissions. There was therefore an argument, which the previous Government accepted, for increasing tax on domestic fuel for exactly the same reason as we increased tax on vehicle fuel.

We did that, and were roundly criticised by the then Opposition, who are now the Government. The environmentalists did not quite know where to stand on the matter: some said yes and some said no. We are now in a curious position. Apparently, it is okay to tax vehicle fuel to reduce emissions—but as soon the Government got in, they reduced tax on domestic fuel. I never understood the logic behind that, and I still do not. If we are to be serious about domestic energy efficiency, there is a good old-fashioned market solution—to increase tax on domestic fuel. That approach is an alternative to the regulatory approach, and I propose it for exactly the same reasons as the environmentalists use when they argue that we should increase vehicle tax.

Dr. Iddon: Tell the pensioners.

Mr. Forth: Well, pensioners drive motor vehicles. The hon. Gentleman may not know, but pensioners have been hit hard by the "environmentally justified" swingeing tax on vehicle fuels. If he claims to be an environmentalist, how can he look the environment in the eye, having presumably supported a reduction in domestic fuel tax and, by implication, encouraged pollution by encouraging the wasteful use of domestic fuel? It goes around and it comes around in various intriguing ways.

The new schedule vaguely attempts, by regulation, to intervene in a market process—a private transaction between freely choosing buyers and sellers. It contains no

detail to guarantee that it will deliver the results that it seeks. I fear that my hon. Friends may have overlooked the market solution with which, I would have thought, we were instinctively in tune. All in all, my hon. Friends have a lot more work to do to persuade me that we should support the provision; my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks made a similar point.

I am aware of the passage of time and the restrictions imposed by the Government's arbitrary and unnecessary time limits on these debates—so, as it appears that the Minister and I are in broad agreement on the proposal before us, I look forward to celebrating that by listening to what he has to say.

Mr. Raynsford: I hope that I will not disappoint the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). I shall come to the same conclusion as him, but for almost exactly opposite reasons. I hope at least to give him a little intellectual challenge.

On Second Reading and in the debate on clause 7 in Committee, I made it clear that the Government fully support the inclusion of energy efficiency information in home survey reports, and that we intend to make that information part and parcel of the seller's pack. There is an overwhelming argument for making that information available. It is when people purchase a new property that they are most likely to consider improvements and changes, and it is right that they should have information. The measure does not require them to do anything, but the information will be available to enable them to reach an informed judgment about whether it is sensible to carry out improvements to the energy efficiency of the property.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) asked what was included in the Bristol pilot. The energy efficiency survey covered the SAP, or standard assessment procedure, rating for the property; the potential SAP rating—that is, the amount by which the energy efficiency could be improved; the annual heating costs associated with the current SAP rating; and the CO_2 emissions, for the benefit of those rightly interested in environmental concerns.

Crucially, the pilot also included advice on measures that would improve the energy efficiency of the property, including both the estimated installation cost and an indication of the energy saving, and therefore the cost saving, per year, thereby giving people information about the long-term pay-back period for investment in energy efficiency measures. That is a wholly sensible approach providing information to the public at the time when it is most useful to them in helping them reach decisions about whether to proceed to improve the energy efficiency of their home. That is the information that we intend to include as part of the proposed home condition report.

Clause 7 deals with the seller's pack. The clause gives the Secretary of State power to prescribe the contents of the pack and gives an indication of the sort of information that we believe should be included. Information concerning energy efficiency could be covered by clause 7(4). That was the point that I made in Committee, where I expressed the view that the Bill already provided for that. Because we had shown, through the Bristol pilot, our intention of including energy efficiency information in the seller's pack, there was no need to be prescriptive in the Bill.

However, to put the matter beyond doubt, we have taken note of the concerns that were expressed in the House and in Committee, not least by the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster). I am delighted that he should take some of the credit. He can send another e-mail home on the subject.

Having taken note of those concerns, we decided that there should be a mention of energy efficiency in the Bill. Government amendment No. 22 specifies that the energy efficiency of a property is relevant information for inclusion in the seller's pack. Government amendment No. 23 is consequential and ensures that information on energy efficiency can be included in the home condition report. That makes it clear beyond doubt that that is intended and will happen.

Let me deal with new clauses 13 and 14. I am sorry to intrude on the private grief of the Conservative party in relation to their possible impact. New clauses 13 and 14 are modelled on the private Member's Bills tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford), which served an important purpose in raising these issues. However, time has moved on, and we have chosen to adopt a different, more comprehensive and more effective route to achieve the objective that my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham sought to achieve.

New schedule 1 is designed to place an obligation on lenders to commission an energy report when they carry out a valuation inspection for mortgage purposes. In Committee, I acknowledged that the measure could in theory enable an interim partial system to be put in place on a slightly shorter time scale than that for the introduction of the seller's pack, but I pointed out the fundamental objections to that. We believe that the seller's pack, with its comprehensive package of proposals, will provide a more appropriate route to ensuring that energy efficiency information is made available to all home buyers.

The proposed new schedule would apply only where an application for a mortgage was made and where, as a result, a survey was carried out on the property. However, we know that 25 per cent. of properties are bought without a mortgage. In those cases, the measure would bring no benefit at all. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) asks about the other 75 per cent. He will know, because we debated the matter in Committee, that there is a growing trend among mortgage lenders to move towards desk-top valuation. He will know, because he will have studied carefully the wording of the amendment, which he will shortly have to defend, that there is no provision for the requirement to apply if there has not been a personal inspection of the property. If a desk-top valuation had been carried out, the provision would not bite. Such valuations are a growing trend among lenders and the proportion of properties that would not be covered is likely to increase.

For all those reasons, we do not believe that the measure would achieve what its promoters hope. We have no objection to energy reports being provided on a voluntary basis as part of the mortgage lending process. The hon. Members for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) and for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) made the point that lenders could provide such reports if they wanted to, and we agree with that and would be perfectly happy for such a proposal to proceed. However, we see no justification for making such provision compulsory, since to do so would be confusing, cumbersome and unduly complicated. It would require sufficient surveyors to be trained and certified to carry out the work, because not all surveyors and valuers currently have the necessary skills to do an

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energy rating assessment. As that training and certifying would be going on at the same time as the training for home condition report certification, there would inevitably be two separate training and certification processes going on in parallel. That would clearly be undesirable, unduly cumbersome and bureaucratic. We are satisfied that our proposals offer the best way to achieve the objectives that the proposed new schedule seeks to achieve.

I assure the hon. Member for Sevenoaks that he is not alone in opposing the new schedule tabled by Conservative Front-Bench Members, because we shall not support it either, for the reasons that I have explained. I hope that, equally, I have assured those hon. Members concerned about energy efficiency that we are utterly committed to it and we shall achieve it by a more effective route.

On the question of the time scale, the hon. Member for Bath expressed the view that the home seller's pack process might be delayed. The one proposal that would be more likely than any other to delay its introduction would be a requirement for an interim scheme, since all the training and certification involved would delay and obfuscate the process of putting in place the necessary certification scheme for the full home condition report.

There could have been an interim of perhaps only six to nine months—the amendment that was tabled would leave it to the Secretary of State to decide the period—one year after implementation. The schedule itself allows different parts of the provision to come in at different times. No one can therefore tell exactly when it will come into effect. However, it is likely to be a matter of only a few months before the introduction of the seller's pack. Given the risk of a great deal of extra cost, confusion and bureaucracy, it would not make sense to introduce an interim scheme for that short period of time. The Government's proposal is the right way forward and I recommend it. I urge the House to reject the amendment.

Mr. Loughton: This is not an easy debate to which to respond. I am bitterly disappointed, because I have never seen such a volte face by a Minister executed by the use of the phrase, "Time has moved on." Many of the Minister's colleagues will also feel bitterly let down. The measure that he and other Labour Members supported in Committee—and which the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) introduced in a private Member's Bill—was acceptable to him and to the majority of hon. Members. Under cover of the phrase, "Time has moved on," it has been completely cast aside.

The Minister made no attempt to respond to the points that I made, because he was still trailing the nonsense, which I thought I had pre-empted, about parallel schemes running together. He merely read out the notes that had been prepared for him before the debate, not having listened to a line of the objections that I made. The Government's mind is utterly closed on this issue and I fear that we shall get no further.

The great tragedy is that virtually none of part I has been debated on Report, yet we now have just one minute left. Bearing that in mind, I shall sit down so that we can move on to the next group of amendments. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 1

MEANING OF "RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY" AND OTHER EXPRESSIONS

Amendment proposed:

No. 28, in page 2, line 3, leave out—

'a freehold interest or a long leasehold interest in the property'

and insert—

'the freehold interest or the interest under a long lease'.—*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment No. 4, in clause 3, in page 2, line 41, at end insert—

'unless the property is explicitly advertised as being sold "without seller's pack".'.

Government amendments Nos. 29 to 40.

Amendment No. 7, in clause 7, in page 5, line 45, at end insert—

'save that these shall not include local authority searches.'.

Amendment No. 6, in page 6, line 2, at end insert—

'save that these shall not include a survey report or home condition report.'.

Amendment No. 8, in page 6, line 2, at end insert—

'and the term "characteristics" shall include information about risk of flooding.'.

Amendment No. 1, in page 6, line 2, at end insert—

'( ) an account of the suitability of the property for occupation by people with disabilities.'.

Government amendment No. 42.

Amendment No. 9, in page 6, line 24, at end insert—

'(9) All the documents and information contained in the seller's packs shall be confidential to the seller, a person acting on his behalf as an estate agent and any bona fide buyer or potential buyer.'.

Amendment No. 3, in clause 13, page 8, line 38, leave out subsection (3) and insert—

'( ) A statutory instrument which contains regulations under this Part is not to be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament.'.

Government amendments Nos. 44, 45 and 48 to 50.

Mr. Waterson: In the 30 seconds that remain, I wish to speak in favour of our eight amendments—

It being Nine o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER, *pursuant to Order [this day] proceeded to put the Question already proposed from the Chair.*

Amendment made.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *then proceeded to put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that hour.*

Clause 3

DUTIES OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON WHERE A PROPERTY IS ON THE MARKET

Amendments made: No. 29, in page 2, line 42, after "possession" insert "or under his control".

No. 30, in page 3, line 4 leave out "contained" and insert "included".

No. 31, in page 3, line 23, leave out "contained" and insert "included".—*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Clause 4

OTHER DUTIES OF PERSON ACTING AS ESTATE AGENT

Amendments made: No. 32, in page 3, line 41, after "possession", insert "or under his control".

No. 33, in page 3, line 42, leave out "copy of the".

No. 34, in page 4, line 11, leave out "contained" and insert "included".—*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Clause 6

DEFENCES

Amendments made: No. 35, in page 4, line 40, leave out "copy of the".

No. 36, in page 4, line 40, after "possession" insert "or under his control".

No. 37, in page 5, line 15, leave out "copy of the".

No. 38, in page 5, line 15, after "possession" insert "or under his control".—*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Clause 7

CONTENTS OF SELLERS' PACKS

Amendments made: No. 39, in page 5, line 20, leave out from beginning of line to "must" in line 25 and insert—

'(1) The Secretary of State may make regulations prescribing—

(a) the documents to be included in a seller's pack required for a residential property by section 3(2) or 4(2); and

(b) particular information which is to be included in or excluded from any prescribed document.

(2) A document prescribed under subsection (1)'.

No. 40, in page 5, line 34, leave out—

'in relation to a residential property'.

No. 22, in page 6, line 2, at end insert—

'(dd) the energy efficiency of the property;'.

No. 41, in page 6, line 13, leave out subsection (7) and insert—

'(7) The regulations may require a prescribed document—

(a) to be in such form as may be prescribed; and

(b) to be prepared by a person of a prescribed description on such terms (if any) as may be prescribed.

(7A) The terms mentioned in subsection (7)(b) may include terms which enable provisions of the contract under which the document is to be prepared to be enforced by—

(a) a potential or actual buyer;

(b) a mortgage lender; or

(c) any other person involved in the sale of the property who is not a party to that contract.'.

No. 42, in page 6, line 24, at end insert—

'( ) In this section "prescribed" means prescribed by regulations under this section.'.—*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Clause 8

HOME CONDITION REPORTS

Amendments made: No. 23, in page 6, line 26, leave out from "document" to "which" in line 27 and insert—

'dealing with matters mentioned in section 7(5)(d) or (dd) (reports on physical condition or energy efficiency)'.

No. 43, in page 7, line 3, leave out paragraph (c) and insert—

'(c) for facilitating the resolution of complaints against members of the scheme;'.—*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Clause 15

GENERAL INTERPRETATION

Amendments made: No. 44, in page 9, line 34, at end insert—

'(2A) A document which is not in electronic form is only to be regarded as being under the control of a person while it is in the possession of another if he has the right to take immediate possession of the document on demand (and without payment).'.

No. 45, in page 9, line 36, after "possession", insert "or under his control".—*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Clause 24

APPLICATION OF PART VI OF 1996 ACT

Amendment made: No. 46, in page 14, line 25, leave out Clause 24.—*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Clause 26

APPLICATIONS FOR HOUSING ACCOMMODATION

Amendment made: No. 47, in page 16, line 37, leave out from "person" to "to" in line 40 and insert—

'is an applicant for an allocation of housing accommodation shall not be divulged (without his consent)'.—*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Schedule 1

FIXED PENALTIES AND ENFORCEMENT

Amendments made: No. 48, in page 21, line 29, leave out "forming part of" and insert "included in".

No. 49, in page 21, line 35, leave out "forming part of" and insert "included in".

No. 50, in page 21, line 39, leave out—

'comprised in the seller's pack'

and insert—

'included in the seller's pack in question'.—*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Schedule 3

REPEALS

Amendment made: No. 51, in page 25, line 39, column 3, leave out "Section 159(5)(b)".—*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Order for Third Reading read.

9.1 pm

Mr. Raynsford: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Unfortunately, our debate has been attenuated because of the divisions in the Conservative party over the issue of energy efficiency, but it has nevertheless covered a number of important issues.

The Bill fulfils important Government commitments to improve the home buying and selling process, and to strengthen the protection available to homeless people. It is an important part of the Government's strategy to

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ensure that everyone has the opportunity and choice of a decent home, as has been set out in our housing Green Paper and widely welcomed.

The Bill improves the housing market for the benefit of the public when they are selling or buying homes, when they seek help because they are at risk of homelessness or have become homeless, when they are in housing need and are applying for social housing, and when they are existing tenants of social housing seeking to move within the social housing sector.

The proposals in part I form part of a wider package of reforms to help up to 2 million individuals and families who buy and sell their homes each year. We are introducing a modern, more streamlined system that is easier and faster for consumers, avoids unnecessary stress and disappointment and offers value for money.

In Committee, it was suggested that sellers' packs would add to the cost of selling homes, that buyers and lenders would not trust home condition reports commissioned by sellers, and that it was unnecessary to impose criminal sanctions on those who market homes without sellers' packs. Those concerns are not well grounded. There will be a small additional cost for people who would not normally commission a survey, but we believe that that cost will be more than outweighed by the benefits of a speedier transaction process and reductions in the huge abortive costs of the current inefficient system, which are about £350 million a year.

In developing the home condition report, we will set up a certification scheme to ensure consistent and high-standard inspections and reports. As we have made clear in recent amendments, inspectors will be liable to sellers, buyers and lenders. We believe that everyone will have confidence in the inspections, will rely on them, and will be able to take action in the event of any defect.

Sanctions are necessary. Without them, the temptation would be too great for freeloaders to sell their homes without a seller's pack, while reaping the benefits of a pack for the homes that they bought. Just one weak link would break the chain, thus perpetuating the misery of the current system.

We have looked carefully at the appropriateness of criminal sanctions. As we pointed out repeatedly in Committee, they are consistent with similar sanctions—for example, those in the Property Misdescriptions Act 1991, and others applying to landlord and tenant law. Currently, 95 per cent. of home sales are conducted through estate agents. Estate agents would be responsible for having sellers' packs when they were marketing a home, and in the vast majority of cases it would be estate agents who faced sanctions if they failed to comply with the law.

Additionally, local trading standards officers will have clear discretion—I emphasised this point repeatedly in Committee—to take the action that they regard as appropriate where they find a person marketing a home without a seller's pack. They will have scope and discretion to offer advice, to give a warning, to issue a fixed-penalty notice or, ultimately, to prosecute. Only the option of prosecution would lead to a criminal record.

We are absolutely clear that, in the overwhelming majority of cases, where an honest and simple mistake had been made, there would be no obligation for trading standards officers to do more than offer advice or give a warning. In the case of any individual householder, there would be little or no purpose, unless there were exceptional circumstances, in doing more than issuing a fixed penalty notice, so the concept of large numbers of innocent individuals being dragged before the courts to face criminal charges is an exaggeration and not properly founded.

We must, however, have sanctions, including criminal sanctions, to cope with the risk of what I hope would be a very small number of unprincipled estate agents seeking to subvert the whole purpose of the scheme by marketing properties persistently without a seller's pack and paying no heed to initial warnings from trading standards officials. I hope that I have made it clear that we have provided a range of responses to allow a proportionate response depending on the circumstances, and that the fears that have been expressed about sanctions are misplaced.

I have listened to the concerns voiced by a number of my hon. Friends about low-demand areas and low-value properties. I have made it clear that we are prepared to consider measures where seller's pack requirements would cause particular difficulties. The Bill provides us with a power to make such exemptions, but we must consider that issue carefully. Our research indicates that seller's packs would offer benefits in low-value areas and we must avoid further stigmatising properties in areas of declining demand and value. We are working up a number of options in a paper that I hope to issue for consultation shortly. That will allow us to have a thorough and considered debate about the best way in which to balance the conflicting pressures on that important issue.

The proposals in part I are based on extensive research and piloting. We will continue to work with the key professionals and consumer representatives in developing the details of our proposals, especially the home condition report and the supporting certification scheme, so that seller's packs can be introduced as planned in 2003.

Mr. David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion): Does my hon. Friend agree that seller's packs could be of particular benefit to potential purchasers in the residential leasehold sector, who currently face service charge and insurance demands that they find baffling and by which they often feel cheated? When looking at the regulations on the content of seller's packs, will he consider, particularly in the light of the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill, which we will examine soon, whether, for example, the last set of certified service charge accounts and information about agencies providing reliable advice to leaseholders and potential commonholders might form part of the packs?

Mr. Raynsford: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He has been assiduous over recent years in pursuing the interests of leaseholders, who form a significant proportion of the residents in his constituency. Like me, he will be pleased at the progress of the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill, which has had its Second Reading in another place and will bring extensive benefits to leaseholders.

It is certainly our intention that the seller's pack will contain detailed information that will be of real value and relevance to leaseholders, including information about

service charges. I would like to consider the wider issue of the availability of advice because, clearly, there is a question about the appropriateness and reliability of advice offered by different agencies. It is our wish that seller's packs should be primarily factual information and should not be open to any possible misinterpretation. It is certainly our intention to provide detailed information on service charges and other relevant information relating to the management of the lease. I should be more than happy to consult my hon. Friend and other hon. Members as we work up the proposals.

Part II will enable local authorities to provide better help in finding a settled home for those who each year face homelessness through no fault of their own. Our proposals require local authorities to adopt a more strategic approach to tackling the causes of homelessness and preventing its recurrence. The Bill will require local authorities to review homelessness in their area at least every five years and to put in place a multi-agency strategy for preventing homelessness, ensuring that adequate accommodation and support are available.

The Bill will encourage a more co-ordinated approach by requiring housing and social services authorities to take the homelessness strategy into account when meeting their responsibilities. We are also removing unnecessary restrictions that can limit local authorities' abilities to find sustainable housing solutions and offer real choice to homeless people, to others in housing need and to existing tenants, thereby helping to create more sustainable communities and tackling social exclusion.

Evidence demonstrates that a high proportion of homeless people who end up sleeping rough come from institutional backgrounds, and we are adding to the priority-needs groups some new categories of vulnerable people, including young children who have come out of care and others who have an institutional background and are homeless and vulnerable. That is a sensible and humane policy. I am glad that the Opposition did not pursue at great length today their unfounded claim that we are seeking to give ex-prisoners housing priority over other applicants. As has been well established, that was never our intention, and it is certainly not the implication of the Bill.

Taken with the Government's sound economic policies, our substantial increases in capital investment in housing and the wider policies set out in the housing Green Paper, the Homes Bill will help us ensure that everyone has the opportunity of a decent home. It is important reforming legislation, and I commend it to the House.

9.12 pm

Mr. Waterson: There has been a surreal note to today's debates which graphically demonstrates the dangers inherent in the Government's regular use of guillotine motions. The House will readily understand why most of my remarks on Third Reading will deal with part I, on seller's packs. As I said at the start of the programme motion debate, to the public, part I is every bit as important as part II—I see the Minister nodding in agreement—and although part I may affect different categories of people from those affected by part II, it is just as important.

Whether one uses the figure of 1.5 million people or that of 2 million, as the Minister did, every year a very great number of people are engaged in buying or selling their own homes. For some people—those who do not have to obtain mortgages or are close friend of the former Paymaster General—there is not much of a problem. For most people, however, it is a time of great anxiety and worry. That is why we find it inconceivable that the Government really wish to make that process even more worrisome.

We have not had the opportunity to debate all the groups of amendments and new clauses dealing with seller's packs duties, seller's packs offences and home condition reports. Although we have had a lengthy—some might even say exhaustive—debate on energy efficiency reports as a part of seller's packs, the vast majority of seller's packs issues, on which we spent more than half our time in Committee, have not been addressed at all in our debates today. I think that I had about 20 seconds to speak to our amendments in the sixth group, and that was it. Of course Ministers do not care, but I think that those who send us to this place will care that an issue that is important to very many people has simply not been debated.

On the subject of seller's packs, it is important to remember two preliminary issues. First, we must consider part I of the Bill against the background of the clear promises made by the Labour party in opposition. Labour Members do not like to be reminded of what the party said on this issue as on so many others, but it is clear that it promised people that it would tackle gazumping.

Whether tackling gazumping is ever likely to be a practical proposition is a matter for argument, but that is not the issue. The issue is that the Labour party led people to believe that that was what would happen. It was a surprise to find, therefore, when we tore open our mint copies of the Bill before Christmas, that that was the one matter that was not addressed.

I am sure that the Minister will say that the Government are trying to tackle gazumping by making the process of house buying quicker. However, we do not accept that the new system will make the process quicker. Moreover, if gazumpers are people who find that they can get more for their homes than they thought—to put it as neutrally as possible—why should the fact that the process is quicker make a difference? I have never received a satisfactory answer to that question.

For what it is worth, I shall repeat what I said on Second Reading and in Committee: the one matter that the Bill does not address is gazumping.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I did not have the pleasure of serving on the Standing Committee, although I spoke on Second Reading. Will my hon. Friend say whether the Minister gave any indication in Committee that he would consider rescinding this measure—in the event that he is still in a position to do so—if it does not reduce the average time that transactions take to complete?

Mr. Waterson: We did not get that far. Most of the significant elements in the Bill will be implemented by regulation. We have not seen the draft regulations yet, although we have had some hints of what they might contain. However, the Government do not propose that the new rules will come into force until 2003. When we win the election, we will have a long and hard look at whether they will make any difference. The betting is that

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the measure will not be retained on the statute book. The Government's attempts to force the Bill through in a short time will therefore have been for nothing.

When he was shadow Secretary of State for the Environment, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) published a pamphlet on gazumping. He wrote that the Labour party was proposing a system under which a seller or buyer who went back on an agreement would be obliged to meet the costs that the other party had incurred in progressing to exchange of contracts. In its 1997 election manifesto, the Labour party said:

"The problems of gazumping have reappeared. Those who break their bargains should be liable to pay the costs inflicted on others, in particular legal and survey costs."

People who decided to vote Labour on the basis of the party's policy to end gazumping would therefore have been gulled.

As for the contents of the seller's pack, no one would contest the fact that it makes sense to put together, at the beginning of a transaction, a bundle of documents that one has to get together sooner or later, to try and shorten the process. Indeed, if one is buying a new property, the developer usually puts the basic documents together.

Our concerns are threefold: first, criminal sanctions should not be imposed. Secondly, to require a home condition report to be included in the pack is unrealistic and unhelpful. Thirdly, to require local searches to be included is also unrealistic and unhelpful.

Surveys, as we know, can be out of date. Some properties in the parts of the country worst affected by the recent flooding could have had a survey six months ago, but the condition of the property might be very different now.

Local authority searches have a relatively short shelf life—a maximum of, say, three months—and it would be prudent to renew them. We have never fully understood why local searches should be an issue. It has always been possible to carry out what is called a personal search, which means effectively paying a bit extra for the articled clerk in one's solicitors to go to the local authority offices and carry out the search then and there.

The basis for the entire structure set out in part I is the alleged success of the pilot scheme conducted in Bristol. We dispute that for a variety of reasons, all of which will be familiar to Ministers who were in Committee. The sample was supposed to consist of 250 people. The figure eventually was 180 or thereabouts, of whom 90 completed. As if that were not bad enough, of that 90, a third were brand new properties—Beazer Homes, although that company is probably called something else now, as it has been taken over since then. So we are looking at a terribly small sample in one city in England as the basis for this scheme.

The Minister will no doubt say that in Bristol everyone thought that it worked fine. The president of the Law Society—the Minister's new best friend—thinks that it is wonderful, the best thing since sliced bread. I explained during the debate on the timetable motion why I thought, with the greatest respect to the president of the Law Society, that he might be enthusiastic. Even more so, no wonder that the level of satisfaction discovered among the participants of the pilot scheme in Bristol was pretty high. I suggest that it was because they were given their seller's packs, including their survey reports, courtesy of the taxpayer. More than £300,000 was pumped into the local property scene for the purposes of that pilot scheme.

We question, as do people intimately involved in buying and selling property, how anyone can rely on the results of that scheme. It also came to light in Committee that the local authority was giving priority to searches connected with the pilot scheme over and above those that came before it in the usual way.

I complained in the debate on the timetable motion that Ministers were unwilling to accept advice from those who ought to know. I spent some time describing the Minister's dismissal of these people. Let us remember what certain organisations have said. Mr. Michael King, chairman of the Law Society's conveyancing and land law committee, said:

"The take up of the sellers pack during the pilot was disappointing. The Law Society does not believe that on this information it should be made compulsory. The Law Society remains to be convinced as to the effectiveness of the proposed pack."

Mr. Michael Coogan, director general of the Council of Mortgage Lenders, said:

"the evidence in support of introducing sellers information packs is not robust and such packs could prove to be unpopular with consumers. The Bristol pilot has failed to demonstrate that SIPs significantly improve the process and that there is widespread support from the professionals in the process."

Mr. Hammond: I should probably draw the attention of the House to my registered interests. One of the great flaws in the condition survey involved in the seller's pack is that it may not be acceptable to lenders, so buyers may have to commission a further report. Did the Minister tell the Committee whether any serious progress had been made on persuading lenders to agree always to accept the condition reports in the seller's packs?

Mr. Waterson: I can tell my hon. Friend that the Minister had a fairly disastrous appearance early last December at the annual conference of the Council of Mortgage Lenders. One of the things that he tried to do was to bully its members into accepting that very principle. The CML takes the view rather robustly, although a little less robustly than it used to thanks to the Minister's pressure on it, that it is for lenders to decide what evidence they need in order to advance money for property transactions.

My hon. Friend has brought me to the next major issue. Who will benefit from the proposals? We know already that many people do not have full structural surveys done. It is important to remember that the home condition report is nothing like a full structural survey; it is fairly limited in scope and detail. I appreciate that the final form is in a state of flux. We have seen at least two draft versions. It is far from being a structural survey.

I was talking to people last night at the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors annual presidential dinner. Anyone in the business will say that unless a property is relatively new, one is advised to have a full structural survey. That is not to say that many people do not take a chance and do not have one done. So, as a matter of law, people will have a home condition report. They may well have a full structural survey as well. Even in the Bristol pilot scheme, a third of the people involved had their own

report done, despite the fact that they were given a free home condition report courtesy of the Government. The lender may insist on a separate survey report and then still insist on the usual separate valuation, for the moment anyway.

So, leaving aside the updating issue that I mentioned a moment ago, we have the potential for a series of surveys on a given property. Those in the business have estimated that up to £700 will be added to a transaction.

Mr. Raynsford: Wrong.

Mr. Waterson: The Minister argues that broadly those costs would be incurred anyway. I hope that I do not do his argument an injustice. Whether that is right or wrong, there is no doubt that front-loaded costs will, for the first time, be imposed on the seller, not the buyer.

One of the main concerns of organisations such as the CML is that there will be a significant effect on the supply of property on the market. It is perfectly true that some people test the market by putting their property on it and seeing what happens. If they get no interest, they take it off and no one is any worse off and no harm is done. There is real concern that speculative would-be sellers will be deterred by the front-loaded costs of putting a property on the market.

The Minister referred to the separate but related issue of what happens in low-demand, low-value areas. A significant number of Labour Back Benchers expressed concern about that on Second Reading. In fairness, I recognise that the Department has done some work in Bradford and Burnley on the problem. The Minister mentioned a moment ago today's Government press release, which says that the Government intend to consult on the options. Of course, that means that they have still not thought of the answer. They cannot take out a council tax band—during our debates in Committee, we eliminated that possibility. It is difficult simply to draw a line on a map.

In his press release and indeed in his speech, the Minister for Housing and Planning has, with breathtaking cheek, adopted the word used on Second Reading by my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry)—"stigmatising". I make no complaint about that, because the word is the right one. My right hon. Friend pointed out that, in some parts of the country, one might produce the very result that one was trying to avoid by telling people that they did not need a seller's pack, thereby stigmatising the area—perhaps, for example, a former mining village. It is clear that Ministers still have no solution to that problem, so they are putting it out for consultation. In Committee, we suggested all the possible options—more than once. None of them seems to have commended itself to Ministers.

Lest it be thought that those are merely scares thought up by the Opposition, or by the Law Society, estate agents or mortgage lenders, we should consider the excellent speech made by the hon. Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) on Second Reading. He was in the Chamber earlier, but some prescience has made him disappear. The hon. Gentleman has practised as a conveyancing solicitor for many years. Possibly, for that reason, he did not make it on to the Standing Committee.

The hon. Gentleman thought that the proposals would make only a marginal difference. He suggested that there might be problems because unscrupulous sellers could hawk a seller's pack around. He made the point that I made earlier—many conveyancers and solicitors already use a type of seller's pack for some of the documentation. He referred to the point that the Law Society has been trying to make to the Minister for a long time: the Law Society and others are already working towards streamlining the system—with the use of e-conveyancing and the like.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the extra cost—possibly £700—and the need for extra surveys. He expressed concerns about criminal sanctions.

Mr. Love: My hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) is attending a legal dinner this evening. He wanted to contribute to the debate; he was in the Chamber earlier.

Mr. Waterson: I am grateful for that intervention, but I thought that I had already pointed out that the hon. Member for Upminster was in the Chamber earlier. I am sure that the legal dinner is most interesting. I hope that when the hon. Gentleman reads *Hansard* tomorrow, he will be impressed. He can skip over some of the earlier passages, but when he reads my speech, he will be pleased that I took so seriously what he had to say—obviously, so did his own Whips.

The hon. Gentleman knows what he is talking about. If the Minister will not even listen to him, we are in a serious state.

Mr. Raynsford: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I have hesitated to intervene, but I really could not let that go on. He will know well, because I raised the matter in Committee and made it clear to him, that, following the Second Reading debate, I invited my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) to discuss the whole issue with me. We had a most useful and constructive discussion and I am sure that I put to rest many of the concerns that my hon. Friend voiced on Second Reading.

Mr. Waterson: I hope that the Minister will not take it amiss when I point out that we have only his word for that—we do not have the hon. Member for Upminster, although I am sure that the bruises have started to go down.

As we pointed out in Committee, when the Minister made that point, it would have been nice if the rest of us had been privy to what the hon. Member for Upminster had to say. When it comes to practical conveyancing, I prefer his comments to those of the Minister.

Mr. Hammond: My hon. Friend might be interested to know that the Minister seems to be a bit selective about which hon. Members who took part in the Second Reading debate he wants to discuss this matter with, because I wrote to the Minister after that debate, asking him whether he could clarify some unanswered questions, and I have not yet had a reply.

Mr. Waterson: That is very worrying, because I know that my hon. Friend knows about these things. I do rather resent the Minister because, as a result of his systematic denigration in Committee of almost every organisation and lobbying group that has a connection with

[Mr. Waterson]

conveyancing, my mailbag has swollen to Gargantuan proportions as a result of people writing to ask who this chap is and how he dares to talk about them in that way.

I should have said earlier that I do not have an interest to declare. As I said in previous debates, I am a solicitor but not one who has ever practised in conveyancing matters.

We now come to the question of criminal sanctions. The Minister said that he was confident that sanctions were necessary. He then undermined his position by saying—it was an ever louder theme in Committee—that he did not think that essentially innocent people would find themselves in trouble with the weights and measures officers, hard pressed as they already are, who will have to try to enforce the legislation.

We disagree with the Minister now, as we did in Committee. It is simply not open to Ministers, even in the Government, where they have an extremely exaggerated notion of their own importance, to say that people will not be pursued or prosecuted for breaches of the law. If we are creating a new law, the breach of which is in theory subject to criminal sanctions, Ministers cannot wave their hands and say that people will not be prosecuted except in extreme situations.

One aspect is really worrying. Even if the Government really believe, against all the advice and evidence to the contrary, that seller's packs will make all the difference, why impose criminal sanctions? The Law Society has been outraged at that suggestion, and so are Conservative Members. We think that ordinary people, going about in their law-abiding fashion, entering, or not entering, into free contractual relations, should not be threatened with criminal sanctions—criminal sanctions which, as we discovered in Committee, are the equivalent of those for someone carrying an offensive weapon such as a flick-knife. We strongly believe that if the Government are having second thoughts about any aspect of part I, they should drop the idea of criminal sanctions.

I shall deal more briefly, for reasons that I have explained, with part II, which deals with housing and homelessness. As Ministers know, we have consistently not voted against the principle of the Bill. We did not do so at Second Reading and I shall not invite my right hon. and hon. Friends to divide the House against the Bill on Third Reading, because there are some good things in part II, some of which we agree with, but some of which have not been thought through enough.

The Bill arrives at the eleventh hour of the Government, after four years in government and 18 years in opposition. I suspect that during every month of that time, the current Minister for Housing and Planning had some sort of responsibility for housing policy. The Bill is missing things such as a licensing system for houses in multiple occupation, which has caused much comment in the housing press. The Bill must be viewed against the background of a general failure in housing policy.

Every time that we discussed the homelessness figures in Committee, the Minister would rise to his feet to rubbish the very figures issued by his Department, so I am risking provoking him again. I believe, however, that we can at least agree that we established painfully in Committee that between 1997-98 and the last year for which figures are available, the figure for total priority homeless acceptances increased from 102,650 to 108,500 in round terms. That means, on my arithmetic, that the homeless figure has been rising under the stewardship of the Government and these Ministers. There has been an increase of 6,000 in those years.

The figure for the total number of empty homes has fallen only marginally, to 762,700. All that, together with the massive extra pressures caused by the Government's comprehensive failure to tackle the problem of asylum seekers and the sharp fall in the supply of new social housing, shows that there is a crisis in housing and homelessness under the Government.

I discovered the other day that the Labour administration in Basildon has had to impose a special service charge of between £7.50 and £17.50 on homeless people. That is referred to locally as the homeless tax. It is argued that, as most homeless tenants are on benefit, the tax will not be paid from their incomes. The housing chairman, Paul Kirkman—a Labour councillor—said that he

"felt heavy hearted at putting a charge on homeless people"

and that imposing the charge felt like

"sticking the knife in"

the homeless.

This country's homeless and housing figures paint a very disturbing picture indeed, and the Bill must be judged against that background. We are mystified as to why the Government have taken so long to produce the Bill and why its scope is so limited, given that they have purported to give such a high priority to housing in the run-up to the election and thereafter.

There are major problems with some of the proposals in part II. As I said earlier, supply and demand is the major issue. The Government have not addressed the fact that there is an excess of supply over demand in some parts of the country and vice versa in others, which undermines choice-based allocations.

In a nutshell, part I will cause enormous problems; it will criminalise ordinary law-abiding folk and make the job of buying and selling houses more expensive and more difficult. Part II is riddled with contradictions. The Bill does not tackle some of the big issues in housing, which should have been tackled by now, but, as I have said, I shall not invite my right hon. and hon. Friends to vote against its Third Reading.

9.42 pm

Mr. Don Foster: I am still pondering the answer given by the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) when he was asked whether a Conservative Government, if there were ever to be another, would rescind the Bill. The answer was that the Conservative party would take a long, hard look at it. I recall that those were the words of either Eeyore or Winnie-the-Pooh.

It is clear from the debates so far that we were absolutely right to question the programme motion. It is absolutely clear that there has been inadequate time to discuss the large number of very important issues before us tonight. However, we could have made more effective use of the time that was made available. Nevertheless, the debates in the Chamber and in Committee have provided an opportunity to discuss not only the issues dealt with in the Bill, but a wide range of other related issues. That has been helpful.

We have had an opportunity to discuss the need to speed up the provision of affordable housing. We have discussed the need to tackle the absolutely disgraceful fact that there are 750,000 empty homes in this country. We have discussed the need to improve support for those who tragically often suffer from the neighbours from hell. We have even discussed the proposals to run trials to determine the ways in which different local authorities can develop greater choice for the various people in need of housing. I hope that the bid from my local authority—Bath and North East Somerset—will be considered very favourably by the Minister. We have also had an opportunity directly to consider important issues in the Bill, such as buying and selling housing and the development of homelessness reviews and strategies by local authorities.

On Second Reading, the Minister accepted that the Bill was, at that stage, work in progress. I genuinely believe that our deliberations have resulted in significant progress. For example, I am delighted that Ministers have been prepared to accept Liberal Democrat proposals for improvements to the reintroduction of reviews of eligibility and of the priority given to homeless people. I am delighted that some of our proposals on energy efficiency have been accepted tonight. Hon. Members from both sides in Committee and in the House have backed our proposals to improve the advice and guidance that local authorities give to homeless people. Ministers have also been willing to reconsider certain aspects of new clauses 5 and 7. I am grateful for the improvements that have been made.

The Bill contains many important and beneficial measures. Despite that, it continues to contain a number of weaknesses. They include the inadequately defined and certainly inadequately financially supported role that trading standards officers will have to play. As the hon. Member for Eastbourne rightly said, insufficient attention has been given to the issues of gazumping and gazundering. There is certainly not enough in the Bill to link the important work of registered social landlords and local authority housing departments. The Minister will be the first to acknowledge that we have still not found a solution to the question of whether a seller's pack should be required in areas of low-value properties. In addition, we have not yet done enough to link together at the local authority level the development of homelessness strategies and the housing strategy.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne rightly referred to the Bill's biggest weakness, which is the sanctions that the Government propose to introduce against those who fail to meet the requirements of a seller's pack. We are fundamentally opposed to the introduction of criminal sanctions. It is wrong to make it a criminal offence to fail to meet the requirements of the seller's pack. That would mean that someone who had not met those requirements could find that their character had been diminished in the eyes of their neighbours and others. Their job might be put in jeopardy and their credit rating and their ability to obtain a mortgage could be put at risk. Some countries, such as the United States, will not accept people with criminal records, so the ability of those people to travel could also be put at risk. If there is to be a sanction, it should be a civil sanction, not a criminal one.

The Bill is work in progress, and progress has been made during our deliberations. I do not want to do anything that will prevent further progress from being made in another place. For that reason, we shall not vote against the Bill's Third Reading.

9.48 pm

Mr. Love: I welcome the Bill, not least because it implements two of the Government's manifesto pledges. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning on taking the Bill smoothly through all its stages in the House, and the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, North-East (Mr. Ainsworth), on his appointment as a Minister.

Funnily enough, I pay tribute to both sides for the measured and sensible debates that we had in Committee. They were in marked contrast to the Second Reading debate, which sounded very much to me like an election rally for the Opposition. As the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) suggested, we had a surreal debate tonight when two Liberal Democrat homelessness policies were on show. There was also the amazing spectacle of the Welsh Nationalists coming to the aid of those on the Opposition Front Bench when Opposition Back Benchers were chiding them about Conservative principles.

The Bill will significantly improve the process of buying and selling a home. The need for the measure is clear: 1.5 million to 2 million sales are made a year. Although the process is among the cheapest, it is also the slowest. Twenty-eight per cent. of all sales fail, even after terms have been agreed, and dissatisfaction is high. Frankly, action was required.

We cannot criticise the Government for lack of research. An enormous amount of consultation and research was carried out before the measure was introduced. A long study took place in 1998, followed by a consultation process. It showed strong support for the seller's pack and even for making it compulsory. The consultation was followed by a pilot study. We are considering trust and confidence in the survey form, which was discussed at length. The provisions should establish that confidence before the form is introduced in 2003. The Bill will achieve more stability and predictability in the process of buying a home.

I have a direct constituency interest in homelessness. Almost one in three constituents who come to me have housing problems. Most of them are homeless or in the process of becoming homeless. That reflects the Tory legacy. The previous Government's neglect of social housing has led directly to such problems; indeed, their legacy is symbolised by rough sleepers. That will haunt the Conservative party for a long time.

I welcome the Bill. It provides a settled housing solution for people who are in priority need, but it also does much more than that. It provides for local authorities to devise homelessness strategies, and establishes the need for them to put prevention at the top of their agenda.

Although Opposition Members have criticised them, I welcome the provisions for strengthening advice and assistance. When we are unable to provide a settled housing solution, we should give homeless people advice and assistance. It is clear that that currently does not happen.

[Mr. Love]

I welcome the Minister's important reassurance that blanket exclusions, which have formed a large part of some local authorities' activities, will be outlawed. I join the hon. Member for Eastbourne—although I do not ask the Minister to select Eastbourne as one of the pilot authorities—in welcoming the extension of choice to social housing. That is long overdue and will lead to local authorities gaining a better reputation for their provision of housing for those in need.

The Bill will make a difference. It will reduce not only homelessness, but social exclusion, which is perhaps even more important and at the centre of Government policy.

9.53 pm

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) complained that there had not been sufficient time to discuss part I, and he blamed the programme motion. The Bill has 33 clauses and it has been allocated a full day for Report and Third Reading. That was not unusual in the House even before the time of programme motions. If the hon. Gentleman reflects on the debate, he will probably realise that there was no time to discuss all the issues that are relevant to part I, mainly because one or two Conservative Back Benchers were so offended by the proposals of the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) that they decided to take him by the scruff of the neck and shake him for an hour or so.

Mr. Waterson: The Minister chooses to work on the basis of the number of clauses, which is rather like a "Never mind the quality, feel the width" approach to politics. Will he remind the House of the number of clauses in the Bill that led to ratification of the Maastricht treaty?

Mr. Ainsworth: The hon. Gentleman might know that, as an ex-Whip, I have a tendency, which I need to lose, towards "Never mind the quality, feel the width". It is something that I shall work on.

Our procedures for buying and selling homes are the slowest and most inefficient in Europe. Every year, hundreds of thousands of people endure the frustration of delays and failed transactions, often incurring substantial costs. We are determined to do something about that and to improve the lot of consumers. An efficient housing market benefits everyone. We are pursuing a range of measures to increase certainty in the process and reduce delays. The Bill, which requires sellers to prepare a seller's pack before marketing a property, is at the heart of these proposals.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne complains that the Bill will do nothing about gazumping. Surely one of the main reasons for gazumping is the time that a transaction takes in a moving housing market. If the hon. Gentleman does not appreciate that, it is obvious that the commonsense revolution has not reached all the parts of the Conservative party.

Homelessness, or the threat of it, can be one of the most stressful experiences in life for families and individuals, especially if they are vulnerable as a result of, for example, their age or health. The legislation introduced by the previous Government failed to provide adequate protection. The Bill puts in place another important piece in our comprehensive strategy to help homeless people and to tackle the causes of homelessness.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne spoke of his objection to the issue of criminal sanctions. If the issue of seller's packs is to be effective, we need a mandatory scheme, and that requires appropriate sanctions. There is plenty of scope within the Bill for a tough line to be taken on estate agents who deliberately flout the law, and for discretion to be applied when a private seller makes an honest mistake. Estate agents market the vast majority of homes.

Civil sanctions would not offer effective safeguards. They would rely on the buyer suing the person who had marketed the property without a seller's pack. That would involve buyers in delays and uncertainty, and the expense of legal proceedings to recover the money that had been lost.

Criminal sanctions would not have to rely on the actions of the buyer. Local trading standards officers—they are not members of the Gestapo—will be able to initiate enforcement action as is appropriate to meet the conditions that they face and individual circumstances.

I am grateful for the support of some Opposition Members for the measures that we have proposed. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

PREVENTION AND SUPPRESSION OF TERRORISM

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Code of Practice on Video Recording of Interviews) (Northern Ireland) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 16th January, be approved.

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Code of Practice on the Exercise of Police Powers) (Northern Ireland) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 16th January, be approved.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question agreed to.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question again proposed.

9.59 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On 31 January, I posed the question: what added value would we get from joint or concurrent meetings? That was at column 406 of *Hansard*. I went on to say that I wanted to challenge the basis on which the motion was predicated. It assumes that the Committees will produce better results by meeting concurrently. That is the point of the argument that I want to develop as it continues, as it will for some

time. The question is whether the two Houses of Parliament, in the context of the Committee that we are now discussing, can make a better contribution separately or jointly—or, as the motion quaintly states, "concurrently". In other words, do they have distinctive roles and can they bring a distinctive or different perspective to matters?

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 January],

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That, for the current Session of Parliament, Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

LANGUAGE OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCEEDINGS

Motion made,

That—

(1) this House approves the First Report from the Procedure Committee, Session 2000–01 (HC 47); and

(2) the Resolution of 5th June 1996 on the Language of Parliamentary Proceedings be amended accordingly by inserting, after the word 'Wales,', the words 'and at Westminster in respect of Select Committees'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Depleted Uranium (Shelling)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

10 pm

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): I am very glad to have this opportunity, which has perhaps come rather earlier than I expected, to raise in an Adjournment debate a matter of increasing concern to many of my constituents. It relates mainly to the test firing of depleted uranium shells from the Ministry of Defence base at Dundrennan, which lies on the Solway estuary in Kirkcudbrightshire in my constituency and which is now run by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency.

My first foray into that area was in April 1998, when I asked a question about the firing of such shells at the range. The answer from Sir John Chisholm, chief executive of DERA, was that 6,255 shells had been fired at Dundrennan since 1982 and that four had been recovered—not 4,000 or 400, but four. To bring these figures up to date, 6,907 shells have now been fired at Dundrennan. Following national press stories, which sought to link depleted uranium to Gulf war syndrome, I wrote to Lord Robertson, who was then Secretary of State for Defence, on 1 December 1998, asking for action to be taken to recover the shells. I received a reply from the then Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), stating that DERA

"does not currently have a programme in place to recover DU projectiles from the Solway Firth, nor does it intend to initiate such a programme."

I am interested in how many depleted uranium shells the MOD needs. In the Gulf war, 100 rounds were used against the Iraqis and some rounds were used during training in Saudi Arabia. Regardless of the argument about whether or not depleted uranium should be used, if we are going to use only approximately 100 rounds, do we really need to test 7,000 rounds? The United Kingdom has fired 70 times as much depleted uranium at Dundrennan as it did in the Gulf war. In asking those questions, I am well aware that a culture of secrecy seems to surround such matters, which only adds to the suspicion of many people about the actions of the MOD.

One example in relation to Dundrennan will suffice. In January 2000, the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) asked a parliamentary question relating to meetings between DERA and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. He was informed by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) that he was withholding details of such a meeting under

"Exception 2 . . . of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information."—[*Official Report*, 28 January 2000; Vol. 343, c. 382W.]

I hope that the Minister for the Armed Forces will not hide behind such get-out-clauses in responding to further questions on this matter. However, I was pleased to note that, in his statement in the House on 9 January, he said:

"I absolutely agree that we should have as much information as possible in the public domain for there to be proper scientific peer review of that information"—[*Official Report*, 9 January 2001; Vol. 360, c. 888.]

Having secured this debate, I should like to stress that I am not saying that there has been any health effect so far on the general public in Kircudbrightshire as a result of

[Mr. Alasdair Morgan]

the Dundrennan tests. However, increasing international worries about depleted uranium lead me to be concerned that, if thousands of she]]s are left in the Solway Firth, we are storing up potential problems for the future. I am also concerned about any health implications for civilian and military staff who have worked at the base.

I would now like to look at the W. S. Atkins report, which the Minister mentioned in his statement on 9 January. The MOD had agreed to implement an independent impact assessment in 1993, which was prepared by W. S. Atkins Consultants Ltd. and published by the MOD in January 1995. It is entitled "Environmental Assessment of the Firing of Depleted Uranium Projectiles at Eskmeals and Kirkcudbright Ranges".

I am somewhat concerned that the MOD is still trying to use the report, which is now six years old, to claim that there are no problems associated with the firing of depleted uranium at Dundrennan. In the Minister's statement, he said

"A detailed review of the environmental impact of firing DU at these ranges . . . concluded that the radiation doses to members of the public and the associated risks from DU released into the environment were extremely low."—[*Official Report*, 9 January 2001; Vol. 360, c. 878-79.]

Although that is indeed part of the report, other sections of the document, far from putting to rest any worries about DU testing, raise many more worries. One concern is the effect on current and past workers, both military and civilian, who have been present when a test malfunctions.

In relation to such malfunctions, which are shells that break up before they hit the target, W. S. Atkins identified several hazards as a result of the test firing programme, one of which is the release of DU material into the environment as a result of the malfunction. On that matter, the report states that

"the consequences will involve the release of DU material to the atmosphere. This material would most probably be in the form of very fine particulates or aerosols of either DU metal or DU oxides."

That leads on to the question of how many malfunctions have occurred since the commencement of tests. The minutes of a presentation to the local council by Lieutenant Colonel David Brown for DERA on 22 September 1999 state:

"Some mishaps had occurred, notably at the Raeberry gun position where some years ago a projectile had broken up as it was fired from the gun. Also some projectiles had hit the ground at the targets instead of travelling through the target into the sea."

The targets are usually hessian or plastic sheets, which are attached to a metal frame. The shells are supposed to be fired through the sheets and to land in the sea.

In a letter that I received from the chief executive of DERA in February last year, I was informed that

"only one projectile had been recovered from the Solway Firth. The other three were recovered from the land."

There are four separate testing ranges at Dundrennan. The W. S. Atkins report refers to the malfunction rate at three of the ranges between commencement of the trials in 1981 and January 1994, when the survey was conducted. The rates vary between 4 per cent. at Raeberry and 0.6 per cent. at Balig. Taking into account the fact that 4,595 shells were fired at Dundrennan during the period in question, and taking even the lowest malfunction range, as the figures are not split for the various ranges, that means that 27 firings were subject to malfunction in that period.

If a similar malfunction rate had continued between 1981 and the present, that would mean that about 41 malfunctions had occurred to date, each potentially creating DU-contaminated dust, although I have anecdotal evidence from constituents working on the range who have seen as many as five malfunctions in one day.

I would appreciate some clarification from the Minister about how many malfunctions have occurred since the testing started, and whether the malfunctions are included in the numbers provided in parliamentary answers relating to the number of shells fired. Does he agree that there is a good case for voluntary testing for depleted uranium poisoning to be made available to all staff involved in the tests at Dundrennan?

That brings me to the matter of misfired shells—shells that have not hit their target. The W. S. Atkins report goes on to state:

"The point of contact of eight misfired DU penetrators is not known and they may have hit agricultural land."

That is clearly unacceptable. Will the Minister inform the House how many misfires have occurred to date and whether any of those shells have been recovered?

Some 6,907 shells have been fired into the Solway, and, even allowing for misfires and malfunctions, more than 6,000 are presumably now lying in the Solway. Many of us instinctively object to the Solway being used as a radioactive munitions dumping ground by the MOD. W. S. Atkins commented:

"For Kirkcudbright, a major unknown factor relates to the fate of projectiles once they enter the marine environment. Distribution of the projectiles within the area of the seabed is unknown, in spite of a monitoring that has been operational since commencement of DU firing."

It goes on to say:

"The state of a projectile after it strikes the sea bed is not known. The projectile may hit the bottom at speed and become embedded in mud, silt or sand, or if it strikes a hard object fragmentation may occur. The degree of fragmentation and penetration beneath the surface cannot be predicted and it therefore follows that the concentration in bottom sediments cannot be estimated."

It also states:

"Penetrators that impact at sea may corrode and release DU into sea water."

My understanding from reading the report is that the expectation is that any such release of DU would be very diluted, and, therefore, apparently not a problem. That may or may not be the case at present, but my real concern is for the future. I understand that DU has a half-life of 4.5 billion years, so we could be sowing the seeds of environmental problems for some time in the future. It is obvious that little is known about the exact whereabouts of all those shells. However, I fail to see how it is beyond the Government's capability to remove them from the Solway and dispose of them more appropriately, or—if they do not wish to embark on that course straight away—to undertake a feasibility study into that option.

That brings me to the legislation on radioactive disposal. On 15 January, in a parliamentary answer on the firing of DU, the Secretary of State for Defence stated:

" Statutory regulations govern the use of DU on ranges in the UK. These are the Radioactive Substances Act 1993, which controls radioactive waste discharges to the environment and the Ionising Radiations Regulations (IRR) 1999."—[*Official Report*, 15 January 2001; Vol. 361, c. 42W.]

The 1993 Act lays down strict guidelines for the disposal of radioactive materials, including depleted uranium. In order to dispose of radioactive waste, authorisation must be sought from the appropriate environmental agency, which in this case is SEPA. Before granting such authorisation, the agency must consult the relevant local authority, among others.

In relation to the Ionising Radiations Regulations, W. S. Atkins states:

"A requirement exists within the Ionising Radiation Regulations for an operator to be able to account for all radioactive material under his control. Up to the point of firing this is done. Beyond that point the material, unless recovered, is presently considered by HMIP (HM Inspectorate of Pollution) to be part of the Kirkcudbright facility 'procedure' and as such does not attract concern. However should the projectiles be recovered then they would be classified as waste and require appropriate dispersal with the relevant letters of approval obtained."

I would like the Minister to inform the House, and my constituents, whether depleted uranium is subject to strict controls before it is fired and if it is recovered, but not if it is left lying in the Solway Firth. That would be unacceptable. If that is not the case, given that the MOD obviously considers the Solway Firth to be the final resting place of the depleted uranium shells, will the Minister confirm whether the MOD has the authorisation required to dispose of them in the Solway Firth, as the Secretary of State seems to have stated that the 1993 Act applies in this case.

Dundrennan is not the only location in my constituency to play host to the leftovers of the activities of the MOD. In the sea between Galloway and Northern Ireland, in the deep trench of Beaufort's Dyke, lie many hundreds of tons of first and second world war explosives, phosphorous bombs and the like. Many of those are not even in the deep trench of the dyke, but in the shallower waters near the coastline, and the phosphorous flares are frequently washed up on the coast of Galloway and Ayrshire.

Further to the east at Luce Bay, near the DERA establishment at West Freugh, live cluster bombs lie on the bottom of the bay as a result of pre-Kosovo trials. These are in the process of being covered over by blocks of concrete. Further east still, we come to Dundrennan, which I have been talking about tonight. The whole area is then gently washed by the tides of the Solway, which are themselves host to whatever radioactive discharges the plant at Sellafield chooses to release. Perhaps Galloway is getting more than its fair share of these man-made problems.

I am not an alarmist. Any inspection of my statements since 1997 would make it clear that I have not sought cheap headlines at the expense of public confidence. However, there comes a stage at which any reasonable person must say that enough is enough. We have an obligation to leave this planet to our children in at least as good a state as we found it, if not better, and clearly in this case we are not doing so.

A couple of years ago, the Government did the agriculture industry in my constituency and elsewhere no favours with their short-term ban on beef on the bone—a ban undertaken largely on the precautionary principle that although the risk of infection was infinitesimal and certainly no higher than that posed by many everyday activities, it was nevertheless a risk, and one that should be addressed. I submit that the same precautionary principle should apply to the test firing at Dundrennan, that as a result no more should be undertaken and that the debris of what has been undertaken should be removed as expeditiously as possible.

10.15 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): I congratulate the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) on securing the debate. It is understandable that there might be concern within his constituency about depleted uranium, following heavy media coverage of the subject in January, but I hope I can reassure him about its use at the Kirkcudbright range.

The armour-piercing rounds for the British Army's Challenger 2 main battle tank are manufactured from depleted uranium, commonly known as DU. The rounds are built around a solid rod of DU metal, which has a density almost twice that of lead. DU also has the important property of self-sharpening on impact with armour. Those properties give it a unique capability as a penetrator, and at present no satisfactory alternative material exists that might provide the level of penetration needed to defeat the most modern battle tanks. For that reason DU will remain part of our arsenal for the foreseeable future. When this country commits our forces to conflict we fight to win, and our troops need the best available equipment to enable them to do that.

Kirkcudbright is an MOD-owned site that is now run by the Army as a training area. It is also used for the proof and trials firing of DU rounds by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency—DERA. DU firing began at Kirkcudbright in 1982, following an announcement in the House by the then Secretary of State for Defence. Since then, a total of 6,907 DU rounds have been fired at Kirkcudbright in order to assess the accuracy of the guns and ammunition, and more recently for in-service quality control or proofing. Usually 12 rounds are fired, in order to sample every production batch of 1,056 projectiles. The current programme of trials comprises production batch testing, and will be completed by the end of this year. Thereafter, further proof testing while the ammunition remains in service may be required, but that has yet to be confirmed.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the DU rounds are fired from prepared positions within the range at soft targets mounted in gantries on the cliff top. They pass through the targets and then continue out to sea, where they enter the water—which is approximately 20 m deep—between 1 km and 3 km from the shoreline. Only one target area is currently in use, together with two firing points.

As DU is a heavy metal with chemical toxicity, and also has low-activity radioactive qualities, precautions need to be taken when it is being handled and fired. The use of DU at Kirkcudbright is undertaken in accordance with statutory regulations, including the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the Ionising Radiations Regulations 1999, which were made under the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 and are enforced by the Health and Safety Executive.

The Ionising Radiations Regulations 1999 replaced similar regulations dating from 1968, 1969 and 1985. In addition, although formally exempt, the MOD voluntarily acts in accordance with the provisions of the Radioactive Substances Act 1993, which controls radioactive waste

[Mr. John Spellar]

discharges into the environment. Periodic visits to the ranges are carried out by the Health and Safety Executive and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. The last such visit took place in January 2001.

The firing programme is undertaken by teams of DERA range staff. Effective steps have been and continue to be taken to protect those who have taken part in the testing of DU ammunition. All staff involved in the DU firing programme are fully briefed on the radiological safety aspects of working with DU before commencing work with the material. Moreover, they are designated "classified persons" under the terms of the Ionising Radiations Regulations. That means that they are subject to a pre-employment medical examination and are kept under surveillance by a medical practitioner approved by the Health and Safety Executive.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: I apologise to the Minister if he is coming to the point, but during their visits, do the Health and Safety Executive and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency look purely at the land area of the base, or do they also look at the area of sea into which the shells are meant to fall?

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman is right. I will come to the sea later.

In addition, checks on the effectiveness of the safety procedures are carried out by the use of dosimeters, personal air samplers, urine analysis and whole-body monitoring. In the whole history of DU firing, none of those personal monitoring measures has ever shown a result that has given any cause for concern.

Indeed, in 1999, the latest year for which complete results are available, the average annual yearly dose for a worker at Kirkcudbright was 0.65 millisieverts. That is well below the statutory annual dose limit of 20 msv for an employee set by the regulations, and lower even than the statutory annual dose limit of 1 msv for a member of the public.

Access to target areas, firing points and, if DU is present, storage areas, must be within the terms of the regulations and is strictly controlled. Routine monitoring of those areas is carried out in accordance with the regulations. Special local safety regulations are enforced, concerning magazines, vehicles, firing and target areas, and they cover the contingency of accidents.

As I have said, the targets at Kirkcudbright are made of soft material through which the projectiles pass. In uncommon cases when projectiles have struck the target gantry, any subsequent risk of contamination from touching or disturbing DU material can be contained by means of relatively simple safety precautions. Personal protective equipment is issued when entering DU strike areas at Kirkcudbright, including protective overalls, gloves and boots. Access to areas known to be contaminated is strictly controlled.

Work on the estate is controlled by risk assessments and range safety rules, made on behalf of the Secretary of State for Defence and administered by the local range commandant. There is public access to the estate outside firing hours, but there are warning signs along the range boundary. Furthermore, the out-of-bounds areas are fenced and signed, where appropriate, with radiation signs.

Even if a member of the public or a soldier on training exercises were to ignore the warnings, enter the restricted areas, pick up and handle any DU fragments, or even picnic on top of one of them, the risk is minimal, according to an assessment undertaken by DERA radiation protection services. Such an individual might, on worst case assumptions, receive an additional radiation dose equivalent to less than 10 per cent. of the statutory annual dose limit for members of the general public.

A long-term environmental monitoring programme on the effects of firing has taken place at Kirkcudbright since 1983, and to date it has shown only very low levels of DU contamination—well below any level that could be considered a health hazard. The monitoring involves taking samples of soil, grass, animal droppings, shellfish and sea-bed sediment from 13 separate points in the range each year—twice each year for grass. None of the samples has ever indicated any concentration of DU above background levels, except for some known contamination in soil at the firing and target sites, which, as I have explained, are fenced.

That monitoring gives us confidence that DU firing does not have an adverse impact on the local environment or the food chain. I know that the hon. Gentleman is particularly concerned about the possibility of DU raising radiation levels in the Solway firth. Scientific modelling, again using pessimistic assumptions, concluded that corrosion of DU rounds would make a negligible difference to the level of uranium that already exists naturally in sea water. That conclusion is confirmed by the samples of sea-bed sediment and shellfish that we collect in the area where the projectiles land. No uranium is detected above naturally occurring background levels.

We are still not complacent about safety or DU contamination at Kirkcudbright. Although the risks from DU fragments are, as I have said, minimal, we have decided to conduct a general survey to find any previously undetected DU fragments on the range and, if necessary, to take appropriate remedial measures. The survey will be conducted using a new, more sensitive device called the exploranium. That device detects, but does not measure, the X-rays and gamma rays associated with the radioactive decay of DU. It is about twice as sensitive as the monitor previously used for detecting DU fragments on the surface of the range, and about 200 times better at detecting fragments below the surface of the range.

The survey will provide an overview of any radiologically significant DU surface contamination on areas of the range, believed to have been caused by a very small number of DU projectiles that failed to reach the sea. As the hon. Gentleman said, some of the early prototype rounds broke up just outside the gun barrel, leaving DU fragments in the soil. Additionally, a few rounds have struck the ground prior to reaching the target. The hon. Gentleman asked for figures, and I shall write to him. We shall also further investigate the areas of known DU contamination round the firing points and targets.

The survey will be conducted by the DERA radiation protection services, with preliminary work commencing in March 2001—as soon as the weather, ground conditions and day length are suitable—and measurement starting in April and May. Allowing for contingencies, the report on the survey should be completed by the end of the year. The undertaking of the survey, in addition to the continuing environmental monitoring and range

control measures, shows how seriously we take our responsibilities in connection with firing DU. We shall publish the results of the survey in due course, in line with the long-established openness that we have demonstrated on the subject.

Mr. Morgan: I thank the Minister for that. However, we do not know the rate at which the shells deteriorate. Although he turned up his nose at the idea of 4.5 billion years, the problem will be with us for centuries, at least. Governments cannot bind their successors. Do we not have to deal with that problem?

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman should understand that a longer half-life for a radioactive substance indicates a lower level of radioactive dispersal. The dangerous stuff has a much shorter half-life, because it is dispersing radioactivity at a much higher rate. In fact, depleted uranium is 40 per cent. less radioactive than natural uranium, which, as I said, is found in the soil—on land and under the sea—throughout the world. This is a useful opportunity to bring that matter to the attention of the public and put it in an accurate context.

Our activities at Kirkcudbright have been characterised by considerable transparency. As the hon. Gentleman said, in 1995, an independent environmental assessment by the consultants W S Atkins, commissioned by the MOD, was released into the public domain. It concluded that there were no significant risks from exposure to DU released into the environment. Subsequently, those conclusions have been sustained and, from 1983 to date, the routine environmental monitoring programme has shown only very low levels of DU contamination, which are well below any level that could be considered a health hazard.

DERA has ensured that the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Dumfries and Galloway council have both been informed of firing activities, and have also been provided with the annual environmental monitoring reports. DERA holds regular meetings with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, and DERA representatives have attended public meetings arranged by Dumfries and Galloway council to discuss the findings of the annual environmental monitoring report. Copies are also circulated to hon. Members and given to the Library.

On 15 January 2001, at a "community" meeting of Stewartry area committee, concern was apparently expressed in the public forum about recent press coverage of the firing of DU projectiles from the range at Kirkcudbright. A letter dated 23 January 2001 from the chief environmental officer to the Secretary of State requested a full report on the issue. We have had other representations from local residents. They will, of course, receive full replies. Meanwhile, however, I should like, through the hon. Gentleman, to provide that reassurance to the local population.

The fact is that, despite the recent media furore, no new evidence has emerged in the past month or so to change our assessment of the risks of DU or its effects on health or the environment. It is far more important for local residents to focus on the reassurance of our precautions, our monitoring of range workers and our environmental analysis of the impact of DU on the range and its environs. That material has been shared with them publicly for many years. The material shows that the risks of firing DU at Kirkcudbright are understood, monitored and managed, and that local residents, farmers and visitors to the ranges can be confident that it has a minimal impact on the range.

The risks, minimal as they are, have been acknowledged and handled throughout that period in accordance with the relevant statutory requirements, and our responsibilities to service and civilian personnel, as well as to the general public, are taken very seriously. That will continue, as our intention to conduct a new survey of the site clearly demonstrates.

The motion having been made at Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at half-past Ten o'clock.

Deferred Divisions

COMPANIES

That the draft Companies (EU Political Expenditure) Exemption Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 17th January, be approved:

The House divided: Ayes 329, Noes 7.

Division No. 108]

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Bailey, Adrian
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Greenway, John
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sheerman, Barry

Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Woodward, Shaun
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

NOES

Beggs, Roy
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Hunter, Andrew
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*

Question accordingly agreed to.

House of Commons

Thursday 8 February 2001

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for consideration, as amended, read.

To be considered on Thursday 15 February.

COLCHESTER BOROUGH COUNCIL BILL *[LORDS]*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Thursday 15 February.

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

New Deal for Lone Parents

1. **Mr. John Healey** (Wentworth): If he will make a statement on his Department's contribution to the new deal for lone parents. [147903]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): The new deal for lone parents is the joint responsibility of our Department and the Department of Social Security and is operated through the Employment Service. New deal personal advisers offer a comprehensive package of advice and support to lone parents on income support and have helped 78,000 lone parents into work since the start of the programme in 1997.

Mr. Healey: I thank my hon. Friend. Is she aware that in the Rotherham and Barnsley district, 289 lone parents have moved into work in the past nine months, which is 55 per cent. of those participating in the programme, compared with the national average of 35 per cent? Will she pay tribute to the quality of our personal advisers, the rapport that they strike with their clients and their knowledge of the local labour market? Does she recognise that one other factor in our success rate is that the background of the personal adviser team covers the Child Support Agency, the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service? Will she reassure me that that will continue when the personal adviser meetings become mandatory for income support claimants after 30 April?

Ms Hodge: I was aware of the figures in my hon. Friend's constituency and I congratulate the personal advisers in his employment team who have been so successful in putting so many people into work. Personal advisers are playing a crucial role in building confidence among lone parents and in helping them to break down the barriers that have prevented them from moving from unemployment into work. I can assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to recruit personal advisers from the wide spectrum to which he referred.

Post-16 Education

2. **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North): What steps he is taking to encourage more students to remain in full-time education after the age of 16 years. [147904]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Malcolm Wicks): We have created the first ever legal entitlement for 16 to 18-year olds to free education and training for young people, which we are supporting with a range of measures, including the new Connexions service for 13 to 19-year-olds, financial support through education maintenance allowances and reform of qualifications and programmes to secure high standards in academic and vocational options for all 14 to 19-year-olds.

Helen Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Has he had an opportunity to look at the recent Education and Employment Committee report on access to higher education, particularly the recommendation that zones similar to education action zones should be set up for higher education to improve aspirations and to widen access for youngsters who have no tradition of staying in education? Does he agree that that would benefit areas such as the centre of my constituency and many others like it; ensure that all suitably qualified youngsters have a chance of higher education, wherever they come from; and end this country's current gross waste of talent?

Mr. Wicks: We welcome the Select Committee report and will study its conclusions with great care. We already have the excellence challenge because of our concern that all children with good academic qualifications should have an opportunity of going to all universities, including the best in this country. We have also introduced opportunity bursaries for young people from communities with no background of going to university. We are concerned to bring into practice opportunity for all, including those from the poorest backgrounds.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Does the Minister agree that one of the greatest threats to the expansion of further education provision for 16 to 24-year olds is the disparity in pay and conditions between lecturers and teachers? Does he agree that that is felt particularly in sixth form colleges? What do the Government intend to do to address that acute problem?

Mr. Wicks: We are aware of the disparity between schools and sixth form and further education colleges and we want to address that issue in the long term. There has to be levelling up. Discussions are taking place with both sides—trade unions and employers—about pay in sixth

form and further education colleges. I am confident that the settlement will move us a significant way towards bridging the gap.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Will my hon. Friend and the education team look closely at the Select Committee report published only this morning, particularly the clutch of proposals aimed at getting young people from poorer backgrounds into higher education? Will he look particularly at the premium paid to universities, which we recommend should increase from 5 per cent. to 20 per cent. so that it can reach back to the 16-year old who drops out of education or to 11 and 12-year-olds so that there is a culture of education around them and an ambition to go on to higher education?

Mr. Wicks: As I said, we welcome the Select Committee report. When I chaired the Committee, I was in on the report's birth, so I certainly welcome it. We are spending £150 million on the excellence challenge and opportunity bursaries. The 5 per cent. extra for those from poorer backgrounds is something for something—not a profit to the university, but money that is required to support those students. We shall certainly consider all proposals with great care.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): In the decade to 1997, the number of students going to university from the poorest homes doubled; since Labour took office, the number has stood still. Do the Government recognise that replacing the student grant with a loan that has to be repaid from earnings of £10,000 annually acts as a deterrent to families who have never earned more than £10,000 annually? Will the Government join Conservative Members by agreeing to raise the threshold for student loan repayment to £20,000 annually? We believe that those students have the potential to earn £20,000 annually, and much more as well.

Mr. Wicks: Let us deal in facts and not Tory fiction. The number of young people from poor backgrounds going to universities is increasing, and we are determined that it should increase more quickly.

Mr. St. Aubyn: It is in the report.

Mr. Wicks: The hon. Gentleman might not want to listen—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I should expect the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn), once he has asked a question, to listen to the answer.

Mr. Wicks: I always remember the hon. Gentleman as an excitable member of the Select Committee.

The number of young people from poor backgrounds attending university is increasing. The policies that we are putting in place will enable more young people from poor backgrounds to go to university, including our best universities. Our system of fees and loans is fair to students, fair to families and fair to the taxpayer. Very soon, 50 per cent. of those going to university will pay no tuition fees at all.

Mr. Michael J. Foster (Worcester): I should like to draw my hon. Friend's attention to the education maintenance allowance scheme that is being piloted in Worcestershire, and to the increased number of young people aged 16 to 18 whom the scheme is encouraging to stay on in schools and colleges. What plans does he have to roll out the scheme in other parts of the country? What plans does he have to make the Worcestershire scheme a permanent one?

Mr. Wicks: Education maintenance allowances are still a pilot exercise—albeit on a large scale as they now cover one third of the country. The early results are showing improvement in participation and a better approach by students once they are in college. The feedback from the young people and teachers whom I meet is excellent. Obviously we shall have regard to the pilot findings when addressing the issue of a national roll-out.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Does the Minister recognise and appreciate the relationship between staying-on rates and the quality of life that children experience in the statutory period of their schooling? If that experience is nasty and brutish, is it not also likely to be short as they strive to get out of education at the earliest possible opportunity? If indiscipline and disruption is their experience—*[Laughter.]* Labour Members laugh, but Opposition Members are angry because people's lives are being blighted by disruption and indiscipline in schools. If, as Ofsted revealed, that is a growing problem, and if that problem is linked to the failure to recruit teachers—which in itself stops people staying on at school—is it not time that Ministers replaced their indifference with a commitment and determination to stop our children's lives being blighted and our teachers' careers ruined?

Mr. Wicks: We shall obviously very carefully consider the recommendations and points in the Ofsted report; I think that that is what the hon. Gentleman was referring to. We have 1,000 pupil support units in our schools to help us tackle that problem. We have also made some very clear statements about the need to eradicate bullying in our schools. We will do anything to support school governors, head teachers and teachers in tackling the problem. We are very concerned to tackle the problem. We are not complacent about it, and we are moving in the right direction. Every one of our young people should be able to be taught, and our teachers should be able to teach, in an environment that is conducive to learning.

Teacher Vacancies

3. **Mrs. Eleanor Laing** (Epping Forest): What recent meetings he has had with ministerial colleagues to discuss the number of vacancies in the teaching profession. [147905]

9. **Mr. Gerald Howarth** (Aldershot): What recent meetings he has had with head teachers to discuss the number of vacancies in the teaching profession. [147912]

11. **Mrs. Teresa Gorman** (Billericay): What recent meetings he has had with parent groups to discuss teacher recruitment. [147916]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): My right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards and I regularly meet those parents, teachers and heads who have a commitment to raising standards in recruiting and retaining teachers.

Mrs. Laing: Does the Secretary of State recognise that, throughout the country, but particularly in Essex, there is a severe crisis in teacher recruitment and retention? If so, why will he not see that his policy of piling red tape, bureaucracy and form filling on new teachers, who have joined the profession because they have a vocation to teach, is causing them to leave, because they are expected to be administrators, not teachers? If he wants to retain teachers in the profession, why does he not change his policy and allow them to teach?

Mr. Blunkett: When I wrote back to the director of education in Essex, I asked him to contact us at the Department if there were any particular problems in schools in Essex. I have no knowledge of any such contact being made. We have increased recruitment to teacher training by more than 2,200 this year; the latest figure for applications for teacher training from this coming autumn is up by 12 per cent.; and the number of inquiries made to the inquiry helpline has gone up from 39,000 this time last year to 114,000 this year.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Is the Secretary of State aware that the situation in Hampshire, as in Essex, is very serious indeed? Head teachers in my constituency have told me that they are gravely concerned about the lack of candidates applying to fill vacancies. Just before Christmas, Fernhill primary school was on the point of sending children home early. Only at the very last minute did it have just one application for the vacancy there, enabling it to keep running at the beginning of this term. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that, in Hampshire, between September and December no fewer than 500 vacancies were advertised, with 60 advertised last week alone?

It is a very serious situation. The Secretary of State keeps telling the House and the country that everything will be resolved because of all the people who are applying for teacher training, but will he confirm that no less than 25 per cent. of those who apply for and take teacher training give up before they get into the classroom?

Mr. Blunkett: First, let me make it absolutely clear that I have never said, and never would say, that all will be resolved by the measures that we have so far taken. We know that, in a tight labour market, there will be a continuing challenge to ensure that we recruit and retain sufficient highly qualified teachers to be able to do the job that we are setting them. We also recognise that, having recruited an extra 7,000 teachers over the past two years, and having substantially increased both pay and promotion prospects, so that a good teacher can stay in the classroom and earn £31,000—£34,000 in London—we are now taking the necessary steps to put right what began in the 1980s, when there was a massive drop in recruitment to secondary teaching, and a total lack of action by the previous Government.

Mrs. Gorman: Would the Secretary of State be interested to hear about my discussions with parent groups in my constituency? They are absolutely fed up and disgusted that their children are being taught in classes not of 30 and 40, but sometimes of 90, when classes have to be amalgamated because there is no one to teach them. Furthermore, they do not regard classroom assistants as a substitute for fully qualified teachers. Would the right hon. Gentleman also be interested to know that they hark back to the days when we had grant-maintained status, when schools had the opportunity to make their own arrangements and when we were creating a proper free market, in which parents had real choice? Will he note that they are looking forward to the free school policy of this Government when we get back into office after the general election?

Mr. Blunkett: I am always interested in the rantings of the hon. Lady, and not least in the fact that she thinks that her party is still in government. It is this Government who are tackling the teacher shortage and the retention of teachers. It is this Government who will have increased the level of teachers' pay that we inherited so that an experienced teacher of seven years' standing, who was paid £21,000 when we took office, will be able to earn £31,000. It is this Government who have put in place measures to help individual schools.

I am aware of one school which, on one day, grouped three classes so that 90 children took part in PE and music lessons, but that is not the same as 90 pupils in one class being taken by one class teacher as a result of teacher shortages. I put the facts on the record just in case someone reports a ridiculous story that starts another ridiculous hare running.

There is a serious problem, and it needs to be dealt with seriously. The hon. Lady's statement is neither serious nor helpful in resolving that problem.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the effective efforts being made by Slough and other areas close to London to solve problems with recruiting teachers? Part of the work of our education action zone is devoted to providing houses for teachers, which has helped local schools to recruit. Will my right hon. Friend encourage other areas with similar problems to develop strategies to provide housing for new teachers, so that they can recruit and retain more teachers?

Mr. Blunkett: I think that the initiative described by my hon. Friend is excellent, as was the one in Reading that was ridiculed by one national newspaper. That is why last week we allocated another £5 million for an immediate recruitment drive that will pay teachers to come back for a six-week refresher course in shortage areas. It will also pay for child care for those with small children. Instead of disparaging and shying away from re-joining the best profession in the world, people will be encouraged to join it.

Angela Smith (Basildon): Is my right hon. Friend aware that unlike the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman), Labour Members with constituencies in Essex have not been shouting and ranting about the difficulties faced by schools in the county? Instead, we went to County hall to meet the director of learning services and other senior officials to proffer our help and support in easing the difficulties faced by the director and by head teachers. Will my right hon. Friend join me in

congratulating teachers and head teachers in Essex, who have worked very hard to manage the difficulties with recruitment that they have faced? Does he agree that, if the previous Conservative Government had invested as much money as this Government in education, we would not have those problems now?

One of the difficulties facing education in the south-east is the high cost of housing. Will my right hon. Friend consider ways of dealing with that problem when he looks at teacher recruitment?

Mr. Blunkett: I strongly welcome the very positive measures taken by my hon. Friend and her colleagues in Essex. They have helped rather than hindered the task of recruiting more teachers. My hon. Friend's question demonstrates why my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and I have been dealing with support for housing, and why, in a debate in the House a couple of weeks ago, I asked for ideas to be suggested. So far, I have not received any such ideas, but I am still open to persuasion. We will continue to look at new ideas, such as the new retention bonus, which is an accumulated bonus of £15,000 over three years which will help to retain teachers in schools facing challenges and thereby enable us to do the job of raising standards for all our children.

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating staff and students at Hull university campus in Scarborough, who have made a special attempt to encourage more mature students to enter the education department for postgraduate qualifications? Will he also reserve time in his very busy diary to come and see the valuable work that is being done there? Will he say what measures he is taking to encourage more mature students to avail themselves of the opportunities to enter what I agree is the most important profession in the world?

Mr. Blunkett: I am always up for a trip to Scarborough, but preferably when the weather is a bit better and the crabs are freshly in from the sea.

I congratulate the university on its initiative. Under the graduate teacher programme, which this Government initiated, more than 1,000 mature students are working as teachers, being paid the graduate salary. We will expand the initiative to 1,600 places this year—a solution that is providing an immediate answer—with those who have experience being able to use it in the classroom.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): In Northern Ireland, the number of highly qualified students wishing to enter the teaching profession vastly outnumbers the number of places available at university and teacher training college. Will the Secretary of State consider discussing with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—and perhaps with the Secretaries of State for Wales and for Scotland—how the number of places available for teacher training might be increased so that the United Kingdom has sufficient qualified teachers and does not have to poach teachers from overseas, especially from areas where they are already greatly needed?

Mr. Blunkett: We welcome qualified graduates from across the United Kingdom and elsewhere to the teaching profession. We do so in particular in those shortage areas where, because of the new bursary system and "golden hello" payments for those entering the profession, we have seen a turnaround.

I am happy to discuss the situation in Northern Ireland with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to those wishing to apply for secondary school teacher training. The latest figures show a very welcome uplift in the number of those seeking teacher training for secondary specialisms—1 per cent. for mathematics, 2 per cent. for English and 5 per cent for science. I would like that to be fostered right across the United Kingdom so that the uplift can be mirrored in other parts of our country.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): Will the Secretary of State confirm that, as the research by Professor Howson shows, the number of teacher vacancies in London alone is 10 times higher than official figures show?

Mr. Blunkett: No, I will not. A census has just been taken, from 18 January, and the update indicates that although there has been a drop in the number of vacancies at primary level from 0.8 per cent. to 0.5 per cent., there has been an increase of 0.1 of 1 per cent. in the number of vacancies at secondary level. That is higher in London, but is similar to the position last year, using the same vacancy definition as the previous Government used.

Mrs. May: It is no good the Secretary of State saying that the definition is the same as that used by the previous Government. Come the election, parents will not be asking what the definition of a vacancy is. They will note the way in which the Secretary of State dismissed the genuine parental concerns raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) and for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman). Parents will ask, "We pay the tax, so where are the teachers?" They will ask why their children are being sent home early, taught in larger classes or taught by unqualified staff. They will ask why more newly qualified teachers are leaving the profession than four years ago, and why the Government are driving teachers out of the profession as a result of increasing red tape, mushrooming work load and burgeoning bureaucracy. They will ask why the Government are doing nothing about the growing national crisis in education.

The time has come to set the schools free and trust teachers again. Will the Secretary of State apologise to the House and to parents, children and teachers for his breathtaking complacency and the damage that his policies are doing to children's education?

Mr. Blunkett: It used to be my old friend Arthur who ranted and raved and put people off joining the Labour party; since he left, the flood into the Labour party has increased. I suspect that the hon. Lady will have had the same effect on anyone who switched on the Parliament channel this morning. It will not be ranting and raving that resolve the problem, but people, locally, in schools, and from the local authorities that she would abolish, who are helping schools to recruit and retain teachers. It will be the uplift in salaries—including the performance-related pay that the Opposition would not fund—that will solve the problem. It will be the reductions in paperwork; last term, there was a reduction of two thirds in secondary schools, and of 40 per cent. in

primary schools. It will be enabling teachers to teach better and to achieve greater satisfaction from their successes with the literacy and numeracy programmes. It will be rejoicing in the successes of those teachers. Those are the things that will encourage young people to join the profession and existing teachers to stay—not the rantings of Opposition Members.

Employment Service Direct

4. **Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick** (Poplar and Canning Town): What his latest assessment is of the effectiveness of Employment Service Direct. [147906]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Ms Tessa Jowell): The award-winning Employment Service Direct has demonstrated its effectiveness by placing 130,000 people in work since its introduction in January 1999; up to 231 of those people are in my hon. Friend's constituency. The service's effectiveness is shown by the fact that it has helped us to deliver the lowest unemployment for 25 years.

Mr. Fitzpatrick: I thank the Minister for that answer. I pay tribute to Employment Service staff in east London for the excellent job that they are doing. Will the Minister advise the House how Employment Service Direct fits into the broader proposals for the use of more advanced technology further to improve overall service provision both for employers and for job seekers?

Ms Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Employment Service Direct is part of a £400 million programme of modernisation, including worktrain, job banks and 9,000 touch screens in jobcentres, enabling unemployed people throughout the UK to have access to about 400,000 vacancies at any time. That supports the Government's drive to end long-term unemployment. I hope that the Opposition, too, will congratulate the Employment Service on this great effort.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Has the Minister seen the note from the House of Commons Library, dated 19 January, which concluded that, since the Government came to power, 300,000 jobs have been lost in the manufacturing sector, whereas under the previous Conservative Administration there was a net gain, with the creation of 70,000 jobs? Does she agree that her Government have failed manufacturing industry and those who have lost their jobs in it?

Ms Jowell: I will certainly study the note, but I also remind the House that, during the 18 years of Conservative government, 2.5 million jobs were lost in manufacturing. The scars remain in the parts of the country that were hardest hit. Under the Labour Government, long-term unemployment is at its lowest for a generation.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): My right hon. Friend will be aware that Employment Service Direct in Doncaster is complemented by the pilot jobpoints scheme. Even though the pilot scheme has been running for only three weeks, it is already proving to be extremely successful in helping people to find work. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that an assessment will be made quickly of the effectiveness of jobpoints pilots and that, if their present success continues, a decision will be made quickly to roll them out nationally?

Ms Jowell: I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that jobpoints will be available nationally. Their effectiveness is judged through their success in getting people into work. I visited the Birkenhead scheme on the day it was launched. Job seekers like it. Employers are looking for people to fill vacancies. Jobpoints will get people into work more quickly.

School Sport

5. **Mr. Bob Russell** (Colchester): If he will publish league tables of the number of hours of physical education provided by each school within the curriculum timetable. [147907]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): Ofsted collects information about the percentage of taught time for each subject when inspecting schools. In January, the Prime Minister announced an entitlement of two hours of physical education and sport, during and after school, for all children. We will consult and work with all interested parties on how that can best be achieved and monitored. Furthermore, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority will shortly produce guidance for schools on how to achieve two hours of physical education a week.

Mr. Russell: The Minister is obviously reluctant to give the figure, because she well knows that, at best, only 25 per cent. of children receive that amount of physical education within the school curriculum. Is it not about time that we stopped the unhealthy obsession with academic league tables, when the health education unit of Exeter university has produced evidence to show that regular exercise helps children to do better? Does the hon. Lady agree that there should be more physical education within the school curriculum? Does she agree with Sport England's view that it is important to revitalise school sport?

Jacqui Smith: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. All students receive physical education within the national curriculum from the age of five to the age of 16, but I agree that we need to do more to develop a good experience in sport for our young people. That is why the major investment in sport, pledged in September 2000, includes £750 million to improve and strengthen our sports facilities. It is why £130 million has already been allocated to local education authorities, which are planning proposals to provide facilities for sports and arts in our primary schools. It is why we are pledged to increase the number of sports colleges, such as Colne community school in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, to at least 150 by 2004. It is why we already have 143 school sports co-ordinators in place, with 660 primary link teachers. Yes, we need to do more to ensure that our children have the sporting opportunities that we all want them to have, which is why the Government are making such investment and why they will ensure that it is delivered.

Valerie Davey (Bristol, West): The curriculum at key stage 2 includes an entitlement to swimming and an

attainment at swimming. Will the Minister confirm that the Department will maintain that and ensure that it is monitored very carefully across all primary schools?

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend takes a close interest in ensuring that we have high levels of swimming tuition in our schools. As I told her during a recent Adjournment debate, we have set up an advisory group to find out how we can improve the already good standard of swimming teaching, especially for children at key stage 2; how we can ensure that swimming is included in the £750 million investment announced by the Prime Minister to improve facilities; and how we can ensure that the small number of children who do not gain the required standard by the end of key stage 2 are enabled to do so. I share my hon. Friend's wish to emphasise the importance of swimming. We will continue to work to ensure that swimming teaching is maintained and improved in all our primary schools.

University top-up Fees

6. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): What recent discussions he has had with universities on the introduction of top-up fees payable by students. [147908]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): My right hon. and hon. Friends and I hold regular meetings with representatives from the university sector. We introduced the new funding arrangements for students and for repayment precisely to avoid the universities levying additional charges.

Mr. Heath: Just before the 1997 election, the then Leader of the Opposition said that he had no plans to introduce tuition fees, yet that was done within two months of Labour's coming to office. The same formulation is being used now; we are told that there are no plans to introduce top-up fees. Yesterday, the Prime Minister said that he did not favour top-up fees. Will the Secretary of State now give us a clear assurance? Will he categorically rule out top-up fees for the lifetime of the next Parliament? That question has only two possible answers—yes or no. Which is it?

Mr. Blunkett: I am really sorry to disappoint the hon. Gentleman. I have made my position clear during the past two years: I am against the levying of top-up fees. I can now make the Government's position clear. If we win the next general election, there will be no levying of top-up fees in the next Parliament.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to early-day motion 282, and congratulate the university of London students union on its campaign in the capital against top-up fees? If any university went off on a tangent and introduced top-up fees, what would he say to that university and what action would he take against it?

Mr. Blunkett: My hon. Friend is right—there was a vigorous campaign, and understandably so. I assure him that the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 permits us to rule out top-up fees. The power to do that is in the hands of the two Houses of Parliament. As I have just said, with our majority in the House after the next general election, we shall ensure that those fees are not levied.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Is not it interesting that Ministers are so far out of touch that the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks), has already told the House that participation in higher education by socially disadvantaged groups is increasing when the facts show that the welcome advances of the last 10 years of the Conservative Government have been stopped in their tracks? The figures from UCAS—the Universities and Colleges Admission Service—show that the numbers from such groups fell by 168 during the first two years of the Labour Administration. Given those circumstances, are we not confronted with an Administration who do not so much believe in widening participation as in widening waffle on these matters?

In view of the breach of Labour's past pledges and the implausibility of Labour's present pledges, will the Secretary of State make it clear to the House, now that he is ruling out top-fees, whether he has any similar commitments to make in relation to what, in shorthand, I call "mainstream fees"? Has he any proposals to increase the total amount of mainstream funding to meet the deficiencies in university funding that many universities have already identified?

Mr. Blunkett: Between 1989 and 1997, there was a 36 per cent. cut in the unit funding per student under the previous Government. We have for the first time since the early 1980s reversed that trend, with an 18 per cent. real-terms increase in university funding over the lifetime of the two spending reviews. The figure is £1.7 billion.

I am fortunate in that I am in possession of the actual facts on the number of disadvantaged students attending university, so I shall give them to the hon. Gentleman. From 1996 to 2000, there was an uplift of 12 per cent. in the number of students from unskilled, manual backgrounds going to university. Although the total is abysmal, there was an uplift in the number from 4,900 to 5,500. That is not a drop; it is an increase. The new excellence challenge, the opportunity bursaries and efforts to reach out to raise the expectations of parents, pupils and schools will, over the years ahead, reverse a legacy of which none of us can be proud.

Long-term Unemployment

7. **Ms Hazel Blears** (Salford): What steps he is taking to reduce long-term unemployment. [147909]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Ms Tessa Jowell): Long-term unemployment is now at its lowest level for 25 years. As my hon. Friend will know, it has fallen by 70 per cent. in her constituency since May 1997. Government action is part of that success, but I hope that the House will pay tribute to the thousands and thousands of unemployed people throughout the country who have seized the opportunities provided by the new deal and other

welfare-to-work programmes to move off benefit and into work. That is good for them, good for their families and good for the economy of this country.

Ms Blears: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Salford now has its lowest unemployment rate for 18 years. It is below 4 per cent., which is in stark contrast to the misery of mass unemployment in the Tory years. We still have more 750 people who are long-term unemployed, but we are having some success. This week, a young man was placed in employment who had not worked since 1992. He has received extra support through the new deal and a jobseeker's grant. For the first time, he has the chance of a decent future. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, under Labour, there will be more such measures of support to ensure that everyone has the chance to get a job, to get into work and to have a decent income for their families, in contrast to what happened under the Tories, when people were consigned to years of hopelessness and misery?

Ms Jowell: I can confirm that more help will be available to enable us to get rid of long-term unemployment and to see it as a thing of the past. Under the Labour Government it is win, win: a win for unemployed people who are equipped with the skills that they need to get a job and a win for employers seeking to fill their vacancies. Under the Opposition, who have pledged to scrap the Government's welfare-to-work programmes, it is lose, lose: unemployed people will lose and employers will lose because they will not be able to recruit the employees whom they seek.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): The right hon. Lady is being modest on behalf of the Government. Surely what the Government have done for the long-term unemployment statistics is simply to reclassify people. If one adds up the current long-term unemployed, the number of people currently in the new deal who are not listed as such and the number of people on follow-through, one realises that just a few thousand people have left long-term unemployment. Will the Minister now undo the spin of putting these people through the revolving door and tell the House the real facts about the real people who are still being disadvantaged by the swindle of the new deal?

Ms Jowell: The previous Government removed people from the unemployment register when they went on to training programmes. That is precisely the same as removing people from the claimant count when they go on to the training element of the new deal. There is complete consistency. What is different is that the new deal has virtually eradicated long-term youth unemployment—help that the Opposition would remove.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): Measures to tackle long-term unemployment have created many more opportunities for women. My right hon. Friend will be aware of yesterday's announcement that 12.5 million women are working in the United Kingdom labour market. She will also be aware that a significant number of those women receive less pay than men who do the same job, despite the anti-discrimination and equal pay legislation of the 1970s. Moreover, the equal value arguments can tie a case down in the courts for years. The British Coal canteen workers' case has been running for 16 years and is not yet resolved. Will my right hon. Friend see what legislation is required to ease the path to equal pay for women?

Ms Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend for that. Yes, it is good news that figures published today show that more women are in work in the United Kingdom than ever before, but there is still a pay gap. To compare full-time women's earnings with full-time men's earnings, for every £1 that a man earns, a woman earns 81p. That is unacceptable in a modern labour market and the Government will shortly introduce proposals to tackle that pay gap.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Does the Minister agree that one of the most effective ways of tackling unemployment is to foster good work experience in schools and good business links with schools? Does she, therefore, share the concern of the National Education Business Partnership Network, which faces the prospect of its funding being slashed by up to 60 per cent., and which has described its response to that as varying from acute disappointment to utter dismay? Will she today guarantee that funding for those vital services from 1 April will at least be maintained, if not increased?

Ms Jowell: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State today announced a further £6 million to fund precisely that programme, so a total of £23 million worth of investment is going in after all. Of course, the best way to maintain high levels of employment is through a Labour Government.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): I welcome the Government's recent commitment to full employment in every region, especially as it includes the employment of lone parents, disabled people and men over 55. Does my right hon. Friend accept that that will have an enormous impact on abolishing poverty in the northern region and will give a great boost to our prosperity?

Ms Jowell: I agree with my right hon. Friend. Our objective is full employment in every region. To achieve that, we must end long-term unemployment. That is why our welfare-to-work programmes are driving down unemployment, but the Opposition are pledged to scrap those programmes. We are working with unemployed people.

School Science Laboratories

8. **Barbara Follett** (Stevenage): What measures he has implemented to update school science laboratory facilities. [147911]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): Under the school laboratories for the 21st century initiative, £60 million has been allocated from the Government's capital modernisation fund to tackle deficiencies in secondary school science accommodation over this financial year and next. That is enabling about 400 improvement projects to be carried out.

In addition, local education authorities have been able to apply for funding from the new deal for schools programme to improve the condition of school laboratories. So far, 151 such projects have been funded, at a cost of just under £37 million. Those authorities may also have incorporated improvements to science accommodation within larger schemes of school expansion, or rationalisation.

Barbara Follett: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply and for the money that the Department has made available for 13 new laboratories in three secondary schools in my constituency. Although that is most welcome, will she tell me what measures the Department is taking to recruit and train more science teachers for secondary schools?

Jacqui Smith: I am glad that my hon. Friend has welcomed the extra investment in her constituency, which is important in itself in providing the surroundings that are necessary to maintain teachers in classrooms and to deliver high standards. We are pleased also, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, that new figures for applications for post-graduate certificate of education courses show that applications for chemistry have increased by 45 per cent., and for physics by 23 per cent. Applications overall for science have significantly increased. The action that the Government are taking to recruit extra teachers in all subjects, but particularly science, is having the necessary effect to maintain high standards and to improve them in my hon. Friend's constituency and throughout the country.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): So that we can have some criteria by which to judge the Minister's comments, will she simply say whether there are more or fewer recruits for secondary training in science for the academic year that began in September 2000 than in the academic year that began in September 1996? More or fewer?

Jacqui Smith: What is important is the action that we are taking to get more teachers into classrooms and more teachers into specialisms. We have already seen capital investment such as that which has been made in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett). The actions that the Government have taken in terms of training salaries and encouraging people into teacher training are having an effect. For the first time for eight years there are more people in teacher training this year than there were at this time last year. The Government are concerned to put in place actions that will encourage teachers into the profession and maintain them in it, while Conservative Members are keen to talk down the profession and worsen the recruitment problem.

Higher Education (Pay)

12. **Mr. Mark Todd** (South Derbyshire): What representations he has received on the implementation of the Bett report on pay in the higher education sector.

[147917]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Malcolm Wicks): My Department has received a number of representations on the Bett report. It is important to emphasise that the report is for employers and universities and not for the Government. The task of Government is to fund our university system adequately. As part of record funding, we have earmarked some funding for academic and non-academic pay at significant levels. The Higher Education Funding Council for England is currently consulting institutions representing bodies and unions on the personnel strategies that will underpin the allocation of funds.

Mr. Todd: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply. Does he agree that it would be helpful to urge employers in the higher education sector to commit themselves, now that they have the most generous settlement for many years, to the process of implementing the recommendations in the Bett report and resolving current disputes about higher education pay?

Mr. Wicks: We would certainly welcome anything that would prevent disputes, as we are concerned about the education of students. However, I am confident that the parties are now meeting and will resolve the matter. We obviously want our university academics to be paid well, and we must have regard to universities' performance and shortages in certain subject areas.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): The Minister may be aware of the current worsening industrial relations at Sheffield Hallam university resulting from actions arising in the dispute over implementation of the Bett report. I accept the Minister's point that detailed negotiations on pay are a matter for employers and employees, but does he have a message for the many staff at Sheffield Hallam university who have contacted me asking for the link to be made between the negotiations and the Government settlement for higher education? Does he also have a message for the employers at Sheffield Hallam university who have made precisely the same point, and said that any pay deal is utterly dependent on Government funding?

Mr. Wicks: The Department must resist the temptation to get involved in detailed negotiations, whether at Sheffield Hallam university or at any other college or university. Our task, which we have fulfilled, is to fund universities at record levels and offer funds specifically for pay in the university sector. We obviously wish to see any industrial relations problems resolved—although that is the task of the employers and the unions—for the benefit of staff and students.

Mr. Roger Berry (Kingswood): Although I acknowledge and welcome the Government's substantial increase in funding for higher education, with specific allocations for increased pay, does my hon. Friend accept that staff do not believe that university employers have been negotiating according to the terms of the Bett report? Will he ensure that the Government's provision for increased pay will result in a general increase in pay throughout the university sector?

Mr. Wicks: I understand those concerns. This coming year alone, we are giving an extra £412 million to the university sector. That is our task as Government—not to negotiate on behalf of employers or trade unions. The future of our university sector depends on decent and fair funding, which must be the object of negotiations.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): The Minister talked about the increased resources available to universities, which are welcome. He also talked about the quality of staff. Is he convinced that the available resources enable universities to employ quality staff, especially in the sciences? In addition, does he believe that sufficient students are going to university to study the sciences which, of course, was the subject of the earlier question tabled by the hon. Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett)?

Mr. Wicks: We certainly need to encourage more young men and women to study sciences and other disciplines crucial to our economy. We tackle that in a wide variety of ways: through our schools, the modernisation of careers services and the new Connexions service. Total departmental funding for the higher education sector will be £5.8 billion this coming financial year, rising to £6.1 billion the year after and £6.4 billion in 2003-04. Unlike the previous Administration, we are providing resources for universities. It is for the universities themselves to determine the sensitivities of pay structure.

Construction Workers (New Deal)

13. **Mr. Desmond Browne** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): How many more people are working in the construction industry as a result of the new deal. [147918]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Ms Tessa Jowell): Twelve thousand bricklayers, plasterers, roofers and other construction workers have found jobs in industry, helped by the new deal. A construction taskforce is identifying further opportunities and ways in which the new deal can assist in meeting skills shortages in the construction industry.

Mr. Browne: I thank my right hon. Friend for her reply and invite her to join me in congratulating the Employment Service and its partners which have, through the new deal action team for jobs pilot in east Ayrshire, secured, in six months, more than 230 new jobs for people who would otherwise have been in long-term unemployment. Many of those jobs are in the construction industry, and the figure represents 20 per cent. of the registered unemployed in the areas covered by the pilot.

Is my right hon. Friend aware that the simple fact of the Employment Service paying for training for the CITB—Construction Industry Training Board—roadworks and street certificate is daily helping people who would otherwise be unskilled to get available jobs in the construction industry? Will she confirm that that type of targeted investment in skills will be expanded by the Government? I urge her to extend that pilot project to my whole constituency.

Ms Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and for his support for the action team for jobs in his constituency—one of the pathfinders. There are now 40 action teams for jobs helping unemployed people back to work in some of the most disadvantaged communities in the country. Yes, I can promise that efforts will be redoubled to strengthen the links with the construction industry in my hon. Friend's constituency. That industry has been a valued partner in the work of the action team.

Business of the House

12.30 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Will the Leader of the House please give us the business for the coming week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:—

MONDAY 12 FEBRUARY—Opposition Day [5th Allotted Day].

Until about 7 o'clock, there will be a debate on "Conditions in Her Majesty's Prisons" followed by a debate entitled "Shifting the Balance". Both debates will arise on Opposition motions.

TUESDAY 13 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Bill.

Remaining stages of the Capital Allowances Bill.

WEDNESDAY 14 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Health and Social Care Bill.

THURSDAY 15 FEBRUARY—Debate on the report of the BSE inquiry by Lord Phillips on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 16 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

As I reminded hon. Members last week, we will not sit again thereafter until Monday 26 February.

The provisional business for the day that we return after the constituency week will be:

MONDAY 26 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Criminal Defence Service (Advice and Assistance) Bill *[Lords]*.

The House will wish to be reminded that on Wednesday 28 February, there will be a debate relating to informing and consulting employees in the European Community, in European Standing Committee C.

The House will also wish to be reminded that on Wednesday 14 February, there will be a debate in European Standing Committee A relating to the prevention and control of certain transmissible spongiform encephalopathies. Details of the relevant documents will be given in the *Official Report*.

[Wednesday 28 February 2001: European Standing Committee C—Relevant European Union document: Unnumbered EM submitted by DTI dated 21 November 2000, informing and consulting employees. Relevant European Scrutiny Committee report: HC 23-xxx (1999-2000).]

Mrs. Browning: I am grateful to the Leader of the House.

Now that the Prime Minister has confirmed that, if re-elected, the Government would propose scrapping the pound within the next two years, will the right hon. Lady press the Chancellor to table a debate so that the Government's timetable can be fully discussed by the House? That would also provide an opportunity for hon. Members to contribute to a debate on the Government's intentions with respect to the wording of a referendum question. There appears to be some confusion on the part of those on the Government Front Bench, not least the Prime Minister. We would welcome an opportunity to hear the Government's intentions.

As the Leader of the House announced, on Monday the second Opposition debate initiated by the Conservatives will give hon. Members of all parties an opportunity, of which they have been deprived by the Government, to vote on "Shifting the Balance"—that is, the shift in the balance of power from the Executive to the Back Benches in respect of Select Committees. Bearing in mind the fact that the Prime Minister has promised a free vote, will the right hon. Lady confirm that Labour Members on both Front and Back Benches will be allowed a free vote on Monday?

Will the Leader of the House give urgent consideration to the proceedings of Bills once they have passed from the Chamber into Committee? In particular, I draw her attention to the proceedings on the Criminal Justice and Police Bill. The Minister claimed on Second Reading that, under the programme motion, there would be 16 sittings in Committee. However, when the Sub-Committee met, the motion proposed by the Minister was for 14 sittings.

I know that the right hon. Lady has written to Ministers about that, but it is wholly unacceptable that a programme motion that is debated in good faith by the House should be changed when the resolution is put before the Sub-Committee. The programme motions and the entire programming procedure are still in disarray. As that was the Government's initiative, I ask the right hon. Lady to get a grip as soon as possible.

Could we also have the promised annual debate on small firms? I ask that question because of a press release circulated on behalf of the Cabinet Office by its Parliamentary Secretary, the hon. Member for Manchester Blackley (Mr. Stringer). In the press release, the hon. Gentleman claims that over-regulation is a myth. Indeed, according to the Government, small firms in the UK have little cause for concern about red tape. It is not only the Opposition who disagree with that view, but organisations such as the Forum of Private Business, which has listed many questions that challenge the Government's assertions. Will the right hon. Lady arrange for a debate on small firms, so that Opposition Members can question the Parliamentary Secretary on behalf of small businesses throughout the country, about his rather exaggerated claim?

Finally, will the Leader of the House consider allowing a debate in Government time on international development? The subject has not been debated since 1 July 1997, but Opposition Members would welcome the opportunity to share with the House many of our policies, especially in relation to helping the third world. We regard such a debate as a high priority and we hope that the Government will share that view.

Mrs. Beckett: I know that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) was in her place yesterday, so she has no excuse for pretending that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister confirmed that the Government propose to scrap the pound. She is intelligent and, as far as I am aware, she is not deaf, so she must know what my right hon. Friend said. He was asked when early in a Parliament would be, and he answered that that naturally meant during its first half. That is when the Government propose that we should seek to make an

assessment of the economic impact of joining the euro. That is precisely what my right hon. Friend said—*[Interruption.]* It is no good the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) wittering on. That is what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said. It has been said repeatedly and it will continue to be said.

I understand that things must be hard for Opposition Members, as they are desperate to pretend that the Government want to bounce people into a referendum straight after the election. However, we have made it absolutely clear, in the roundest and simplest possible terms, that we have no intention of doing any such thing. The Opposition are struggling, but they nevertheless have no excuse for suggesting that something was said when it was not said.

The hon. Lady asked me about the debate on the Liaison Committee issue. I am sure that she does not expect me to inform the House of the Government's advice to Labour Members on a Conservative party motion that we have not yet even seen, and I have no intention of doing so. She is right that it is perfectly normal for House business to be dealt with on a free vote, but the motion is not House business; it is Opposition business. With all charity to the hon. Lady, who did not have her present responsibilities when the Liaison Committee report was published, I point out that not all her colleagues will enter the Lobby to support the report if they are given a free vote.

As I said, we shall consider the matter when the motion becomes available. We may find that we must seek to amend it, but that remains to be seen. The hon. Lady spoke about a shift in power from Government to the Back Benches in respect of the report. In fact, there would be a shift in power from the Government to three individuals who are the most senior members of the existing Select Committee structure, in the new Parliament or whenever the proposals were introduced. That is not quite the same as a shift in power to Back Benchers, but the House will have its own views on the matter.

The hon. Lady asked about proceedings on the Criminal Justice and Police Bill. I am not aware of the precise developments to which she referred and I shall certainly make inquiries. However, it is for the Standing Committee that considers that Bill to decide whether it needs more sittings to dispose of its business expeditiously. The handling of programme motions is not in disarray. Given that the technique is new and experimental, I believe that it is working reasonably smoothly. Furthermore, the procedure was not solely my initiative or that of the Government. I remind her that, at the outset of the current Parliament, the then Modernisation Committee recommended that we should use programme motions for all Government Bills. Of course, Opposition Members did not subsequently wish to adopt such an arrangement, for understandable reasons.

The hon. Lady asked for a debate on small business. I shall take that request into account. As she will be aware, every Leader of the House is most wary of promising annual debates, not least because so many such debates are sought with regard to many different issues. But I am of course conscious of the pressure for a debate on small business—and, as the hon. Lady will know, we held such a debate last year.

I am well aware that small businesses are always concerned about over-regulation. I remember them protesting when the Conservatives made them take over the handling of sick pay and maternity pay, and they were most upset when the Conservatives made them act as immigration police. These are not unfamiliar accusations.

The hon. Lady asked for a debate on international development. That is certainly an attractive thought, especially as yesterday I once again heard the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), claim that this was yet another area in which the Conservatives did not propose to make any cuts in the Government's approved budget. They are running out of options—but I fear that that is not a reason for allowing a debate in the near future.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Has my right hon. Friend seen today's reports of an increase of £9 billion—85 per cent.—in Shell's profits? Will a statement be made in the House, and will that statement call on Shell and the other oil companies to reduce the price of petrol in accordance with the Chancellor's announcements in his pre-Budget statement? If the oil companies refuse to do that, will the Chancellor be asked to impose a windfall tax on all of them in his Budget?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. I am sure that all members of the public will be concerned if they believe the price of petrol is being held artificially high when it would be possible, as well as desirable, for it to be reduced. I sympathise with my hon. Friend's wish for a statement examining these matters; I fear I cannot undertake to find time for one in the near future, but I am sure that, as always, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will heed my hon. Friend's words.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I think all Members will welcome the news that we now have a full day in which to debate the remaining stages of the Health and Social Care Bill. I believe that at one point the time was to be more limited.

Does the Leader of the House recall her exchange with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) during last week's business questions, about teachers' pay and conditions? Does she now recall—she confessed then that she was not aware of it—that a written question tabled for answer on Thursday was withdrawn and retabled for answer on Friday, so that those expecting an announcement on Thursday would be caught out? Is she now aware that the announcement was actually made on the "Today" programme on Friday morning, before the publication of the written answer? Is she satisfied that that is the best way for Government policy to be announced; and can she ensure that in the coming weeks we have a better understanding—a proper understanding—of the needs of the House and its business?

As the Leader of the House will recall, the Chancellor indicated in his autumn statement that he intended to renegotiate the level of VAT that his Conservative predecessors had imposed on the repair, maintenance and conservation of churches and chapels. Can she tell us when the Chancellor will be in a position to make a full statement on progress—he has given me an answer which, frankly, suggests that little has been made—and what he

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proposes to do about the £38 million of additional funds from hard-pressed congregations that go towards the VAT budget?

I understand that the Chancellor intends to make some sort of announcement; when will he do so? We need to know the scope of the proposals, how the timetable will fit in with the delay in dealing with VAT and, indeed, whether the funds will be capped.

We agree with the Conservatives that we should have a debate on the timetable for the euro referendum—if only because it would allow their leader to repeat the pledge he gave on BBC South and West television, when he said that he was opposed to any referendum on the euro. He is not prepared to let the British people decide.

Mrs. Beckett: I was not aware of the statement to which the hon. Gentleman has just referred. I shall certainly make inquiries, as it was my impression that at least some of those currently funding the Conservative party were doing so on the basis of their belief that the party would allow a referendum. We knew, of course, that there was unlikely to be one in the next Parliament if the Conservatives were elected, because they have set their face against that, even if it is in Britain's economic interests.

I take the hon. Gentleman's point; nevertheless, it does not change my view on the likelihood of a debate in the near future on these specific matters, and on the timing.

I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman said about the Health and Social Care Bill.

On teachers' pay, I did not follow the precise timing of the way in which the matter was handled. It is always a matter of regret if people feel that others have been informed before the House, even though that may not always have happened. There would never be any question of the timing of a parliamentary question being changed to catch people out. There may be other reasons for a change, such as to ensure that precise information was available or, occasionally, to avoid one answer being swamped by another. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] Well, that is an important matter, and the House and the country were interested in the outcome of the review, and in the Government's view on it.

With regard to the renegotiation of VAT, I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will be in a position to make a statement on his progress on those matters, but I shall certainly draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks to his attention.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a statement on job losses in the aerospace industry in Lancashire? BAE Systems is wielding an axe over thousands of jobs, but we do not yet know where that axe is going to fall. Some employees are being given no real choice of deployment: the choice between working at Warton, Salmesbury or in Saudi Arabia is not a real choice for people with families. The time has come for a statement to be made.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand and sympathise with my hon. Friend's concern on behalf of his constituents. I know that he and other colleagues from the north-west have been pressing for more clarity on those issues, in the House and outside, so that their constituents might know how they are going to be affected. I fear that I cannot undertake to provide a statement in the near future, although I will certainly draw his remarks to the attention of the Secretary of State. My hon. Friend will recall that it is Trade and Industry questions on Thursday, and, depending on how the draw has gone, he might find an opportunity to raise the issue then.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Is the Leader of the House aware that the Secretary of State for Health has failed to answer a question from me, on the exclusion of nurses in west Kent from the new cost of living supplement, that I tabled on 20 November? Is she also aware that he has failed to respond to a letter from me dated 24 November? Does she agree that that is unacceptable? What will she do about it?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not aware of the background to the specific constituency issue that the hon. Gentleman raises. Obviously, I understand his concern. If it has not proved possible for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to deal with the issue until now, I shall certainly undertake to draw the hon. Gentleman's concerns to his attention.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): May I assure my right hon. Friend that my request for a debate on international debt relief was not at all influenced by the question asked by the shadow Leader of the House? After all, the Opposition had every opportunity to devote one of their Opposition day debates to that subject, but they chose to debate asylum seekers and other subjects.

A recent Oxfam study showed that of 12 countries experiencing debt relief—greatly to the credit of the Department for International Development—three of them nevertheless had to spend more on debt servicing than on health and education. DFID has a good story to tell, and a lot to contribute in terms of providing a strategy for international debt relief and the reduction of poverty. Given that it has such a good story to tell, may I support the calls for such a debate?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, and I understand and sympathise with both the basic points that he makes. There is a good story to tell on the Government's initiative and success in promoting the cause of debt relief.

My right hon. Friend also referred to the issue of spending on education vis-à-vis debt. We have substantially increased the resources made available, committing more than £400 million since the general election to support primary education in developing countries, as part of the increase in the development budget as a whole by 45 per cent. in real terms. I accept that the Government have a good story to tell, although there remains a great deal to be done, not least in the international arena. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate in Government time in the near future, but my right hon. Friend might like to consider the attractions of the time available in Westminster Hall.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Will the right hon. Lady express her gratitude to the Opposition for finding time for a debate and a vote on a matter for which the Government should have provided time: the Liaison Committee report "Shifting the Balance"?

Will she reflect on her reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning)? The Prime Minister made it clear that there would be a free vote on the report. Will the right hon. Lady confirm that, if the Opposition table a motion in the precise words of the Liaison Committee, there will be a free vote as the Prime Minister promised?

Mrs. Beckett: Of course it is for the Opposition to determine topics for debate on Opposition days, and it is for the country to judge whether the Opposition's priorities reflect public concern. However, the right hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out that the Prime Minister said, entirely correctly as always, that there is a free vote on House matters. The Prime Minister has never said, and is never likely to say, that Opposition day debates are a matter for a free vote.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): May I support the call of the shadow Leader of the House for the Chancellor to come to the House, not to embarrass the Tory party about its single currency policy, but to give the Opposition an opportunity to hear the excellent speech that he made to a private meeting in Westminster Hall yesterday about the Government's plans for full employment in every region and for abolishing child poverty, pensioner poverty and poverty among disabled people?

Mrs. Beckett: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful case. I am aware of the Chancellor's determination to build on the solid foundations that he has laid for the economy by tackling full employment and child poverty. I understand and sympathise with my right hon. Friend's views. He knows that, despite many opportunities on Opposition days or at Prime Minister's Question Time, the Conservative party prefers dancing around the argument about angels on the head of a pin and discussing whether any aspect of the Government's policy on the euro has changed to dealing with important issues of substance to the British people and to the future of our country. Nevertheless, I cannot undertake to find time in the near future for such a debate, although I am sure that the Chancellor would be delighted to take part in it.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): Does the right hon. Lady know that yesterday, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food told the National Farmers Union annual general meeting that he believed it was time for a full debate in Parliament on bovine tuberculosis and the epidemic that has spread throughout the country under the Government? Has the Minister made any request to the right hon. Lady for such a debate? If so, when will it take place?

Mrs. Beckett: I would be slightly surprised to learn that my right hon. Friend had couched his remarks in those precise terms. It was not my impression that tuberculosis began to spread on 1 May 1997. I shall draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend. However, the hon. Gentleman knows that an important agriculture debate on BSE is scheduled for the near future, and that takes precedence. The Conservative party has called for that important debate for a long time.

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): The *Financial Times* reports on 30 January that the Postal Services Commission, the new regulator for the Post Office, has issued a draft licence for consultation, which will take effect from 26 March. Will my right hon. Friend speak to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to ensure that the licence is placed in the Library? Can we have a debate on the Floor of the House before the licence becomes operational? I am especially concerned about the three years until the fines are introduced for late delivery. That is a matter of great anxiety to my constituents in Putney.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand and sympathise with my hon. Friend's anxiety on behalf of his constituents that the licence conditions should be properly aired. There are genuine problems, especially in parts of London. I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on the Floor in the near future. However, I shall draw my hon. Friend's request for licence papers to be placed in the Library to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. I also remind my hon. Friend that Trade and Industry questions are scheduled for next Thursday. He may find an opportunity to raise the matter then.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Why are the Government so frightened of debating the euro? Does not the right hon Lady recognise that, when she says on the "Today" programme that the decision will be taken entirely on the subjective judgment of the Chancellor and on subjective criteria that he has set, she raises the suspicion that it will be based not on what is in the best economic interests of the United Kingdom but on what is perceived by the Government to be in the electoral interests of their party?

Mrs. Beckett: There is no question of Labour Members being afraid of debating the euro; we are just deeply bored with the endless round-the-houses pursuit by Conservative Members attempting to find something different in what Ministers are saying. The hon. Gentleman claimed that we are worried about debating the euro because a decision might be taken not in the best economic interests of the country but in the political interests of the Government. There is only one party in the House that is determined that such a decision should be based not on the country's economic interests but on its own political stance, and that is the Conservative party.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): My right hon. Friend will recall that last week I asked for an urgent debate on the cuts in vital social services being made by Tory councillors in Calderdale. Those councillors are now proposing even more damaging cuts, this time in a health and social services initiative that has just been given beacon status because it is so highly thought of. Will my right hon. Friend please make time for a debate, not just on the cuts in Tory-controlled Calderdale but on the cuts being made by Tory-controlled councils across the country?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's concern, particularly since the cuts that caused her concern last week are now being exacerbated in a way that might damage the delivery of health and social care. She will recall that those of us who campaigned in local elections during this Parliament warned people who want to see improvements in health and social care about the inconsistency inherent in local authorities pursuing

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policies different from those of the Government. If they are happy to see such provisions cut, they are entirely right to vote for the Conservative party, because that is its policy.

I understand my hon. Friend's concern but fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on the Floor of the House in the near future. However, it is Environment questions next Tuesday and she might find an opportunity to raise the matter then.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Will the right hon. Lady note in her busy diary the forthcoming exhibition in the Upper Waiting Hall, commencing on 26 February, in which we hope to demonstrate our vision for a future Northern Ireland by exhibiting what is best? Will she recommend to colleagues and staff in both Houses that they seek to visit the exhibition and become better informed about what is best in Northern Ireland, so that they can fully participate in future debates?

Mrs. Beckett: I am happy to join the hon. Gentleman in his plug for that exhibition. I share his view that it is good for people to be aware of positive developments in Northern Ireland, not least because it is important to project a positive view and to see the Province move towards greater prosperity and success in the future.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): Will my right hon. Friend reconsider the request by the shadow Leader of the House for a debate on international development, so that we can focus on the UN target of 0.7 per cent. of GNP, a commitment from which the Tory Government resiled during their 18 years in office, with the result that we inherited a figure of 0.2 per cent? It is important for us to increase that figure. A debate would also give us an opportunity to discuss problems such as AIDS in Africa, which is claiming 500,000 children's lives and 2.5 million adult lives.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's point. He is entirely right that, as far as I can recall, throughout the 18 years of Tory Government there was a sustained reduction in the resources made available to help developing countries. Although I sympathise with his concern and with his anxiety to highlight the Government's progress in the right direction—a direction to which the previous Tory Government were committed in theory, although they went in the wrong direction—I cannot undertake to find time for such a debate.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): As the right hon. Lady is the custodian of the House's duty to hold Ministers to account, can she guarantee that if the former Treasury Solicitor, Mr. Hammond, presents a report to the Prime Minister on the conduct of Ministers, that report will be published verbatim and not bowdlerised, and that the Prime Minister will come to the House to make a statement upon which he can be questioned?

Mrs. Beckett: My right hon. Friend immediately volunteered to establish the inquiry—which I believe is being conducted by Sir Anthony Hammond—and it has been made clear that Sir Anthony's views and conclusions will be made public. It is a matter for him now—we hope speedily—to conduct that inquiry. The Government have no concern about putting the report in the public domain. It is we who established the inquiry so that its outcome can be in the public domain.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): The Leader of the House will know that, at business questions and on other occasions in the House, I have raised the issue of volunteers and the Criminal Records Bureau. She will also know that, this week, in a written parliamentary answer, the Government announced that they would not be charging voluntary organisations for checks to screen out those who are unsuitable to work with children and vulnerable adults. Could a Minister be asked to make that announcement in the House, so that all hon. Members can congratulate the Government on it? Does she agree that such an announcement would provide hon. Members with an excellent opportunity to discuss the contrast between the Government's support for voluntary organisations and vulnerable people in our communities and the support being given them by Conservative Members?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right. She is only one of many hon. Members to raise the issue—although she has been most assiduous in raising it in the House—of the charge. The Government have always said that the matter was under review, and that is proven by the fact that the review has come up with a set of proposals different from those that were first advanced. She is right also to say that that is only one example of the ways in which the Government have massively increased support for voluntary organisations. I know that organisations such as the scouts and the guides, which in many ways led that campaign among voluntary organisations, will particularly welcome the announcement.

I fear nevertheless that I cannot undertake to offer to find time for a special debate on the issue—not least because, sadly, there are so many occasions when the House should be able to congratulate Ministers on taking action for which the House had called yet which turn out to be about something else entirely.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): It is now clear that, shortly after the general election, the Government will announce their intention to ditch the pound. Does the right hon. Lady understand that most of us believe that the economic criteria are largely subjective and that the conclusions will be whatever the Chancellor wants them to be? Does she also understand that many of us believe that the constitutional and political criteria are yet more important? Consequently, should we not have before the general election early and frequent debates so that the electorate can have exposed to them exactly where the Government stand on those issues?

Mrs. Beckett: If I may take issue with the right hon. and learned Gentleman, as the Prime Minister and I have repeatedly made clear, it is absolute rubbish to pretend—as Conservative Members are clearly desperate to do—that the Government are committed, as he puts it, to "ditching the pound" straight after the general election. What the Government are committed to doing is ensuring that there is an assessment of the economic position and of whether we feel that the economic tests are met. If,

and only if, it is judged that those tests are met, the Government might make a recommendation that would be put to the decision of the British people in a referendum.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman made a separate point about the constitution and political criteria, which met with loud approval on the Opposition Benches. He is entirely right that these are different issues and that they are of considerable importance. The Government have never disputed that. We have simply made it plain that, having given careful and mature consideration to those constitutional and political issues, we do not take the view that they are of sufficient weight to prevent Britain from joining the euro should we conclude that that is to our economic advantage.

I see no great need for frequent and early debates to explore these issues, as the position has always been absolutely clear. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell) is rightly pointing out that it was the Conservatives who signed the Maastricht treaty. One must be cautious with information that comes from press reports, but I understand that the Leader of the Opposition has said that Conservative Members will be free, in their personal general election manifestos, to say that they want never to join the euro, even if it is in Britain's economic interest, or even to go so far as to say that we should leave the European Union. That is an interesting debate which is clearly being held sub rosa in the Conservative party. I wonder why it does not want to share it with the rest of us.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): We had a useful Adjournment debate on Monday about unsolicited mail. A load of scams are being operated to wheedle money out of people, some of whom become addicted to the methods being used against them. As every Member of Parliament has constituents who are badly affected by such operations—and the Royal Mail does not play a very honourable role in this regard—can we have a debate on the matter in Government time? We might then end up with some red tape around the necks of the people involved, which we could tighten.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend sounds uncharacteristically bloodthirsty, but hon. Members of all parties will share his irritation about unsolicited mail—and indeed unsolicited faxes and all the other paraphernalia. I fear that although I sympathise with the anxieties that are caused, I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate in the near future, but I will undertake to remind my ministerial colleagues of the importance that my hon. Friend and others attach to it.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I must repeat the call for a debate on the subject of Britain joining the euro, because the Leader of the House did not answer the question fully. The only thing that the Prime Minister was clear about yesterday was that the pound is on death row. It has a two-year stay of execution and the only chance of a reprieve is the intervention of an incoming Conservative Government. Will the right hon. Lady make absolutely clear what the question would be in such a referendum? We failed to get an answer to that from the Prime Minister yesterday. The House and the British people want a debate on the subject, so that they will have a fair and reasonable chance, when the referendum comes, to exercise their judgment and protect the interests of this country by keeping the pound.

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that there is remarkably little to add to what has already been said ad nauseam on the issue. I know why the Conservatives repeatedly ask what the question would be in a referendum: they want to bolster their contention that we will hold a referendum immediately after winning the general election. That is not true. We have made it absolutely clear that we have no intention of bouncing people into a referendum straight after the election. It is also absolutely clear that, if the Conservative party were to be elected, there would be no referendum. As to what is on death row, it is perfectly clear that that position is occupied by the policy programme of the Conservative party.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): May I add my voice to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), who called in business questions last week for an early debate on the annual report of the Intelligence and Security Committee? Has there been any progress?

Mrs. Beckett: As my hon. Friend says, my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), not for the first time, asked about scheduling such a debate. I am aware of the Committee's concern that it should be held as early as possible. Debates that require the presence of two senior Cabinet Ministers, one of whom is frequently charged with being out of the country, are not always easy to schedule. I can give an assurance, however, that such issues are under active consideration. All that I can undertake is that we will do our best.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The Leader of the House has agreed that the Prime Minister meant what he said when he responded on 13 July to a question about the report from the Liaison Committee entitled "Shifting the Balance" by saying that there would be a free vote on the matter. That is encouraging, but last week the right hon. Lady made it clear to me, as she had done previously to other hon. Members of all parties, that she was going to do her best to prevent that free vote from taking place. There is the opportunity for that free vote to take place in Opposition time on Monday—and we shall leave to one side what conclusion the electorate should draw about which party stands up for the independence of Members of Parliament and their ability to hold the Executive to account. If the terms of the motion under debate are to be precisely those adopted by the Liaison Committee, will the right hon. Lady say whether Labour Members will have a free vote?

Mrs. Beckett: I have never made the remarks to which the hon. Gentleman alludes. I have simply answered the questions posed repeatedly by Opposition Members by saying that matters to do with the House are decided on a free vote. I have also said that we will of course look with care at any motion that the Opposition table, although we may wish to amend it. However, it has never been the case that Opposition business is the subject of a free vote.

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): Does my right hon. Friend agree that a debate on the future of public services,

[Mr. Derek Twigg]

especially education and health, might be possible at some time? I am surprised that the Opposition did not pick that as the subject for one of their supply days. That is especially interesting, given last week's speech by the Leader of the Opposition on the future of public services: it seems that Opposition Members want to talk about such things outside the Chamber but not inside it. I should be especially interested to hear the Opposition's policies with regard to the two-tier education system that they want to introduce, and on the future of private health care.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes a strong point but he will know that, although the Leader of the Opposition refers occasionally to such policy areas outside the House he never manages—as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister pointed out at last week's Question Time—to get around to asking questions about them in the House. My hon. Friend is also right to identify the great interest, time and thought being devoted by the Government to the future of our public services. He may know that the Prime Minister will very shortly—very shortly indeed, in fact—make a speech setting out the framework within which we hope to take forward our policies on education, crime and other areas. Further announcements will be made on the policy debates that we hope to take forward in the coming weeks.

I know that my hon. Friend and others will study my right hon. Friend's speech with great interest. However, although I understand my hon. Friend's wish to have a debate focusing on how we want to improve standards in public services and on how the Opposition would—given the chance—undermine and destroy them yet again, I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for that debate in the near future.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): May I ask the Leader of the House yet again to reconsider a debate on the abolition of the pound, to which the Government are so committed? Is it not fair to say that the manifesto on which the Labour party fought the last election committed us to a referendum in this Parliament? That manifesto went on to state:

"In any event, there are three pre-conditions which would have to be satisfied before Britain could join during the next Parliament: first, the Cabinet would have to agree; then Parliament; and finally the people would have to say 'Yes'".

Why were there three preconditions before the last election, whereas now there are five? Is it because the Cabinet cannot agree?

Mrs. Beckett: Dear, oh dear! The hon. Gentleman can surely do better than that. It remains the case that, before any referendum of the British people, an assessment must be carried out. The Cabinet would then have to come collectively to the view that that assessment meant that the tests set by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, with the full agreement of the whole Government, had been satisfied. The Cabinet would have to be confident—as far as that is possible in this world—that it would be in Britain's economic interests to join the euro. If the Cabinet so concluded, the decision would be put to the House and then, ultimately, to the British people.

The Opposition are trying to exert general pressure in relation to this matter. I may be in error, but I think that almost every Opposition Member who has raised the matter with me and expressed such great concern for the potential loss of the pound in fact voted for the Maastricht treaty.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South): I am sure that my right hon. Friend is aware of the anxieties felt in all steel communities throughout the United Kingdom as a consequence of Corus's announcement. I am sure that she will also accept that many Members of Parliament who represent steel areas are furious at the response of Sir Brian Moffat, who, having offered us the opportunity to speak with him today, has cancelled the meeting. We see this, once more, as a sign that he is contemptuous of Members of Parliament and of this House.

Some 22,000 people in the industry are directly employed by Corus. That figure can be multiplied by five, taking into account others who are employed as a consequence. Will my right hon. Friend find time for an urgent debate on steel?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend has taken every opportunity to raise this matter, as have other Members representing constituencies strongly affected by the moves proposed by Corus. I think that Members across the House will share her concern if there are difficulties, when constituents' interests are so much at stake, in making contact with those who have the authority to make the decisions.

As my hon. Friend knows, there was a recent debate in Westminster Hall about this matter, and I am confident that it will continue to be aired. I fear that I cannot undertake at present to find time for a further special debate in the near future. However, my hon. Friend will know that it is Department of Trade and Industry questions next week and the issue may well come up then.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Can we please have an urgent debate on the increasing but understandable propensity of the Scottish Parliament to vote increased benefits to the Scottish people at the expense of the English taxpayer? Is it not about time that we had a full explanation of why it is considered proper for the taxpayer to spend 20 per cent. to 25 per cent. more on Scottish people in terms of health and education, while English taxpayers—long-suffering and patient though they are—are expected to put up with this state of affairs indefinitely? Please can we have a debate so that we can clarify the matter and put an end to it?. *[Interruption.]*

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend the Member for Workington reminds me of something that I was about to mention. The right hon. Gentleman speaks very forcefully on behalf of his constituents, although the decisions to which he refers were made long ago and are constantly aired in the House. May I say—with deep respect to you, Mr. Speaker—that it is a little surprising that the right hon. Gentleman, as a good Scot, appears to be so anxious about the Scottish Parliament?

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): May I join my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) in asking for a debate on the need to introduce new law to deal with scams—postal scams in my hon. Friend's case and fax scams in mine?

My sister and her husband have a hotel in Lincolnshire, and she has sent me a huge pile of telephone scams received over the past three years. They are all false bookings for the hotel, sent out by companies that have been set up with the specific objective of conning hoteliers in the United Kingdom. The scam is talked about in hotel industry magazines to alert hoteliers, but it is going on in other businesses all over the country. We need new law to stop these scams.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an interesting and powerful point. I was not aware of the episode to which he alludes, although I am aware that, unfortunately, the fraudulent and criminal mind is always good at devising new means of taking money off people. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on the issue in the very near future.

I confess that I was not aware of the point that my hon. Friend was about to raise when he first spoke about outlawing scams—I thought that he was talking about what the *Financial Times* said about the Conservative party's policy on student loans.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Last night, the Select Committee on Education and Employment—or, at least, the Labour members of the Committee—released a report on access to higher education. We look forward to an early debate, before the election, on the Government's response to what was in the report, as well as on tackling student hardship and debt aversion, which were not in the report.

It can be seen from the proceedings that at the very last meeting of the Select Committee, the mild criticism of the Chancellor over the Laura Spence affair, previously agreed by all members, was deleted by the Labour majority. There were rumours that there was Cabinet pressure to remove such criticism which, in turn, implies unauthorised knowledge of the content of private proceedings. Can the right hon. Lady reassure the House that she and—as far as she can say—her Cabinet colleagues did not receive premature or unauthorised information about what was in the report, or about the private proceedings of the Committee?

Mrs. Beckett: I received no such information, nor indeed am I aware of the slightest evidence that any member of the Government did so. I am slightly surprised that the hon. Gentleman makes such an allegation. I am aware that some concern was expressed in the Committee about the unauthorised release of information—but not by Labour Members. The issue should be handled with more caution. The Government will, of course, respond in the fulness of time to the Select Committee report, which has only just appeared. It remains to be seen whether the issue as a whole will be dealt with accurately. On the "Today" programme this morning, I heard the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) make the astonishing assertion that the Labour party brought in the student loan system. I do not know where the hon. Gentleman was 10 years ago, when the Conservatives introduced that scheme, but if we cannot have higher standards of accuracy than that, our debates will certainly be carried out with increasing difficulty.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): My right hon. Friend is of course aware of the remarks made nearly two weeks ago by the father of Damilola Taylor—that this country needs to address an agenda of moral regeneration. Does she agree that the House should take that matter seriously and that, because of those events, it is incumbent on the Government to find time to consider ways that we can respond constructively to that viewpoint?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. I know that the whole House was impressed by Mr. Taylor's anxieties and concerns and sympathises with him in his sorrow. I do not anticipate being able to find time for a debate on that specific matter in the near future. However, perhaps during the days and weeks ahead, as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary turns his attention to the outlook and to the changes that we propose to roll forward in our agenda for handling crime and offences—not least among the young—some opportunity will arise to focus on the issues raised by my hon. Friend.

Points of Order

1.21 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday, during Prime Minister's questions, in answer to a question from the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), the Prime Minister said that there had been 500,000 extra students in further and higher education since the Government came into office. The video recording clearly shows that he said 500,000, yet in the *Official Report*, at column 921, the figure has been changed from 500,000 to 5,000. Mr. Speaker, is it in order for a figure to be changed in that way? How may I ensure that the record is changed to show the correct figure stated by the Prime Minister, and that the right hon. Gentleman comes to the House to explain why the record was changed and why his Government have failed to deliver on their pledge to increase numbers in further and higher education?

Mr. Speaker: I understand that the Prime Minister was misreported by *Hansard*. There was no request from the Prime Minister to alter the figure he gave the House. A correction will be published tomorrow.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. As you know from the Order Paper, we are about to be asked to take a decision, without debate, on a new programme motion for consideration in Standing Committee of the Hunting Bill. Is it at all possible for time to be provided for a debate, or at least for a statement from a responsible Minister, as to the reasons why the Government are changing the terms of their programme? That is especially important, given that this is the first occasion on which the Government have had to change programming arrangements in that way. Surely, that demonstrates to everyone in the House that the idea that one can anticipate, in advance of a Standing Committee's proceedings, how many sittings will be needed for adequate consideration of a Bill is utterly mistaken.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let me answer the point of order raised by the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington). Perhaps right hon. and hon. Members will not then need to take it further.

Under the terms of the Sessional Order, Questions on supplementary programme motions to increase time for debate on a Bill are put forthwith. The Hunting Bill (Programme) (No. 3) motion extends the time for the Committee, so what is set out on the Order Paper is perfectly proper.

Mr. Leigh *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Does my answer help the hon. Gentleman? Is he rising to speak further to that point of order?

Mr. Leigh: As ever, Mr. Speaker, you have been most helpful. However, given that every other programmed Bill has been ruthlessly dispatched in Standing Committee and sent back to us, I wonder why the Hunting Bill alone has been allowed to meander quietly around the English countryside of the Standing Committees. Has that happened because the Government do not really want the Bill ever to see the light of day?

Mr. Speaker: That is not a matter for me.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. If any clarification is given about the extra sittings of Standing Committee B, could it be made clear that the motion was introduced by agreement and upon representations from Conservative Members, and that that is the fundamental reason why the sittings are being reprogrammed?

Mr. Speaker: Once again, that is not a matter for me.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I have recently learned that the Chairman of the Select Committee on Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman)—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I need to hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying.

Dr. Harris: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I learned today that the Chairman of the Select Committee on Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Huddersfield, has called for my resignation from the Committee, apparently, for opposing the majority report. May I ask you to confirm that members of Select Committees are appointed by the House to scrutinise the Government and that it is not appropriate for the Chairman of a Select Committee, whose job it is to try to create consensus, to make such a decision or, indeed, to express such an opinion? I apologise for giving you short notice of this point of order, but I notified the hon. Gentleman's office about half an hour ago that I hoped to raise the issue with you.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is right. He was appointed by the House, and that appointment will cease only by a decision of the House.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You will have noticed that the Prime Minister yesterday set a two-year timetable for the abolition of the pound and the merger of this country's economy with those of continental Europe. Given that all the indications are that over the past two years public opinion has hardened from a two to one majority in favour of keeping the pound to more than three to one in favour of keeping the pound, have you received any notification of a ministerial statement, perhaps to be made by the Minister for Europe, on whether or not the hoped for turnaround could be funded—

Mr. Speaker: Order. There has been no such approach to me. I hope that that helps the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I am sorry to have to rise, but you heard the altercation between those on the two Front Benches during the points of order on the

Hunting Bill. May I ask you whether you could advise those Conservative Members who were party to the arrangements on those proceedings that they might consider their position, since the usual channels arrangement depends on the truth being told at all times? My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall) has set out precisely what happened. The hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) and the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) should clarify the position at the Dispatch Box. Unless they do so today, there may be implications for the way in which the Bill is handled during the next week or two.

Mr. Speaker: I keep well away from matters regarding the usual channels.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I should be most grateful to you for your guidance. Would you be good enough to confirm to the House that the fact that the Hunting Bill (Programme) (No. 3) motion, on extending the time for debate, is not eligible for debate in no way precludes us from saying that, although the extension of time is welcome, it is patently inadequate for the consideration of the remaining new clauses and amendments to the Bill?

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is getting a bit rusty; that was not a point of order.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I apologise for the fact that I have not had an opportunity to give you notice of this point of order, but the information has only just come into my possession. A little while ago, at Education and Employment questions, I asked a Minister about concerns involving the future funding of education business links and was told that the Secretary of State had made an announcement on the matter today.

I have since discovered that the Department issued a press notice on the matter at 10.25 this morning, only an hour before questions to the Department for Education and Employment were due to start. The information was sneaked out, and not in a parliamentary answer. Sufficient time was not given to Members on both sides to become aware of the press notice's contents, and that made it impossible for me and other Members to question the Minister about whether there had been a cut in funding. I believe that there has been a cut of at least 20 per cent. I should also have liked the opportunity to ask whether the additional funding announced will be ring-fenced or will be discretionary funding for the Learning and Skills Council. Is it not the case that you, Mr. Speaker, deprecate the practice of sneaking out in press notices information that should come to the House?

Mr. Speaker: I shall look into the matter.

Mr. Alan Simpson: Further to the point of order raised by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: I have taken many points of order, and the business of the House takes priority.

Mr. Simpson: My point of order is about the business of the House which we shall have to consider shortly. As a member of the Committee considering the Hunting Bill, I am somewhat confused about how the matter has come back to the House. Presumably it was discussed by the usual channels, who presumably agreed that the House should authorise further time for the Bill's consideration in Committee. I do not understand where the points of conflict and contention arise when such agreements are brought back to the House as a matter of consensus. As a member of the Committee, I would welcome your guidance, Mr. Speaker, on where and how this practice should be properly—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should not worry about confusion; I get confused every day of the week. I cannot help him on this point.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. Does this matter not show the very reason why Programming Sub-Committees should not meet in secret? We have asked that they do not meet in secret, but the Government insist that they do. If the Committees were to be open, there would be no circumstances in which misunderstandings could take place.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: I must stop the discussion now, because we are now getting into a debate. Let us move on to the main business.

HUNTING BILL (PROGRAMME) (No. 3)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Orders [7 November and 20 December 2000],

That the Order of 20th December 2000 (Hunting Bill (Programme)) be amended by the substitution in paragraph 5 (time for conclusion of proceedings in Standing Committee) of the words 'Tuesday 13th February 2001' for the words 'Thursday 8th February 2001'.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Question agreed to.

Social Security Contributions (Share Options) Bill (Programme) (No. 2)

1.32 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): I beg to move,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Social Security Contributions (Share Options) Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 23rd January:

Consideration and Third Reading

1. Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading shall be completed at today's sitting.

2. Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at half past Three o'clock.

3. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at a quarter past Four o'clock.

4. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Consideration of Lords Amendments and further messages from the Lords

5. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any programme motion to supplement or vary this order in relation to—

(a) proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments; or

(b) proceedings on any further messages from the Lords,

and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

The motion proposes that the proceedings on consideration and Third Reading shall be completed at today's sitting, with consideration concluding by 3.30 pm and Third Reading at 4.15 pm.

The Bill gives companies the chance to settle their national insurance liabilities on the options granted between 6 April 1999 and 19 May 2000 early—in advance of the date when the actual gain is made by the employee. Companies that wish to use this measure will calculate the amount of national insurance due by reference to the accrued gain up to 7 November 2000—the day before the pre-Budget statement when the proposals were announced. They will be required to notify the Inland Revenue and pay the appropriate amount within 92 days of Royal Assent to the Bill. That effectively caps the national insurance contribution liability by reference to the company's share price on 7 November, so providing the company with certainty.

Our debates in Committee were brief but purposeful. The Opposition introduced worthwhile amendments, and we were happy to accept the main thrust of some of them. In particular, we accepted that the deadline for sending the notification and paying the special charge under the Bill should be extended from 60 to 92 days. We tabled an amendment in Committee in response to the Opposition request that companies with a nil liability to the special contribution should not have to go to the trouble of lodging a formal notification within the 92-day deadline. Under our amendment, such companies will be deemed to have lodged formal notice within the set period. Both those changes will help to reduce the burden of compliance for companies and will allow all companies whose liability for the special contribution would be nil to qualify automatically.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Minister, but I need to point out that we are dealing with the programme motion, not the Bill itself.

Mr. Timms: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The point that I wanted to make was that all the Opposition amendments, except one, were withdrawn. Today we are introducing nine amendments which I will commend to the House, all of which respond to points raised in Committee with the intention of making the Bill more effective. None of them changes the policy intention that was fully discussed in one Committee sitting. In view of that, I believe that consideration and report can be concluded within the time set out in the programme motion. I commend it to the House.

1.36 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): The House is aware that the Conservative Opposition disapprove of programme motions in principle for two reasons: first, because it is unknown what Members may have to contribute and, secondly, because it cannot easily be known what will be required in terms of a thorough analysis of and debate on proposals.

The Minister correctly pointed out that there was a constructive exchange in Committee and that the Government have one way or another taken in most of the issues and amendments that the Opposition proposed. However, clause 3, for example, is highly technical and is about what the arrangements will be in relation to national insurance charges when companies are taken over. Yesterday I received the Government's redrafts, and it was the evening before I could check out their precise implications with lawyers. It is apparent that they contain drafting errors and so will need more attention than just a few minutes during the forthcoming debate.

This is a classic example of circumstances in which, even with a relatively focused piece of legislation and with most of the material having been dealt with in Committee, the whole concept of programmed timetables does not work. If the programming arrangements are adhered to, the result will be not enough time for discussion of important, nitty-gritty clauses and, potentially, more time than needed on Third Reading later. Therefore, although we appreciate the Minister's acceptance of the various points that we raised, we do not feel that programming Bills is a good idea in principle. Even in this particular focused circumstance, yet again the motion is shown not to be delivering what is in the interests of the House and the country.

1.38 pm

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): The Government amendments conceded in Committee were helpful and it would be churlish to say that the Bill is not welcome. It caps liability at 7 November 2000, but is certainly not perfect and leaves much to be desired. Improvements can and should be made. Furthermore, as the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs

(Mr. Flight) mentioned, detailed further clauses have been tabled which need careful, rigorous scrutiny. The Bill deserves that scrutiny.

Hon. Members must realise that the Bill impacts on many companies in most constituencies. Many hon. Members may want to speak about the merits or otherwise of the Bill and about the amendments that the Government have tabled.

The Government have asserted that the quid pro quo for certainty—that is, fixing the employers' national insurance contributions for unapproved share option schemes as at 7 November 2000—is to fix that liability on that date with payments to be made shortly thereafter. There are other views which deserve consideration by and a response from Ministers. Some hon. Members will be concerned about bureaucracy and unnecessary Government expenditure. I have put to the Minister a satisfactory solution which would be simple and would provide value for money. Why not leave the liability open until exercise of the option, and then leave it open to companies to pay national insurance contributions either on the basis of the 7 November 2000 value or the value on the date on which the option is exercised? That is simple—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is getting into the argument about the contents of the Bill. We are discussing the programme motion.

Mr. Burnett: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Members are likely to want to raise matters of bureaucracy and of fairness to taxpayers. These are important matters that deserve long debate and significant consideration. We shall oppose the motion.

1.40 pm

Mr. Eric Fort.. (Bromley and Chislehurst): It has become apparent that each programme motion raises different issues about the approach that the Government have taken to programming under "modernisation". We are embarking on a voyage of parliamentary discovery. It started with the idea that life should be made easier for parliamentarians, especially Labour Members. It was thought that everything should be done more quickly and that scrutiny should be truncated. The idea has developed from there.

We see in each instance—this is a good case in point—that such an approach is entirely inappropriate to the parliamentary process. We now know—we should have known before—that each Bill is sui generis. It stands on its own and has a different character, history and personality. Members come to the Chamber with tales of what happened in their Committee: they may talk of consensuality, joviality and other good news.

We find that the Government's explanation for a vicious truncation of the parliamentary process tends to be different in each case. In this instance, we are told that we are dealing with a relatively small and technical Bill, that there is not much to be discussed, and that what went on in Committee may or may not have been very productive. However, it is about 1.45 pm and we are debating an absurd motion which states that consideration on Report will be completed at 3.30 pm. That would be bad enough, but we know that the programme debate can run for 45 minutes.

The hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) has said that he believes there will be a Division, and I will join him in that. I hope that I have the opportunity to do so. It is possible that we shall not even get to on to Report until 2.30 pm. The Government are generously giving us until 3.30 pm to complete consideration on Report.

Optimists among Members may say, "There are only three groups of amendments to be considered." They may also say, "There are only"—as I count—"10 amendments to be considered." Even so, one hour divided by 10 gives us six minutes per amendment. I do not know what your view is, Mr. Deputy Speaker—we shall never know because you are not allowed to express it—but I suggest that six minutes is adequate for the House to consider an amendment to proposed law that deals with social security contributions and share options and will have a direct impact on many people's lives. Yet the Government have the gall and the arrogance to suggest that six minutes per amendment will be adequate.

There are 660 Members, and from that membership we can take away the bloated payroll, which probably runs now at about 150. We can take away also the members of the bloated Opposition Front Bench, which probably accounts for another 100. There are probably about 400 Members who are entitled to express an independent view on these matters. If we divide six minutes by 400, we have an idea of the amount of time that the Government are suggesting each Member has, potentially, to participate in a debate on these matters. That is a reductio, but not ad absurdum.

I am giving those figures to try to make the point that this is possibly the best—or, rather, the worst—example to date of the Government's view of the role of the parliamentary process, a Bill's Report stage and the role of the House of Commons in considering legislative proposals. Programme motions are simply legislative proposals, and embody what the Government think should happen. They are discussed in a Committee, and the whole House is here now to consider a particular programme motion. By my calculation—unless anyone wishes to challenge me—six minutes is the time that the Government are suggesting is available for each matter.

If we voted on Report, the Government seem to suggest—again, by my calculation—that we would have 30 minutes, from 3.45 pm until 4.15 pm, for Third Reading. Third Reading provides an opportunity for all hon. Members to come together and give mature consideration to the totality of a Bill that they have discussed on Second Reading and which a privileged few have looked at in Committee. We have gathered together now to look at a particular Bill on Report. However, on Third Reading, all hon. Members who have been unable to participate so far can come to the House of Commons and say what they want about a Bill, knowing its final form.

The Government are now telling us that we will have 30 minutes to do all of that; not 30 minutes each, but 30 minutes for the entire House of Commons to consider a piece of legislation on Third Reading. Surely, that illustrates better than most things thus far the absurdity and arrogance of the Government—as well as the cruelty that they are inflicting on the parliamentary process—

[Mr. Eric Forth]

in assuming that that is an adequate period in which to legislate on a matter which, although detailed and technical, is nevertheless important.

Mr. Burnett: Because the matter is detailed and technical, does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that it deserves careful scrutiny? Having detailed and technical provisions tabled last night is unacceptable. Does he agree that there is not enough time for careful scrutiny of these important matters?

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who has led me into the next part of my analysis. I gave a rather dry consideration of the inadequacy of the numbers involved. However, the hon. Gentleman made a valid point, from which two inter-related points follow.

First, the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) both made the point that the Government assumed that the Committee stage would be completed at a certain point, only to introduce further provisions and peremptorily insist that the House deal with them with almost no notice. That is difficult, and not only for ordinary Members of Parliament. For goodness sake, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs is a world expert on these matters, but even he is struggling a bit. The hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon is an intellectual giant of the House, but he is struggling. What hope is there of us poor laymen, who have come to the House to try and grapple with the matter on behalf of our constituents, dealing with the technicalities involved?

Mr. Burnett: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware of another example of this sort of detailed legislation being rushed—the Finance Act 1998? Detailed amendments were tabled on stamp duty, reserve tax and anti-avoidance measures. However, they were wrong and the Government lost revenue to the tune of £1 billion or £1.5 billion because of the inadequacy of debate and scrutiny.

Mr. Forth: I am not surprised or shocked by that. The hon. Gentleman strengthened his point and illustrated it well. We run that risk if we are rolled over by the Government, as they are now attempting to do.

The motion is surrounded by an accumulation of negatives and, as far as I can see, no positives whatever. The time made available to the House for considering the Bill on Report and Third Reading has been compressed. Almost no notice was given—and that is true not just for hon. Members. As has already been said, with such a Bill one would have thought there should be an opportunity for legitimate representations to be made by outside bodies to those of us who are privileged to be here, so that we can learn from them and understand their concerns. There is no such opportunity, given the Bill's time scale.

My query about all this is why the Government persist in offering wording such as:

> "Proceedings on Consideration shall . . . be brought to a conclusion at half past Three o'clock."

What is the hurry? It would be bad enough if the Government had insisted, as they do in respect of the Committee stage, that we would be given, say, six hours to consider the Bill on Report, or four hours, or whatever. Today, rightly, as usual, Mr. Speaker generously allowed some time for business questions. The Government are lucky that there was no Division on the grubby deal that was done on the Hunting Bill. By setting a time of 3.30 pm for the conclusion of proceedings, rather than allowing us a specific amount of time, the Government have made us victims of the vagaries of the parliamentary process.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): We are fortunate that there was not a Government statement, a private notice question or a response to some disaster in the United Kingdom or elsewhere—

Mr. Forth: Or in the Government.

Mr. Howarth: Indeed—there is one of those every day. Any of those eventualities would have required the attention of the House, and would have further compressed the time available for these matters to be discussed.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is right. By taking such an approach—tabling motions that specify a particular time of the clock at which matters must be concluded—the Government make us a potential victim of what Harold Macmillan described as "events". Events do impinge on the parliamentary process, as indeed they should and they must.

The Government make the crude assumption that we will be able to dispatch the Report stage properly by 3.30, regardless of what may have happened during the parliamentary day up until that point. They go on to compound the felony by proposing that Third Reading will be finished by "quarter past Four o'clock." They do not give us a certain amount of time to consider the matter, bad enough though that would be. They make matters worse by saying that proceedings will end, willy-nilly, at a particular time of the clock.

The Government obviously take the view that it does not matter what may have happened up till now today. Regardless of any of that—regardless, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) said, of statements, private notice questions being granted and the length of time allowed by Mr. Speaker for business questions—we will complete consideration by 3.30 pm.

That cannot be right. It cannot be a proper parliamentary process. I regret to say that it illustrates yet again the approach that the Government take to Parliament—one of utter contempt. It could just be a misunderstanding of Parliament, I suppose, because some members of the Government have not been in the House very long. Some of them make no secret of the fact that, having got here, they want to leave the building as early and as frequently as possible. Although that may be a family-friendly approach, it does not exactly help the role of the House of Commons in giving proper scrutiny to legislation and holding the Government to account.

We are in a real mess, and the motion illustrates that all too well.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. I am genuinely shocked, even by the standards of this arrogant and inconsiderate

Administration, that Ministers apparently envisage a Third Reading debate lasting a maximum of 45 minutes. Does my right hon. Friend think that the Government expect any significant contribution from Back Benchers in that allotted time?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is correct. I had calculated 30 minutes for Third Reading, but we shall wait and see. The Government are assuming that their Back Benchers will play no part in the debate at all, as they increasingly do.

There are currently no Government Back Benchers in the Chamber. That is a sad reflection of what has happened to Government Members of Parliament and Government Back Benchers. I wonder what their constituents think they are doing at this time on a Thursday? I leave that for their constituents to muse on. They are certainly not representing them in the House of Commons—that we do know because the physical evidence is plain to see. I leave that as a matter of speculation.

I had intended to go on and comment on the further proceedings on the Bill, which are alluded to in the motion, but I am aware that a number of my parliamentary colleagues are present, in their place, representing their constituents—

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Forth: I will, but I am anxious to conclude.

Mr. Jack: I had hoped that my right hon. Friend would develop his further point. As the Financial Secretary said, nine Government amendments have been tabled, which means that we are allowed to consider each for 10 minutes. Such timing is sparse in respect of the complex matters that are involved. Does my right hon. Friend think that we have adequate time to consider each of the amendments?

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend is generous. I calculated that we were allowed six minutes for each amendment. I shall not repeat my rough calculation of how the time will be squeezed by a combination of events, including votes and other considerations.

I shall conclude my remarks, as I am aware of the pressure from the large number of Opposition Members who want to contribute and I do not want to hog the available time. I believe that the motion is probably the worst example yet of the results of the ill-thought-out and ill-considered so-called modernisation process that has inflicted such a disgraceful programming scheme. I hope that it will illustrate to everybody that that scheme is an unworkable and unjustifiable outrage that should be dropped as soon as possible. In the meantime, I hope that I will get a chance to vote against the motion.

1.56 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Unlike my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), I am not against programming in principle and have argued on a number of occasions that it has some merit. However, I agreed today with almost everything that he said.

A first-rate Minister has had to introduce a third-rate Bill. It is a shoddy measure that has been torn apart by the clear-headedness of my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), who is probably the only hon. Member who understands what it is all about. It is a small and technical Bill, but as has been pointed out, it affects a large number of people. Everybody agrees that it is flawed. I think that the Financial Secretary will admit that that is the case and confirm that clause 3 is still deficient and needs further attention. Currently, he appears to be neither agreeing nor disagreeing with me. I cannot tell what he is expressing, but I suspect that it is agreement.

We are now stuck with an awkward situation and we do not have much time to try to sort it out. Programming makes life no better. The Bill will go to the other place, where the Government will take a bit more time to try to sort it out and table the necessary amendments. Their attitude is clear. They put a Bill into play in the House of Commons to get it running. It does not matter how shoddy it is or how much it is shredded in Committee. They get it out of here on the back of a programme motion and then sort it out in the House of Lords, where the political temperature is a bit lower and they will not have to deal with so much flak. I do not think that that is a good way of making legislation, and neither does anybody else, except the Executive, and an arrogant Executive at that.

As I said, I would not have been against programming this measure in principle. If it is to be used, however, hon. Members must have something in return in terms of better pre-legislative scrutiny. I cannot believe that the Bill would have been brought before the House in its current condition if it had been given thoroughgoing pre-legislative scrutiny and had been considered by a Committee that could ask detailed questions of the few people in the country who understand the subject with which it deals.

Programming has been introduced to the House without anything being given in return. Scrutiny of legislation has not been improved through other means and no commitment has been made to improve pre-legislative scrutiny. That is why I disapprove of what the Government have done in respect of programming. I oppose not the principle, but the fact that it was introduced without any sense of balance in respect of better scrutiny of legislation in the House of Commons.

Let us cast our minds back to the last shift in power that was as dramatic as the adoption of programming. Timetabling was introduced in the late 19th century, but was accompanied by a big quid pro quo: Supply days. The current Government have decided to introduce a major shift in the way in which legislation is scrutinised without offering anything in return to the House of Commons to try to improve legislation or demonstrate to the wider public that they are doing their job properly. Anyone viewing the Chamber today—and I hope that the cameras will be permitted to pan the Labour Benches for just a moment—will see that absolutely no scrutiny of the Executive is going on. This is really not an adequate performance.

As I said, Supply days were introduced in return for acceptance of Balfour's railway timetable; but when we accepted Beckett's railway timetable we were given nothing in return, which is why I shall vote against the motion.

2 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I join my colleagues in opposing the motion.

Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), I am opposed in principle to so-called programme motions.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): Guillotines.

Mr. Howarth: Indeed, they are effectively guillotines. The fact that they are undemocratic, curtailing Members' opportunity to hold the Executive to account, has been amply demonstrated by my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester.

Today's Order Paper illustrates the fatuous nature of programme motions. It features no fewer than three guillotines—if I may bow to the description preferred by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills—and I think the first justifies our complaints. In the motion that we are discussing, and also in the others, the Government seek to impose not so much time limits as a schedule specifying the time by which we shall be deemed to have completed consideration of what are, in some instances, complex matters. The first motion, for example, shows the fatuousness of the original proposal that proceedings on the Hunting Bill should be completed by a certain time, because the Government must now return to the House—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, and I realise that he could not be here for the opening speeches, but we are discussing a specific programme motion relating to the Social Security Contributions (Share Options) Bill, and he must confine his remarks to that.

Mr. Howarth: I was trying to illustrate my opposition to programme motions in general, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I take your point.

I wonder how many more times the Government will come back to the House and ask us to amend an earlier programme motion. Clearly, that will not happen in this case, as the motion we are discussing relates only to consideration and Third Reading—and, of course, to consideration of Lords amendments and further messages from the Lords. I must confess that I am not sure what all that means: the wording is couched in references to such and such paragraphs of the ghastly Sessional Order that is the fount of all the misery we are having to endure as a result of the Government's determination to curtail debate in the House.

We are discussing an extremely important Bill. Although I have considerable experience of the City and international banking, I do not claim to be an expert in the particularities of the share-options issues that lie behind the Bill. Fortunately for us—not just Conservative Members, but Members throughout the House—my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) has such expertise. He bears testimony to the value of Members who have worked in the real world and bring experience of it to the House. Such experience is especially likely to inform debates on such matters as share options, in which my hon. Friend is extremely well versed. It could also be said that his expertise makes the case for Members' maintaining familiarity with such issues by having outside interests—but I will not pursue that point.

The Bill constitutes the Government's second attempt to reform their own legislation. Having failed to produce a sensible measure earlier, they have had to return to the House. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester that the Minister is an extremely good Minister; it is just a shame that he is in the wrong party. But the fact that he is such a good Minister—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman seems unable to concentrate on the motion. Interesting and complimentary though some of his asides have been, they are not relevant to the matter before us.

Mr. Howarth: I hesitate to compliment you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I entirely accept your guidance.

This is a complex matter that should have proper scrutiny. I object in principle to programme motions, and I object in particular to this one.

Mr. Tyrie: Will my hon. Friend give some thought to how such a first-rate Minister could end up introducing such a shoddy Bill and still be unable to get it straight? Does my hon. Friend think that programming is the right way to try to force through such a Bill in these circumstances?

Mr. Howarth: Such matters will always be conducted for the convenience of Governments. We should not forget that there were guillotine motions when we were in government. There will always be rational arguments that will persuade Ministers to support guillotine motions, or programme motions, as we now call them.

I am sure that, even if the Minister wanted to spend more time properly assessing and discussing the issues with hon. Members, he would nevertheless be under pressure not to do so, but to comply with the requirements of the sewers of Westminster, as they are known collectively—not the Minister, of course—to ensure that the Government get through their business as quickly as possible, regardless of whether it has had proper scrutiny in the House.

2.7 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I apologise to you and to the House for not being here at the start of this important item of business. I was able, by another means, to follow some of the Minister's introduction to the programme motion.

I am disappointed that a piece of business dealing with social security and national insurance issues should be introduced by a Treasury Minister. Up to now, most business of this nature has proceeded on an amicable, nay, even consensual, basis in the House of Commons. Since I have been in the House, I have been involved, from the Government and the Opposition Benches, with five Finance Bills and each one has managed to achieve its objectives by agreements through the usual channels. Some of the contents of those Bills have touched on, or dealt with, the issues in this measure.

However, we are now debating a programme motion on a matter that is clearly not of great controversy between the two Front Benches, in terms of the principle,

at this stage. However, the dratting and objectives of the Bill require further debate, and I shall come to those points in a moment. It is sad that the programme motion breaks away from an important point of tradition on the way in which financial matters such as these have always been dealt with.

I had always thought that the reason for introducing a programme motion—or guillotine motion, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) said—was that the Government of the day had been filibustered or were in danger of not completing their business. Under the procedures introduced, and in the context of this type of measure, that risk is not there. The Government seem to be on auto-pilot, in that we have to go through this process every time a piece of business is introduced. There is no selectivity. There is no trust between the two sides of the House that some business will pass unimpeded, without the need to impose this rigidity on us.

Why do I object to the programme motion before us today? The debate is scheduled to end at 2.17 pm. By 3.30 this afternoon, or half-past three of the clock as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) more correctly describes it, we are supposed to have considered nine detailed Government amendments. They may improve the Bill.

Mr. Tyrie: How will we know?

Mr. Jack: That is a good question, which leads me to my central point. The Government amendments amount to a fundamental rewrite of clause 3. Yet there is inadequate time for us to probe more thoroughly the failings of any pre-legislative consultation exercise on the Bill. In earlier proceedings, the Government made much of the fact that the Bill had been introduced because of representations from third parties. There is not enough time for us to discover what went wrong between the receipt of those representations, the original drafting and the effective rewrite of clause 3. There is insufficient time to consider the failings in policy development or draftsmanship.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Does my right hon. Friend know of any Bill since the Queen's Speech that has been subject to the pre-legislative scrutiny procedure? Would it not be better for more Bills to be subject to such scrutiny? Perhaps they would not need to be timetabled if that happened.

Mr. Jack: I understand my hon. Friend's point. However, although pre-legislative scrutiny provides an opportunity for technical measures such as the Bill to be considered in detail, it should never replace proper, thorough debate and scrutiny in the Chamber and in Committee. A Bill will be introduced on capital allowances shortly. Although it will have received a great deal of input from outside opinion, that does not remove the right and role of the House to scrutinise.

Given the detail in some Government amendments, which I am sure my hon. Friend has considered, there is insufficient opportunity to consider their implications. Although is not right to debate Government amendment No. 3 now, let me just point out that it introduces proposed new section 4A, which establishes labyrinthine interconnections. It would take a good two hours for even an excellent Financial Secretary to explain, for example, how the Corporation Taxes Act 1988 and the various connections between sections 135 and 136 relate to the proposals.

The wording in the amendment is tortuous. The tax law rewrite exercise has shone little light on it. I should have liked at least a quarter of an hour to probe the Financial Secretary about the reason for such tortuous language. I should like another hour to take him, with meticulous care, through some of the reasoning behind rewriting so much of the Bill.

An advantage of Report is that it gives hon. Members who have not served on the Standing Committee the opportunity to hear in detail the reasons for tabling further amendments.

Mr. Forth: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, given the way in which matters are proceeding, with a probable Division shortly, there will be an hour in total to consider nine or 10 important amendments? That leaves six minutes for hon. Members to discuss each amendment. My right hon. Friend will get less time than that. That does not approach the amount of time that he estimates he requires.

Mr. Jack: My right hon. Friend is right. If we take account of other matters that need consideration, there is even less time than he estimates. It is bad form to deal with detailed technical matters in that way.

Pepper *v.* Hart is often cited in the context of detailed Bills. It gives the legal profession the opportunity to use our proceedings in court or other tribunals to help to show the true meaning of a measure. If we have only six minutes to discuss each amendment, and the Financial Secretary wants to go into detail about some of them, those who seek to use the facility of Pepper *v.* Hart will have scant information on which to draw.

For those reasons, the time allocated for the amendments is inadequate, and I shall have no hesitation in joining my hon. Friends in the Lobby to oppose the motion.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 249, Noes 124.

Division No. 111] **[2.16 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Berry, Roger
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*

Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda
(Edinburgh Pentlands)
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry
(B'ham Hodge H)
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Miss Melanie
(Welwyn Hatfield)
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle
(B'ham Yardley)
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John
(Aberavon)
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John
(Glasgow Anniesland)
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine
(Morecambe & Lunesdale)
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann
(Dewsbury)
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wareing, Robert N
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan
(Swansea W)
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. Clive Betts.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Chapman, Sir Sydney
(Chipping Barnet)
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth
(Rushcliffe)
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles
(Ross Skye & Inverness W)
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim

Luff, Peter	Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas	Steen, Anthony
McIntosh, Miss Anne	Stunell, Andrew
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew	Swayne, Desmond
Maclean, Rt Hon David	Tapsell, Sir Peter
McLoughlin, Patrick	Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Mates, Michael	Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Maude, Rt Hon Francis	Taylor, Sir Teddy
May, Mrs Theresa	Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Moore, Michael	Tonge, Dr Jenny
Moss, Malcolm	Townend, John
Norman, Archie	Tredinnick, David
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*	Trend, Michael
Öpik, Lembit	Tyler, Paul
Page, Richard	Tyrie, Andrew
Paice, James	Walter, Robert
Pickles, Eric	Whitney, Sir Raymond
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael	Whittingdale, John
Prior, David	Wilkinson, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John	Willetts, David
Rendel, David	Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*	Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*	Yeo, Tim
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*	Young, Rt Hon Sir George
St Aubyn, Nick	
Sayeed, Jonathan	**Tellers for the Noes:**
Shepherd, Richard	**Mr. Peter Atkinson and**
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*	**Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-**
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*	**Brown.**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Social Security Contributions (Share Options) Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 23rd January:

Consideration and Third Reading

1. Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading shall be completed at today's sitting.

2. Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at half past Three o'clock.

3. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at a quarter past Four o'clock.

4. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Consideration of Lords Amendments and further messages from the Lords

5. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any programme motion to supplement or vary this order in relation to—

(a) proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments; or

(b) proceedings on any further messages from the Lords,

and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

Orders of the Day

Social Security Contributions (Share Options) Bill

As amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

Clause 1

NOTICES RELATING TO SHARE OPTIONS ACQUIRED BEFORE 19TH MAY 2000

2.31 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I beg to move amendment No. 10, in page 3, line 3, at end insert—

'(7) For the purposes of this Act only, a right to acquire relevant shares will be deemed to give rise to a liability of nil under section 2 below.

(8) In subsection (7) above, relevant shares are shares which on 7th November 2000 were neither listed on a recognised stock exchange nor traded on a recognised investment exchange.'.

I should like first to declare that I am a director of companies with outstanding option schemes, none of which are covered by the Bill's provisions. More importantly, in the past 15 months, I have been participating in a major study among leading members of the industry to determine how the United Kingdom can achieve higher levels of venture capital investment in new businesses. Although the study has focused on a very wide range of issues, I think that it has concluded that the issue of options and the UK options tax regimes are absolutely central to understanding the performance differential between the United Kingdom and the United States. As I shall explain later, the Bill is an important part of addressing that issue.

Although Opposition Members are happy that the Government accepted most of the key points that we made in Committee, we are particularly unhappy that, even in the Government's second attempt, their proposals to deal with takeover and roll-over situations are not the correct ones to fulfil what we perceive to be Ministers' intentions.

In Committee, we welcomed the Government's deeming amendment, which dealt with our point that a lot of time and money would have been wasted if a determination—or deeming—that companies are not subject to the special national insurance contribution liability is not made automatically on the due date. The amendment would also help greatly to avoid potential unfairness to smaller and foreign companies that were perhaps not even aware of the new special NIC charge on options issued between April 1999 and May 2000. However, although the Government's change is welcome, we believe that there is still a grey area and the potential for problems which could very easily be avoided.

The issue is whether options relate to shares deemed to be readily convertible assets—which is the key phrase. In the Government's arrangements, if the option is under water or the shares in question are not readily convertible assets, there would be no special NIC liability. The situation applying last November, however, is old history. For the purposes of the deeming provision, therefore, our amendment proposes not defining shares as readily convertible assets if they were not listed or traded on a recognised stock exchange or market on 7 November 2000.

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[Mr. Howard Flight]

If amendment No. 10 is not accepted, a potential problem is that private companies will assume that they are covered by the deeming provision. Consequently, they could fail to provide due notice. Those companies could become involved in a subsequent, never-ending debate with the Revenue on whether the assets were readily convertible assets on 7 November. If the Revenue found that the companies' shares were readily convertible assets, they would have forgone the opportunity of availing themselves of the Government's relieving provision.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): My hon. Friend said in his opening remarks that he had spent time in consultation with companies that use share option. Was amendment No. 10 therefore also born of practical considerations and his discussions with those companies?

Mr. Flight: Yes, it was. I have endeavoured to consult very fully on all the Bill's clauses both with members of the venture capital industry and with lawyers specialising in share options, with the simple and pragmatic purpose of trying to create a regime that is good and not damaging for the United Kingdom economy.

The amendment's proposed arrangements would affect only this legislation and are not intended to address the wider issue of how to define a readily convertible asset. They are not intended to have knock-on effects on other legislative provisions.

There is a grey area when a private company is approaching flotation and its flotation date and market price have not been established. However, I am sure that the House will agree that, for the particular purposes of this Bill, setting 7 November as the target cut-off date is just as realistic a quid pro quo as that enshrined in the Bill—which tells employees to take a gamble and pay the special NIC charge so that companies do not subsequently have excessive NIC liabilities that could not be met.

The amendment is a very practical proposal. It would have minimal revenue implications and help to prevent the possibility of unfairness and wasted time.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Liberal Democrat Members support the amendment, which is a move towards simplicity. If an asset is not listed on the specified date, it would not be deemed a readily convertible asset, and therefore not be subject to the special charge to national insurance contributions. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on the amendment. Surely the thrust of the legislation is that the special NIC charge should not affect unapproved share option schemes in private companies. By definition, a private company is one that restricts the transfer or sale of its shares.

I am a solicitor, and I specialised in taxation matters. However, I do not practise as such now. I also did not do an awful lot of work on approved or unapproved share option schemes. I spent some time in the shares valuation division, and as I said in Committee, share valuation is very much an art, not a science. A lot of deeming takes place and there is enormous scope for disagreement and negotiation.

The Government are content for shares that are not readily convertible to escape the special national insurance contribution liability. I hope that the Minister will confirm that and elaborate in detail on the Government's objections to the amendment. Do they fear that it may, in some obscure way, lead to tax avoidance? I do not believe that it will, but I will wait to hear from the Minister before offering any rebuttal. Is their point that it will discourage listing, and therefore investment?

If the Minister rejects the amendment, I hope that he will give compelling reasons, because I consider it to be worth while, simple and straightforward.

Mr. Jack: I declare an interest as a non-executive director of a company that has both approved and non-approved share option schemes, although it does not fall under the scope of the amendment.

I share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) that the amendment would bring clarity, but if I were in the Minister's shoes, following what the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) said, I would want, if I intended to reject the amendment, to cover areas such as anti-avoidance and what would happen if people with share options in a non-quoted company knew that a takeover was coming and that convertibility would come into play.

Mr. Flight: The amendment relates to history, so it has nothing to do with tax avoidance measures that people might get up to in the future. It relates purely to the position on 7 November 2000.

Mr. Jack: I posed hypothetical questions in the hope of getting the Minister to explain his position. He may offer us emotive arguments. My hon. Friend's central point of clarity of purpose makes the amendment attractive. People need to know where they stand in this complex area, and the amendment is very helpful.

The amendment refers to "a recognised stock exchange", and most people would understand that, but "a recognised investment exchange", to which it also refers, is a little more obscure. It is sometimes hard to keep up with all the newly emerging markets. Will the Minister give us his views in careful and meticulous order? I hope that he will simply say that the Government accept the amendment, but we certainly want to know his reasons either way.

2.45 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): I am happy to provide the House with that explanation. I do not believe that the amendment represents a simplification, as Opposition Members have suggested. Indeed, it would introduce a new and unhelpful complication.

The national insurance and PAYE rules on share options were aligned in 1999, so that from that date the PAYE rules effectively determine the national insurance liability. PAYE applies only to shares and options that are readily convertible assets. Shares not falling within that description are not taxed under the PAYE rules, nor are they liable to national insurance charges.

The amendment would narrow the definition of readily convertible assets, but only for the purposes of the Bill, and the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs

(Mr. Flight) confirmed that he did not intend to change the definition in other parts of the system. That is an unnecessary complication.

Mr. Jack: What is the definition of a readily convertible asset and how does the amendment narrow it?

Mr. Timms: What I can best do is to refer the right hon. Gentleman to the Inland Revenue website, which I have no doubt he visits frequently, and in particular to tax bulletin issue 36, which explains the matter in great detail. Of course, a readily convertible asset is one that can be converted to cash and—

Mr. Jack: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for a Minister, when a Member of the House asks a straightforward question, to refer him to a technical asset that is not immediately available to Members to find the information that is required?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): The right hon. Gentleman has long experience of the House and is a former Minister, and he should know that it is not a matter for the Chair how a Minister chooses to answer a question. It is a matter for debate.

Mr. Timms: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am a little hurt by the right hon. Gentleman's point of order, as I was trying to be helpful to him in explaining that a readily convertible asset is one that can be readily converted to cash and is therefore appropriate to be taxed. That is well understood. The amendment would narrow that so that a share in any unlisted company would be deemed not to be a readily convertible asset. To have two definitions floating around in different parts of the tax system would be an unwelcome and unhelpful complication.

Mr. Burnett: Would the Minister be minded to accept an amendment that did not exclude this amendment, allowing the definition to include shares that are

"neither listed on a recognised stock exchange nor traded on a recognised investment exchange"?

Mr. Timms: No, certainly not, because that would substantially broaden the concept of assets that cannot be readily converted, which would substantially reduce the tax take in a wide range of circumstances.

In practice, the amendment would allow all those companies that on 7 November 2000 were in the process of floating to avoid liability under the Bill, as well as those that had trading arrangements in place.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs said when he moved the amendment that he did not think that it would cost very much. My estimate is that it would cost some millions of pounds, as a significant number of companies required to make a special payment under the Bill would not need to do so if the amendment were passed. I can understand why some people might lobby for that change, but I do not think that it would be right to introduce it.

Mr. Flight: The latter part of 2000 was a period when stock markets were weak and there were very few flotations. Given that the amendment deals with history, the argument that significant revenue is at risk does not stand up.

Mr. Timms: I think the hon. Gentleman is mistaken. It is true that the shares of a number of companies were lower in the period to which he refers than they had been previously, but the liability faced by those companies under the Bill is therefore less than it would otherwise have been. For that reason, Opposition Members might wish to draw attention to the Government's generosity in setting the relevant date at 7 November. If the amendment were agreed, a substantial number of companies would avoid liability.

In allowing companies whose shares were not readily convertible assets on 7 November last year to pay no national insurance on the options granted between 6 April 1999 and 19 May 2000, the Government are already offering considerable relief. Under the existing class 1 rules, many companies would go on the list before the options were exercised and would be liable to class 1 national insurance. The Bill allows all companies whose shares were not readily convertible assets on 7 November last year to be exempt from both class 1 and the special contribution.

I hope that that answers the point raised by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), about avoidance. As I have said, a number of companies that will have to pay under the Bill as it stands would find, if the amendment were passed, that they did not have to pay anything.

The hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon also said that valuations for unlisted companies are difficult to finalise. I can tell him that the shares valuation division of the Inland Revenue can now help companies with their valuations. However, we made it clear in Committee—and I emphasise the point again to the House—that if valuations are produced by the company on a reasonable basis, and if the valuation eventually agreed with the employer is higher, the company will be able to pay the difference without falling back into the class 1 rules.

Mr. Burnett: The Financial Secretary said that he was concerned about the amendment because it would exempt companies in the process of flotation, and those with trading arrangements in place. Will the hon. Gentleman elaborate on the latter point? That would be of considerable assistance to practitioners and people with unapproved share option schemes, as well as to the House.

Mr. Timms: I am not sure what the hon. Gentleman means. If a company's shares are not regarded as readily convertible assets there is no liability, irrespective of the reasons for that judgment. However, I should be happy to respond to the hon. Gentleman in writing if he would care to drop me a line.

From 7 November 2000, companies will have 92 days after the Bill receives Royal Assent to make a judgment as to whether their shares are readily convertible. As was explained in Committee, the Bill contains appeal provisions that would allow a company that had made a wrong call about whether its shares were readily convertible to pay the special contribution after the 92-day period, as long as that decision had been made on a reasonable basis. That provides an important safeguard for companies.

Mr. Jack: I hope that the Financial Secretary will help me on a technical point. In the case of a company that had flotation plans in train and was therefore deemed to have readily convertible assets, what would happen if the flotation was pulled the day before or the day after the valuation date? What would be the position of that company?

Mr. Timms: If the right hon. Gentleman comes across a company in that position, he should advise it to contact the Inland Revenue for advice. I am confident that such a company would be given clear guidance about how to proceed.

I see no reason, simply for the purposes of this Bill, to impose an arbitrary limit to rules on the definition of readily convertible assets that are well understood and established. I think that that would be an unnecessary, unwelcome and costly complication to the tax system. In the interests of simplicity, as well as for the other reasons that I have advanced, I ask the House not to support the amendment.

Mr. Flight: In view of the guillotine motion, I do not consider the amendment a sufficiently important issue of principle on which to detain the House. However, the Government have introduced a special national insurance contribution charge, and they do not mind the fact that they are addressing a problem of their own making by means of a special form of tax charge. The amendment proposes a special, one-off clarification of readily convertible assets, purely for the purposes of the Bill. It is incorrect for the Minister to object to the fact that we are applying the same principle as the Government are applying.

The Minister made a point about trading arrangements that I do not consider correct. The amendment specifically refers to trading on a recognised exchange. In the absence of the amendment, many companies and Inland Revenue staff will spend a lot of time discussing whether the shares of a limited number were readily convertible assets on 7 November 2000. In most cases, it will be found that they were not. The Government's tax take will be very small as a result, but the costs in terms of time imposed on the companies involved and the Inland Revenue will be considerably greater.

In arriving at that judgment, I have taken heed of the practicalities. It is a pity that the Government do not see fit to accept the amendment, especially as the Bill is designed to be a pragmatic measure, relieving a problem of the Government's making. However, for the sake of time, I shall not press the matter to a vote.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 2

EFFECT OF NOTICE UNDER SCHEDULE 1

Mr. Timms: I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 3, line 34, leave out from "amount" to end of line 36 and insert—

'which (in accordance with the provisions of section 135(3)(a) of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988) would have been taken to be the amount of the gain realised by an exercise in full of that right immediately before the time of its assignment or release.'

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 2 to 8.

Mr. Timms: These amendments would amend the provisions in clauses 2 and 3 that deal with the assignment or release of an option that has been settled under the Bill. As I said in Committee, I am grateful to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) for identifying a loophole in the Bill as previously drafted.

Clauses 2 and 3 deal with the somewhat complex issue of exchanges of options. Our clear intention was to protect the national insurance liability if a settled option were to be subsequently rolled over—or exchanged for another option—or assigned or released, and the new option were to be of a higher value at the time of the roll-over.

We have looked again at clause 3, as I said in Committee we would, and amended it to ensure that it is effective to deal with the range of situations that may arise. It remains complex. I do not seek to persuade the House that this is a straightforward matter. It is not. It deals with multiple roll-overs and a situation in which options are assigned or released for a mixture of benefits such as options plus cash. Most companies will not need to use the provisions in clause 3, which deal only with roll-overs. For those that do, special guidance will be available so that they can be confident about how the legislation will operate.

3 pm

The amendment leaves undisturbed the class 1 liability on the excess value given for the settled option to prevent the kind of manipulation to which the earlier drafting could have been open and to which the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs drew our attention.

I commend this technical, but valuable, group of amendments to the House

Mr. Flight: Amendment No. 1 indeed addresses the point that we raised in Committee—that the wording of the Bill as drafted opened up scope for avoidance. By the substitution of the term "gain" for the "gross proceeds" to which the original drafting referred, the mistake is corrected.

Our main objections are to amendments Nos. 2, 3 and 4. As we pointed out in Committee, clause 3 deals with the complex territory of takeovers, in which people have options in a company that is taken over and receive alternative options. We attempted to draw the Government's attention to what we felt was misdrafting and a misunderstanding of the implications of certain parts of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988.

It is our perception that those problems have not been grappled with. What is the Government's intention in relation to takeovers and switches of options? We have assumed that common sense will prevail and that the intention is that if people receive a like-for-like option and the value is the same, the position is essentially neutral and no national insurance contribution liability is activated. Obviously, if more valuable options are granted in lieu of the existing options, there is a changed situation, and an NIC liability should apply on the value enhancement, preferably when the options are exercised; or if in place of the existing options people receive a mixture of new options and cash, there will be NIC liability on the cash that has been paid.

It seems that the basic flaw that we pointed out in Committee has been carried over in amendments Nos. 2 and 3. The Bill should provide that if there is an enhancement element in any option exchange, it should be subject to NIC on exercise, as we proposed in Committee. Otherwise, the new option has the benefit of any exemption on the old option.

The technical background is that NIC charges on options are explicitly linked to income tax charges under section 135 of the 1988 Act. Section 4(4) of the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992 charges NIC on any gain on which the earner is chargeable to tax by virtue of section 135. This charges tax on the exercise, assignment or release of an option and provides that if people exchange one option for another they are not charged tax on the value on the new option, but are charged tax if any other consideration—cash, for example—is given at the same time. The new option should be treated as if it were the original option and the employee had paid the due amount to acquire the new option equal to what he paid for the original one, less any consideration taxed on that exchange and paid at the time of the exchange. So it is a little misleading in amendment No. 3 to describe section 136 of the 1988 Act as

"charge to tax on roll-over".

The relevant section moderates a tax charge which would otherwise have applied under section 135.

Amendments Nos. 2 and 3 expressly require section 136 to be disregarded in certain circumstances which, prima facie, appear to require a class 1 charge under section 4 of the 1992 Act under which there would not be an income tax charge. We are of the view that, technically, the provision is not correct as it stands.

Amendment No. 2 deals with the assignment or release of an option on which NIC can still be charged on the excess of any buy-out consideration which exceeds the inherent gain in the option. That is reasonably sensible in the light of amendment No. 1. However, amendment No. 2 also seems to provide that in the circumstances of an assignment or a release, we can ignore section 136 for these purposes and apply clause 2(3) to charge national insurance on the excess of the buy-out consideration over the lower of either the inherent gain in the old option or the inherent gain in the new option. That would only ever catch an extra cash consideration on the roll-over: if the new option was an enhancement, proposed new section 3A(a) would treat the non-cash consideration as equal to the gain in the old option as the lower of the two gains plus any cash, and the clause 2(3) charge would be only on that amount less the gain in the old option.

The net effect of the wording of the Government's amendment is that if no extra cash is offered on a roll-over but there is still an enhancement element, there will be a nil charge under clause 2(3). I question whether that is what the Government wanted. It is not a bad result, but the drafting that arrives at this, I suspect unintended, result is incomprehensible.

We think that there is an error in the drafting of amendment No. 3. Clause 3(4) preserves the right to charge national insurance on replacement options in specific circumstances, but amendment No. 3 provides that, on a roll-over, section 136 will apply to the new option only to the extent that it is over additional shares—that is, that the exchange is an enhancement. The intention appears to be that any enhancement element would be referred back to clause 3(4) and charged national insurance on eventual exercise. Is that the Government's intention? If it is, fair enough.

The problem is that if there is no enhancement in the exchange, the wording also implies that section 136 will not apply to the roll-over, where only so much of section 136 applies as relates to additional shares and the new option, prima facie, gives rise to an NIC charge under the 1992 Act because, with section 136 ignored, there would have been a charge for income tax purposes under section 135.

I was upset that it was not possible to re-table on Report the amendments that we tabled in Committee on these complex issues. As we see it, our amendments address what the Government are seeking to achieve and what should be achieved, whereas the Government's amendments, sadly, do not.

On amendment No. 3, specifically, if the old option was covered by a notice under clause 1, there would be a nil class 1 liability and if not, there would be an accelerated employers' and employees' class 1 liability on the option exchange. So there is a mismatch between the national insurance charge and income tax; the Government are penalising "correct" parity non-enhanced option exchanges for companies which do not gamble on their share price. We assume that that is not the Government's intention; if it is, it is not very prudent. We shall be interested to hear whether that is the case. New subsection (4A) in clause 3 is expressed to be subject to new subsection (5), but that does not help the situation either.

We want to hear the Government's counter-arguments. If they think that we have not technically understood this nightmare labyrinth and the fact that, in essence, there is no 1992 Act charge because such a charge is moderated by statutory regulations; and if they are thinking of relying on such regulations, we would advise them against. Not even the Revenue pretends to apply the regulations in that territory, because they were wrongly drafted. The Government should correct or withdraw their amendments and reconsider the arrangements that we proposed in Committee.

Amendment No. 3 should read

"leave out from 'or' in line 7 to the end of line of line 31 and add, '(4A) Subject to subsection (5) below, a determination under subsection (4) above may be made in respect of a replacement right or a subsequent replacement right in either case buying a right to which a notice under section 1 applies only—

(a) at a time when, but for this Act, a liability to pay class 1 contributions would otherwise have arisen in respect of that right; and

(b) to the extent that it is a right to acquire additional shares'."

The matter will clearly have to be dealt with in the Lords, but, in short, I ask the Minister to reconsider in depth the drafting of the amendments—especially that of amendments Nos. 2 and 3, which do not achieve what we believe to be the Government's aims.

Amendment No. 4 is not particularly necessary. It seeks to achieve the existing law of the land in a round-about fashion. It seems to be saying only that when there is a roll-over of a new option into another option, with cash paid out as well, the charge is on the cash element under clause 2(3)—on the assumption that one ignores any enhancement element in the new option. As discussed under amendment No. 2, that would be the position in any

[Mr. Flight]

case, as I have just commented. We have no particular quibbles as to technical drafting problems with the amendment, but we are not sure that it is needed.

Amendment No. 5 is broadly speaking okay. It addresses a mistake in the Bill which we pointed out in Committee. Amendment No. 6 also corrects a mistake that we pointed out in Committee. Amendment No. 7 is somewhat unclearly drafted, although if it were more precise, it could achieve an end with which everyone is in agreement—along the lines of our alternative amendment proposed in Committee.

Is the Minister sure that the wording of amendment No. 8 is right? We think that the brackets should be deleted from subsection (10)—the current wording does not seem to make grammatical sense. However, I am open to correction. How is the amount of special contribution for one of the options to be assessed, if not according to the principles set out in clause 3? Are we to pretend that the option is an original right?

I apologise for using such technical language, but it is important that law passed by this place is accurate and that it is so drafted as to achieve its objectives. I thought that the Government had accepted the underlying points in the amendments that we tabled to clause 3 in Committee. As I had sight of the Government's amendments only yesterday and had only yesterday afternoon and evening to take legal advice on them, I am disappointed that, for the third time, a significant part of the measure is wrong.

3.15 pm

Mr. Burnett: I was extremely interested in the matters raised by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight). He stressed the importance of consultation and of ensuring that the provisions are correct. They are designed to address loopholes in the Bill; we held lengthy discussions on those matters in Committee. In particular, they cover roll-overs and multiple roll-overs—an extremely complex issue. The fact that the amendments were available only yesterday means that neither individuals in the professions nor taxpayers have had an adequate opportunity to give their views on the drafting.

I do not expect the Minister to offer us this afternoon a redrafting or suggested redrafting of amendments that the Government tabled only yesterday. I hope, however, that before the Bill goes to the House of Lords, he will authorise his officials to submit it to the professions, to taxpayers and interested individuals so that they can consider it and offer their comments. I am sure that the Minister will then be minded to listen carefully to their views.

In Committee, I asked the Minister what the Government's aim was in respect of these provisions. I asked him to confirm that, if there was a bona fide exchange of shares—for example, on a takeover—at approximate parity, and provided it that was not part of a measure designed for the avoidance of taxation, a charge should not arise for the taxpayer. There should be no charge to a taxpayer on a takeover or subsequent takeover; to use capital gains tax jargon as roll-over jargon, it should be treated as "no gain, no loss". There should be no charge for the special national insurance contribution.

When the Minister responded to my point, he agreed as to the Government's aim. He said that if the roll-over is at parity, there should be no additional charge. In the light of our previous debates and our discussions on private companies, will the Minister confirm that there should be no charge? That is important. If there is parity or approximate parity—in respect of private companies, the valuation of shares is an art, not a science—there should be tolerance in valuation either way. It is in the commercial best interests of this country that takeovers happen and that, when they do, taxpayers can be reasonably sure of their liability, provided that they have a bona fide stab at valuation.

Since the Minister was not prepared to accept the amendments that we tabled previously, I can only ask him to elucidate—to tell the House exactly what the charge will be. When will there be an exemption on a roll-over or a multiple roll-over? Will the Minister confirm that he will instruct his officials to circulate these draft provisions to the professions and to interested parties? And when they make their comments and submissions, will he listen to them and then submit a properly drafted Bill to the House of Lords?

Mr. Jack: I do not profess to understand the technicalities of this provision beyond its general purpose, but I rise to express my discontent at Government amendment No. 3 and the tortuous drafting therein. Except for the sake of giving the Financial Secretary adequate time to respond to the excellent speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), I shall not detain the House for long.

First, I should like to know what Government amendment No. 3 means and how it will be applied. It starts:

"Subject to subsection (5), so much of section 136(1) of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 (charge to tax in roll-over cases) as provides for"—

and on it goes in the most labyrinthine and impenetrable language. I want to know what it means.

Mr. Graham Allen (Vice-Chamberlain of Her Majesty's Household): Oh no!

Mr. Jack: It is a great pity that the Whip on duty will not grace the House with his own clairvoyance on the matter. The fact that we are subjected to such language is a condemnation of parliamentary drafting, especially as a tax law rewrite exercise is taking place.

Secondly, I should like the Financial Secretary to tell us why such a technical matter was not subject to further consultation. The Government have had long enough to develop the Bill. Part of the clarity of the tax system has been achieved by virtue of subjecting to outside opinion the proposals in the rewrite exercise. As both Front-Bench spokesmen have said, this group of amendments clearly has not been subject to the white heat of public scrutiny.

I ask the Financial Secretary for a proper, fully detailed explanation of Government amendment No. 3. Why has it been so poorly drafted? How does he propose to ensure that practitioners have an opportunity to comment on the legislation before it is finally cast in concrete?

Mr. Timms: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) for the care with which he has studied these amendments and taken advice on their contents. He and the hon. Member for Torridge

and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) have asked me what precisely is the Government's intention in clause 3, so I shall explain it again.

Under clause 3, settled options will not incur any further class 1 liability where the option is subsequently rolled over, provided that roll-over is conducted at parity. That aspiration was expressed by both hon. Gentlemen, and that is our intention. Where the roll-over is not at parity, class 1 national insurance contributions will apply, but only on the proportion of the gain on the new option that relates to the amount in excess of parity. So the amount of the gain on the new option that relates to the original remains capped.

Mr. Burnett *rose—*

Mr. Timms: Let me finish the point. I confident that, when these amendments are agreed to, that is what the clause will achieve. The relief from class 1 contributions will be provided by a new basis of the class 1 charge. Therefore, only the proportion of the new option in excess of parity will be subject to charge. That is the intention.

Of course, I shall consider with great care what hon. Members have said about the details of the wording. The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) asks what Government amendment No. 3 will achieve. The best that I can do is to refer him to the published notes, which set out precisely what Government amendments Nos. 3 and 4 will achieve. I shall carefully consider the points that hon. Members have made. I am happy to discuss technical matters, as we have done throughout the process, with the share scheme lawyers group. The Inland Revenue has discussed the roll-over provisions with that group. I believe that these amendments will achieve the Government's intention, which is supported on both sides of the House, and on that basis, I commend them to the House.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 3

SPECIAL PROVISION FOR ROLL-OVERS

Amendments made: No. 2, in page 4, line 44, at end insert—

'(3A) The liability by virtue of section 2(3) to pay Class 1 contributions in respect of a gain realised on the assignment or release of the original right shall be determined—

(a) as if (notwithstanding anything in section 136(1) of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988) the replacement right were or, as the case may be, were part of the valuable consideration given for the assignment or release; and

(b) as if the value of so much of that consideration as is represented by the replacement right were equal to whichever is the smaller of the following amounts—

(i) the amount which (in accordance with the provisions of section 135(3)(a) of that Act) would have been taken to be the gain realised by an exercise in full of the original right immediately before the time of its assignment or release; and

(ii) the amount which (in accordance with those provisions) would have been taken to be the amount of the gain realised by an exercise in full of the replacement right at that time (assuming it to be exercisable at that time) which falls immediately after it is given in consideration of the assignment or release.'.

No. 3, in page 5, line 7, leave out from "determined" to first "to" in line 29 and insert—

'in accordance with the following provisions of this section.

(4A) Subject to subsection (5), so much of section 136(1) of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 (charge to tax in roll-over cases) as provides for sections 135 and 136 of that Act to apply as mentioned in section 136(1) of that Act in relation to the replacement right, or in relation to any subsequent replacement right, shall be deemed to have effect (or, as the case may be, to have had effect) for the purposes of the determination mentioned in subsection (4) of this section—

(a) as if it provided for those sections to apply (and to apply as so mentioned) in relation to that right'.

No. 4, in page 5, line 31, at end insert—

'(5) Where—

(a) the whole or any part of any consideration given for the assignment or release of the replacement right or of any subsequent replacement right does not (or did not) comprise a subsequent replacement right, and

(b) as a consequence, a gain would (but for this Act) be taken for the purposes of section 135 of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 to be realised (or to have been realised) on that assignment or release,

that gain shall be taken for the purposes of the determination mentioned in subsection (4) to be (or, as the case may be, to have been) equal to the amount in respect of which liability to pay Class 1 contributions would have been preserved, on the assumptions mentioned in subsection (5A), by virtue of section 2(3) (read with subsection (3A) of this section) or, if no such liability would have been so preserved, to nil.

(5A) Those assumptions are—

(a) that (subject to paragraph (c)) the right assigned or released is a right the liability to pay Class 1 contributions in respect of which is a liability to which section 2(1)(a) or (b) applied;

(b) that references in subsection (3A) of this section to the original right and to the replacement right are references, respectively, to the right that is assigned or released and to the right comprised in the consideration for the assignment or release; and

(c) that so much of the right assigned or released as is a right to acquire additional shares is to be disregarded for the purposes of both section 2(3) and subsection (3A) of this section.

(5B) Nothing in the preceding provisions of this section shall limit or remove, or be deemed to have limited or removed, any liability to pay Class 1 contributions in respect of a gain arising on the exercise, assignment or release of the replacement right, or of any subsequent replacement right, in any case in which the right in question or that gain derives (directly or indirectly) from a transaction the purpose, or one of the main purposes, of which was to make use of the provisions of this Act to avoid the payment of such contributions in respect of a benefit conferred after 19th May 2000.'.

No. 5, in page 5, line 36, leave out from "right" to "the" in line 37 and insert—

'with a value that matches the value of'.

No. 6, in page 5, line 41, leave out from "right" to end of line 49 and insert—

'shall be taken to have a value that matches the value of the shares obtainable in exercise of the old right to the extent, and to the extent only, that the following amounts are the same—

(a) the amount which (in accordance with the provisions of section 135(3)(a) of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988) would be taken to be the amount of the gain realised by an exercise of the new right at the relevant time (assuming it to be exercisable at that time) for obtaining the shares; and

(b) the amount which would have been taken (in accordance with those provisions) to be the gain realised by a full exercise of the old right immediately before the time of its assignment or release;

and in this subsection "the relevant time", in relation to the new right, means the time which falls immediately after it is given in consideration of the assignment or release of the old right.'.

No. 7, in page 6, line 7, at end insert—

'( ) All such apportionments as may be necessary shall be made in determining for the purposes of this section, in a case in which the number of additional shares cannot be a whole number, to what extent a liability to pay Class 1 contributions arises in relation to the exercise, assignment or release of a right to acquire any such shares.'.

No. 8, in page 6, line 8, leave out—

'require the assumptions set out in subsections (5) and (6) to be used'

and insert "apply".—*[Mr. Timms.]*

Clause 5

INTERPRETATION

Mr. Timms: I beg to move amendment No. 9, in page 7, line 40, leave out "sixty" and insert "ninety-two".

In Committee, I was happy to accept the amendments, tabled by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), which extended the period in which notification and payment must be made from 60 to 92 days after Royal Assent. Of course, that change must be made throughout the Bill, but we subsequently found an omission. The amendment will remedy that omission and ensures that 92 days will be referred to throughout.

Mr. Flight: We welcome this amendment. In fact, in Committee, it was our error to have missed one of the references to 60 days. We are glad that the Government have picked up that omission, so that the Bill will refer to 92 days throughout.

Mr. Burnett: We also welcome this amendment. We supported the amendments in Committee. The date for notification and payment will now be 92 days, not 60 days, as in the proposals as originally drafted. This worthwhile amendment is welcomed throughout the business community.

Amendment agreed to.

Order for Third Reading read.

3.27 pm

Mr. Timms: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Bill, as hon. Members know, responds to the concerns of a number of companies about the effects of paying national insurance on employee share option gains. Following that change, some companies said that the uncapped secondary national insurance charge had led to accounting difficulties for them.

Following a period of consultation, measures were introduced last year, enabling companies to remove the accounting problems and uncertainty that the NIC charge presented. The earlier measure allowed companies to ask the employee to bear the secondary national insurance charge on the share option gain. That was announced on 19 May 2000. That legislation has enabled companies to remove the accounting difficulties and has provided them with certainty.

Although last year's legislation was drafted to cover all the options that had already been granted, it has, not surprisingly, been difficult for employers to negotiate with employees terms that change options already granted to them, so the uncertainty remained for some of the companies that granted options before 19 May 2000.

The Bill responds by giving companies the chance to settle their national insurance liabilities on the options granted between 6 April 1999 and 19 May 2000 early, in advance of the date when the actual gain is made by the employee. Companies that choose to take advantage of this measure will be able to cap their national insurance liability by calculating the amount of national insurance due by reference to the accrued gain up to 7 November 2000.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Will the Financial Secretary clarify a basic point about the legislation? We are trying to redress an anomaly, which was created as a consequence of earlier legislation designed to prevent tax avoidance of the NIC charge by the use of share options. How much revenue do the Government reckon was at stake in the beginning, and how much revenue is at stake now? We have just heard the most extraordinary labyrinthine story of complex legislation being added to the statute book, and that has resulted in huge compliance costs for industry and a bonanza for lawyers. How much money will the Government get in return for that?

Mr. Timms: The Bill does not correct an anomaly; it completes the arrangements to ensure that companies will not face the uncertainties about which some of them have been concerned. On the hon. Gentleman's question about the cost, because payments in the first year will have to be made within 92 days of Royal Assent there will be a gain to the Exchequer. Money will be paid earlier than it would be if it were paid only when the options were exercised. Over a five-year period, there will be a loss to the Exchequer and we estimate that to be about £160 million.

Mr. Tyrie: I am sure that the Minister has given the correct answer about the cost of the Bill, but my question was about the problem that was generated by the decision taken in 1996. I want to know how much revenue was at stake when that decision was taken. Clearly, the Government must have gone back to consider the original legislation to see whether it was worth while closing all these loopholes.

Mr. Timms: I do not have a figure for how much was at stake when the previous Government made the changes in 1996. I have no doubt that they published figures at the time, and I shall certainly try to dig them out. Perhaps I can write to the hon. Gentleman about that.

As I have explained, companies that choose to take advantage of the measure will be able to cap their national insurance liability by calculating the amount of national insurance due by reference to the gain accrued up to 7 November 2000. They will be required to notify the Inland Revenue and pay the appropriate amount within 92 days of Royal Assent.

Our consideration of the Bill has been brief, but it has been fruitful. Several worthwhile improvements to it have been made and I am grateful to hon. Members for that. I take pleasure in commending the Bill to the House.

3.32 pm

Mr. Flight: As the House is aware, the Bill is the Government's second attempt to correct the problems of their own making when, with inadequate consultation, they introduced in April 1999 a charge to national insurance on unapproved option gains. As has been pointed out, this attempt has resulted in excessive technical detail and it still has not got the corrections entirely right in the objectives for takeovers, under this relieving Bill.

We have welcomed, in principle, the relieving measures in the Bill and we welcome the fact that the Government accepted most of the points that we raised in Committee. They will make the operation of the relieving measures more practical by allowing a sensible period of 92 days in which to elect to pay this one-off national insurance charge.

However, as we said at some length on Second Reading and in Committee, we continue to oppose the principle of making companies gamble on their potential tax liabilities. The only comfort for most listed companies that issued options between April 1999 and May 2000 is that the options would likely have been significantly under water on 7 November 2000, given what happened to stock markets over that period. Therefore, the great majority of companies will not have any difficult decisions to make, because they will not have a special NIC liability.

I stress that we do not think it is correct for Governments to play with tax policy and offer quid pro quos, or gambles, on shareholders' funds. Let the Government never forget that the overwhelming majority of shareholders are pension funds.

The Government have not entirely understood the principles relating to market abuse on which they themselves insisted in the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000. At that time, we urged them to accept the principle of intent, but they resisted that. As a result, under the Bill, giving misleading price information—whether intended or not—will be an offence.

As we have previously pointed out, if companies do not exercise the option to make the special NIC payment, the markets will perceive them as sending a negative signal about their share price prospects. However, as the Minister agreed, the reasons for that might be quite different: companies might not exercise the right because of a shortage of cash or because of intended staff changes. The only comfort is that the latest draft of the Financial Services Authority's code of conduct on market abuse makes it clear that it has included the concept of intent in virtually every provision, as we recommended at the outset.

As we pointed out last summer in the debates on the Finance Act 2000, our main criticism is directed towards the whole approach of treating options in the same way as remuneration and the argument that gains on unapproved options should be subject to national insurance charges. Such thinking is misplaced. It is absolutely clear that if someone's remunerations arrangements involve a lower salary than he might receive at a mature company but include a package of options, whether those options have any value is entirely a matter of risk. The net effect of everything that the Government have done is to tax those options at a higher rate than ordinary income, and that cannot be logical.

In reality, the Government's proposals were an excuse for more stealth taxation. On 4 September last year, the Minister wrote to me advising that the Treasury viewed the cost of not having national insurance on unapproved options as £1 billion per annum. I think it is extremely unlikely that the Government will obtain anything like that revenue from national insurance on options. To the extent that the Government argue that the proposals are designed to close avoidance loopholes, I point out that I have never encountered arrangements whereby one can have a share option scheme with a certain return. If the Government and Revenue have encountered such an arrangement, that problem could have been dealt with specifically. The much wider measure of treating option gains as the same as earned income is the wrong path down which to go.

The issue is important because unapproved options have become central to entrepreneurial motivation in this country. The tax regime for approved options is attractive but they are limited to £30,000 in value. Sadly, the Government's new executive management incentive scheme is extremely restrictive. Therefore, unapproved options are used overwhelmingly to offer incentives to management, particularly in new businesses in the new technology and new economy sectors.

In Committee, the Minister admitted that only 100 companies of the 20,000 or so suitable have taken up the new executive management scheme incentive scheme. Although it looks very generous, it is difficult to qualify for and any company that started to achieve success would quickly disqualify itself. I am tempted to observe that the Government knew that because the amount of tax cost provided in the Red Book was modest.

Let us come to the heart of the matter. I am assuming that the Government are not disingenuous in their desire to see a much more vital economy and a much higher level of venture capital investment. We should not be complacent. The United Kingdom is doing poorly against America. Per pound or dollar of national income, America is achieving about four times the level of venture capital investment of the United Kingdom. We may be doing well against Europe, but we are certainly doing poorly against America. That has been central to the growth rates of the two economies. America has grown at about 4.6 per cent. per annum for the past three years and the United Kingdom at only about 2.3 per cent. Our under-performance is material. The huge US economy has done so well largely because of the tremendously positive level of investment and activity in new ventures in high-tech, new economy and so forth.

This is central to the Bill. When people in the venture capital industry in the United Kingdom are asked what are the key issues, interestingly they say that right now it is not about there not being enough money, but about a shortage of talented management wanting to come forward. There is a shortage of people willing to leave the more comfortable employment terms and security with large, established businesses and risk joining a new business. Often there is also a shortage of new business projects that those people might otherwise bring to the table.

[Mr. Flight]

When the venture capital industry is asked what is central to this issue, it says that the tax regime on share options in the United Kingdom is extremely unattractive compared with that in the United States. In the United States for the equivalent of UK approved schemes, known as ISOs, people can have $100,000 of options per annum; the employee is not taxed on exercise but only on the sale of shares following the exercise of those options; the tax rate, provided that he has held the shares for a year, is 20 per cent.; and there is no equivalent to national insurance charge because social security charges are capped for both employer and employee at incomes of $74,000.

In the United States, the new business sector which is not hugely profitable—it is building businesses where cash flow is tight—uses predominantly ISO options to pull in and motivate talented management and, inevitably, pays them lower salaries than they would get in mature businesses. That is what options are all about.

While US unapproved options have a tax of 39.6 per cent. on exercise, the issuing companies get a tax credit equal to the tax which the employee pays, so the net tax situation between employer and employee is tax paid at about 10 per cent. and, again, there is no equivalent to our national insurance charge.

If the Government genuinely want to get a higher level of venture capital activity in the United Kingdom, it is crucial that they accept and understand the message from the industry that we are going wrong on option incentives. The Computing Services and Software Association said to the Chancellor in the lead-up to the discussions behind the Bill:

"We need a similar regime to the USA as that is where we have to compete for staff."

The Minister will be aware that the top management of Cisco, now the largest high-tech company in the world, and of companies such as Micromuse—still British but with more of its activities in the United States than here—say that the high tax on options was leading them to move their operations elsewhere, predominantly to the USA, because they could not motivate staff here where options were taxed too highly.

The staff needed in the new business areas are international. They are people who will move about the world readily. This is not necessarily about a brain drain from here to the United States; it is also about whether we attract the talent from all over the world to the UK that we need to get our high-tech sector going.

The chairman of the UK small business investment taskforce, appointed by the Government, commented in a letter two weeks ago on how restrictive the executive management incentive option schemes were and on how punitive the national insurance charge arrangements on options are. The chief executive of QXL Internet Auction company commented that the NIC situation in this country would force talented staff out of the United Kingdom.

The message from the high-tech industry is loud and clear. This relieving Bill is welcome in terms of the specifics, but it does not address the fundamental issue—namely, that the Government have hit the venture capital and new tech industries by applying a 47.3 per cent. tax charge on unapproved options when individuals exercise them. That is right at the centre of why we are not doing nearly as well as the US in our new venture capital industry.

Last May the Government realised and accepted the threat to the cash flows of new companies by imposing NICs on options. It is the companies that are the problem with a 12.2 per cent. national insurance charge. The Government thought that they could be clever and that by a wheeze they could keep the stealth tax that they had imposed by changing the rules so that the employer's NIC could be transferred to the employee. As the Government have confirmed, that gives a 47.32 per cent. tax charge to employees on unapproved share options.

It is palpably nonsense that a risky form of remuneration—whether options are worth anything depends on the particular success or failure of an individual business, whether new high-tech areas prosper and the general economic climate and where the risk-to-reward ratio is skewed heavily to risk—should attract higher tax than a safe salary. That is theoretical nonsense. It is reducing the use of options. The reaction of talented people who are willing to work for new ventures is to want better salaries and a safer income, as well as some options. Instead of the trade-off of lower salaries and more options, they are demanding higher salaries, and that is just what new businesses cannot afford.

Behind the Bill still lies the great misfortune that just when the Government have been claiming that they want to help new ventures, venture capital and entrepreneurship, they have hit at the centre and made the key element—namely, option incentivisation—punitive and unattractive tax-wise. If the Minister goes out and about in the venture capital industry and talks to people other than the Government's cronies, he will find that the Government are not seen as bona fide friends to entrepreneurship and venture capital, and are believed not to understand how crucial the taxation of options is to entrepreneurial endeavour.

When the relieving measures that we are discussing were announced shortly before Christmas, the press reaction summed them up. It was that the proposals received one cheer from high-tech entrepreneurs, who said that they did not go far enough and did not address the fundamental issue. Others commented that the problem is of the Government's own making, with constant tinkering and a failure to sort out the fundamental issue of what the tax regime should be for share options, if we want to be able to attract many more talented people into new ventures.

The Bill is a relieving measure and we are not opposing it. We hope that the Government will correct what we believe are outstanding technical errors as the Bill passes through another place. We appreciate that the Government have accepted our proposals to make arrangements simpler and to avoid potential for unfairness in this Bill. We say to the Government, "If you are genuine about wanting to encourage entrepreneurship, go back to first principles and consider the taxation of options in the United States. Do what those who are at the centre of, and who are trying to create, more new venture capital and more new business recommend, and look to have option taxation regimes that are broadly similar to those of the US and that are not punitive, as the mainstream unapproved option regime now is."

3.52 pm

Mr. Burnett: This is one of the few occasions where the Government have changed their mind on a Treasury Bill. I pay tribute to the Minister for listening to, and understanding, the points that have been made. Both the changes to which he has agreed are important.

The Bill is a relieving measure and it is helpful. It caps liabilities at 7 November 2000. As I said earlier, other amendments could have been made in fairness to taxpayers. For example, the Government should have given taxpayers a choice whether to pay on 7 November or on the date on which the option was exercised. That would have been simpler, just as certain, and fair. Now, an individual will, for example, have to pay national insurance contributions on the value of an option on 7 November last of £100,000. The option might decrease significantly in value, and when he or she exercises the option in years to come, the value might be only £10,000, so the individual will be considerably worse off.

The amendments that have been agreed to are welcome. First, the period in which notice is given and contributions have to be made is extended from 60 days to 92. Secondly, there is the amendment that applies where the amount of special contribution is nil because on 7 November either the option was under water or the shares were not readily convertible assets. In those circumstances, notice would be deemed to have been given within the prescribed period. Those are helpful amendments.

We discussed the significant amendments that the Government introduced yesterday, and the Minister has confirmed that he will circulate the draft clauses and probably the entire Bill. I welcome that. I believe he said that he would circulate them to the various professional bodies and perhaps to some taxpayers who call for representation so that they have the opportunity to make submissions and produce amendments to clarify and improve the Bill.

Having had those assurances from the Minister, and realising that the Bill is a relieving measure, we welcome the Bill and the amendments to which the Minister has acquiesced. We shall not, therefore, oppose it.

3.55 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): I confess that I did not understand all the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) made when he was dealing with the Government's amendments to clause 3. I doubt whether anyone else in the House did. I certainly do not think that the Minister did. The only person who fully grasped them was my hon. Friend. That reflects a serious problem that we have encountered today in trying to make legislation of this sort on the Floor of the House.

It is certain that we shall be passing a flawed Bill to the other place, where we hope that it will be put right. It seems that the programme motion will prevent virtually any discussion, if the Government so choose, of any changes made in the other place, even if they are substantive. Effectively, that which is to become law will have received virtually no scrutiny in this place. That is not a good way to produce legislation.

I strongly agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs that this relieving Bill is welcome, but that the Government have hit the industry elsewhere and have not understood the damage that they have been doing. We are dealing with a complex and technical matter that relates to an awkward interaction between tax and national insurance contributions. The origins of the problem lie in the decision to treat options as remuneration. That was done as an anti-avoidance measure. I shall throw up for consideration whether that was worth it and whether the Government have thought through whether it was.

There are two ways of answering that question. First, was it worth it from the Inland Revenue's perspective and how much NIC liability has been created? The Minister gave me the figures for this relieving measure, but following my earlier intervention it was clear that he had no understanding of how much money was being brought in as a whole as a result of the underlying measure, which the Government are attempting to improve by means of the Bill. How much avoidance activity will be discouraged by putting the Bill on the statute book? The yield may be low, but firms may have written fewer options than they would otherwise have done.

The second big issue in addressing whether it was right to treat options as remuneration is the effect that that has had on the whole economy. My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs referred to that in his excellent speech. Treating options as remuneration significantly affects economic behaviour. Share options may be extremely efficient as incentives to better business performance. That approach will have been discouraged by anti-avoidance measures.

An assessment of the entire economy would also take into account the compliance burden, the administrative burden and the legal and accounting costs involved in introducing the measure. There has been far too little analysis of those whole-economy effects and a great reluctance to put numbers on them, in terms not only of the Bill and underlying legislation but of a range of measures that the Government have taken since 1997.

Some of that work used to be done by the deregulation unit, but one of the Government's first acts was to abolish that, in July 1997.

The Government are trying to mitigate the whole-economy damage that some of their measures have caused by creating the new approved scheme. The EMI scheme and the company share option plans that the Government introduced push in that direction. They have heavily targeted the information technology sector with some of their measures. I am not convinced that it is right to create a distortive incentive to target a particular sector. The argument runs that that incentive is needed because shares in the IT sector are more volatile. So what? Volatility should be treated as a business cost and the Government should not rejig the tax system to take account of it.

I said that I do not like the way in which the Government have gone about the matter. By implication, I am criticising the way in which the previous Government tried to treat the awkward relationship between tax and national insurance contributions. Of course, that is the origin of the Bill. Let me briefly go through a few possible alternative approaches. The first would be to continue muddling through, which, clearly, the Government are trying to do now. One could continue to try to police the line between tax and national insurance; one could try to limit tax avoidance, but strike

[Mr. Andrew Tyrie]

a balance between closing tax ramps and chasing small sums that might slip through. However, there is always the risk that one is chasing ever smaller sums with larger dollops of regulation and ever more pages of legislation.

Mr. Burnett: Does the hon. Gentleman subscribe to, and agree with, the contribution principle?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Before the hon. Gentleman answers, let me say that his remarks are becoming rather wide-ranging. Third Reading is limited to the contents of the Bill, and his remarks should be limited to those contents.

Mr. Tyrie: I entirely accept your ruling, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We know that the Bill that we are now considering will not end up on the statute book because it is flawed as drafted; there will be further consultation and it will be fundamentally re-examined in the House of Lords. It is therefore helpful to flag up markers for the other place when it comes to examine the Bill.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. What happens to the Bill when it leaves this place does not affect the fact that Third Reading speeches should relate purely to the content of the Bill.

Mr. Tyrie: A crucial aspect of that content is the great emphasis on the need to collect revenue, however small the amount being chased. Looking at the Bill, one sees that there is almost a light-headedness about putting on the statute book huge quantities of highly complicated legislation. I defy anybody to read the amendments and honestly say that they can work out what they mean. As I said, nobody has made the effort to work out the whole-economy effect of such measures.

Other approaches need to be adopted alongside the approach that the Government have decided to take. One is to treat share options like all shares and tax the capital gain, as was suggested by Mr. Mike Lynch, chief executive of the software group Autonomy. He said:

"There's no doubt that the Government is trying to do the right thing."

I agree. Mr. Lynch continues:

"The problem is that they tinker, tinker, tinker and don't sort out the fundamental issue, which is that options should be treated as a capital gain, and not be hit with national insurance."

That has some attractions, although the logic of it leads towards integration of capital gains tax and income tax; I am not sure whether Mr. Lynch had that in mind. Of course, the treatment of capital gains as a marginal slice of income was the intellectual background to the 1988 Budget, which caused so much controversy in the venture capital industry. That is not the right way to go. Capital gains tax is in a fundamental mess, and trying to go down that route would make it even worse.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. As the hon. Gentleman is cantering around the economy, I remind him yet again that he must debate the precise content of the Bill.

Mr. Tyrie: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for making sure that I do not canter around the economy. However, I assure you that there is an intimate inter-relationship between share options, capital gains and the anti-avoidance measures on national insurance that we are discussing. Once one is altered, the others will require attention, which is why this awkward measure is before us today.

I shall not linger for more than two sentences on the point about the contributory principle made by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett). I disagree with the view that national insurance contributions and income tax should be integrated, and believe that the contributory principle should stay. The recent report of the Select Committee on Social Security agreed with that, and that is probably where we shall remain. If so, we are thrown back to the first option that I listed—muddling through. If we do muddle through, I urge the Government, as I said a moment ago, not to chase ever smaller sums of revenue with ever more regulation. Is it really worth trying to collect national insurance on unapproved share options?

That is the key underlying question, which I hope the other place will have in mind when they examine the Bill. When it does so, I hope that it will weigh the whole-economy cost against the diminishing return to the Inland Revenue.

4.7 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Following your general nudging of my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thought that I would say a few words about the Bill. That seems to be the order of the day and is what the House expects on Third Reading. I shall have a go and see if I can deal with the Bill in the limited time that is left.

First, an irregularity that struck me—and which, I hope, will attract the attention of their Lordships in another place—is the Bill's long title. These are difficult, complicated matters to do with tax and high finance, and understanding them is obviously limited to a small number of people, of whom I am certainly not one. In those circumstances, the layman is allowed to speculate about why on earth the Bill deals retrospectively with a period beginning with 6 April 1999 and ending with 19 May 2000.

That tells one several things, including the fact that the problem was certainly not noticed when it should have been and/or was not dealt with properly when it should have been. However, with the benefit of hindsight, we shall reach back into the recesses of time and try to deal with it now. That strikes me as something that we would normally deprecate and be uneasy about. Against that background, I am a little unhappy with the consensus with which the Bill seems to be easing its way forward.

Following your helpful advice to look at the Bill, Mr. Deputy Speaker, my eye lit upon clause 2(5), in which, I thought, some sinister elements appeared. It contains the condition:

"If it appears to the Inland Revenue that a person who has given a notice under section 1 in respect of any right and who would (but for subsection (4) of this section), be liable by virtue of that notice to pay a special contribution".

A lot of use of "appears to" and "but for" is creeping in. At the very least, that indicates something that my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) was at pains to point out from the start:

the measure has not been properly thought out and, despite the expertise and tender ministrations of my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), we still have not got it anywhere near where it should be at this stage of the proceedings. After all, the Bill is in the last gasps of its proceedings through the House of Commons. I wonder whether the Government are up to their old tricks, hoping that it will be sorted out properly in another place. That is a constitutional and parliamentary proposition of extremely dubious value.

This place should take responsibility for sorting out Bills that originate here. One could say that, when a Bill originates in another place, we expect it to come here in good order. The same must surely apply in the other direction. What seems to be happening recently, not least in respect of this Bill, is that we have come to rest more and more on the presumption that we can do sloppy, untidy, hasty, poor work here—making the law of the land, let us not forget, and affecting people very directly, as our measures must inevitably do, and this Bill no less than most—and pass it to the other end of the building, saying to their lordships, "You have more time. You can sort it out." That is not a sound constitutional principle.

My doubts grew even stronger when I read in clause 2(5)(a) the words:

"which he had reasonable grounds for believing was the correct amount of his liability".

That is probably fair enough, but the clause goes on, almost unbelievably, in paragraph (c):

"has a reasonable excuse for having failed to do either of those things within that period"—

not a reason, but an excuse. Excuses have now entered our statute as a term of art.

I am not a lawyer. The hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon is an eminent lawyer. It is probably too late for him to comment now, but I leave the thought with him and not least with the Minister: if we are writing excuses into our statute, matters have gone beyond all reason. It makes me wonder how on earth we could have arrived at this point in our deliberations, with all the accumulated brain power of my hon. Friends, the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon, the Minister, who has been praised lavishly today and whom I will praise modestly, and all the panoply of talent available to the Minister via the parliamentary draftsmen, when they are not engaged on hundreds of amendments to other Bills at the last minute.

The best that the Government can come up with in the Bill is a reference to someone having a reasonable excuse for having failed to do something within a specified period. It is pretty desperate stuff, when one thinks about it. It is not the stuff of which proper statutes should be made. It will provide a field day for the lawyers. Imagine them getting their minds around that, and their fees around it, as well. I will not tempt my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), who, if he were listening to me, which he wisely is not—

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I was listening closely to my right hon. Friend. He was speaking about fees.

Mr. Forth: I shall have a quiet word later with my right hon. and learned Friend. Leading up to the talk about fees, I was speaking about excuse as a concept in the law. He and I can discuss that later; even though it is in the Bill, I am sure that Mr. Deputy Speaker would not want me to elaborate further.

At that point, I was put off reading the Bill any further. I thought, "If things are as bad as that so early in the Bill, I do not see why I should upset myself or anyone else by reading on." I concluded without too much effort that it is yet another example of a Bill poorly conceived, poorly drafted and—I say this with considerable regret—poorly scrutinised, mainly because the Government have not given us proper time or opportunity to give it the attention that it deserves.

As has been pointed out, the period allowed between identification of the flaws in the Bill in Committee and its Report stage today would usually be sufficient to permit proper reflection, advice to be taken from other sources and the expertise of those whom I mentioned previously to be brought to bear. None of that has been allowed. If we are to learn a lesson from the Bill, it is that the way in which the Government are requiring the House to deal with legislation is inadequate. It palpably does not work, and the Bill is a perfect example of that.

Although I sense that we shall probably give the Bill an unopposed Third Reading—would that that were not the case, as I would love to vote against it—I hope that, at the very least, we can invite Members of another place to give it much more scrutiny than they might otherwise do.

4.14 pm

Mr. Timms: The climate for enterprise and entrepreneurship in the United Kingdom is better than it has ever been, and the Bill makes it better still. We have made a number of changes to the Bill. It has been a good example of effective scrutiny. I take great pleasure in commending it to the House.

It being a quarter past Four o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Order [this day].*

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

Children's Commissioner for Wales Bill (Programme) (No. 2)

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I beg to move,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Children's Commissioner for Wales Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 16th January:

Consideration and Third Reading

1. Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading shall be completed at today's sitting.

2. Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at quarter past Six o'clock.

3. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Seven o'clock.

4. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Consideration of Lords Amendments and further messages from the Lords

5. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any programme motion to supplement this order or to vary it in relation to—

(a) proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments; or

(b) proceedings on any further messages from the Lords,

and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

The motion proposes that the remaining stages of the Bill should be completed by 7 pm. The programme is supplemental to the one approved for the Committee stage, which finished in good time, before the programmed date of 1 February. Indeed, we did not use all the time that was allowed in Committee under the programme motion agreed by the House.

The Bill was debated thoroughly in Committee; the debate covered a range of relevant matters in detail. There was a high degree of consensus, and I am grateful for the co-operation of the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) and other hon. Members on the overall aims of the Bill. However, that did not prevent detailed and vigorous discussion and a thorough examination of the provisions.

The Government have not tabled any further amendments. Only a small number of Opposition amendments were tabled in Committee, and the amendments before us this afternoon were discussed in Committee, so we should have plenty of time for debate in the time allocated for consideration of the amendments. Similarly, I hope that, given the consensus, Third Reading would not require more time than has been allocated. If the Opposition do not oppose the motion and we commence Report and Third Reading shortly, we will have two and three quarter hours for the debate. I commend the motion to the House.

4.17 pm

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): It has become a ritual at the conclusion of each Second Reading debate and at the beginning of each Report stage that we spend 45 minutes debating not the merits of the Bill, however worthy and however urgent, but how long we will permit ourselves—or more correctly, how long the Government will permit us—to scrutinise the legislation.

The proceedings on the Bill are a classic example of bad management of the time that the House spends scrutinising the Government's legislation. We spent the permitted 45 minutes debating the programme motion after Second Reading on 15 January, then a further 15 minutes or so voting on the motion—all to what effect? We voted to conclude the Committee stage by 1 February—not an unreasonable target for an eight-clause Bill, but as the Government are the masters of the timetable of the House, did the House need to resolve such a date at all?

We also voted to set up a Programming Sub-Committee to timetable the Committee stage so that we might meet that target. As is the practice of such Sub-Committees, we met in private, with no record of our proceedings. We met early in the morning, two days after Second Reading, with the greatest display of amity that I have seen in the House for some time. We all referred to each other not by our constituencies, nor as Mr. this or Mrs. that, but by our Christian names, which is the practice in the National Assembly for Wales, where Members have a different way of conducting their business.

The Minister—I dare not call him Dave now—moved a motion that we should meet at 10.30 on a Tuesday and 9.30 on a Thursday, and that we should conclude our proceedings by 1 February. The Government Whip—may I call him Don?—then informally suggested that we meet for five sittings: twice on the first Tuesday, once on the Thursday and twice the next Tuesday. The Opposition protested that that might not be sufficient. "Ah. No problem." We could meet after dinner each Tuesday. "But that may not be sufficient, either," we protested. We were then told, "Oh well, maybe we could meet twice on the first Thursday, and if that isn't sufficient, we could meet twice on the following Thursday." The original five sittings had now been expanded to a possible 10 sittings.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): To help the Opposition.

Mr. Walter: Indeed, to help the Opposition. That is the point that I am coming to. We could meet as often as we liked, so long as we finished by a specified end date. It was concluded that we could come back to the House if there was not sufficient time and ask for more time. There was some discussion between the Chairman and the Clerk on that point, but the Committee concluded that we could ask for an extension.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): My hon. Friend will be aware that a motion asking for more time was dealt with earlier today, in relation to another Bill. He has obviously been preparing for the excellent speeches that he will make on the Bill before us, but will he confirm that we cannot consider or debate motions for further time? Such motions are simply slapped before the House, with or without consensus, and hon. Members who have not had the privilege of participating in the process are asked to take them or leave them. Does my hon. Friend approve of that procedure?

Mr. Walter: I do not. As my right hon. Friend points out, we were not permitted to debate a Hunting Bill

programme motion that was dealt with earlier. Apparently, according to the Sessional Orders that deal with programme motions, no debate is possible on such extensions of time.

I left the Programming Sub-Committee wondering what purpose our meeting and the programme motion had served. It seemed that the usual channels were alive and well. The Whips could formulate whatever mutual agreement they felt to be necessary, and the rigid programme motion was completely superfluous. We must now consider whether the Government's proposed allocation of time is adequate for Report and Third Reading. As on so many previous occasions when we have debated a timetable motion, it is peculiarly difficult, if not impossible, to state with confidence whether the proposed time will be adequate.

One of the principal reasons why we can have no idea at this stage whether it will be adequate is that we do not know how many hon. Members will seek to speak on the new clauses or to what extent. Without knowing how many speeches will be made, how complicated they will be or how strongly held the opinions expressed by hon. Members on either side of the House will be, it is absurd to speculate on whether we will have sufficient time to consider the issues.

Even hon. Members who consider, as I do, that the Bill is sound in principle believe that the House should be able to consider its detail even at this late stage, before it goes to another place.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): My hon. Friend said that this was a late stage. Although he is correct in one sense, it is also the first stage at which the House as a whole can consider the detail. That is what consideration on Report is about.

Mr. Walter: My right hon. and learned Friend is right. This is the opportunity for hon. Members on both sides of the House who did not have the privilege of serving on the Committee to discuss the amendments and new clauses that they have tabled. That will be pretty difficult in the time available. Although Opposition Members have tabled a number of new clauses and amendments, only two of them—I am sure that the timetable was borne in mind—have been selected for debate. It is a great pity that the Government display so much haste and indifference to the rights both of the Opposition and of their Back Benchers, who were very active in Committee.

Mr. Hanson: I am greatly enjoying the hon. Gentleman's contribution, as I can tell from his eyes that he does not believe a word of it. Will he tell the House exactly when the Committee's sittings finished? As I recall, we did not use the time allocated for either the Tuesday or the Thursday sittings. And which hon. Members who did not serve on the Committee have tabled amendments for consideration today?

Mr. Walter: It is clear that other hon. Members have not tabled such amendments. However, I have discussed with my hon. Friends a number of amendments and new clauses, and given the limited time granted by the timetabling of this business, we plan to ask our noble Friends in the other place to table similar amendments.

Mr. Hogg: It may be right for amendments to be tabled in the other place, but does my hon. Friend agree that we, as elected Members of the House of Commons, should be the first to consider any substantive amendments? Does he further agree that if amendments have to be considered in another place because of a timetable motion, that is in itself a criticism of the process on which we are embarking?

Mr. Walter: Yes. We will have barely an hour or so to consider on Report what emerged from the Committee. That time is insufficient for us to give adequate scrutiny to the Bill.

I know that the Government are treating the measure with a degree of urgency, and that they want to get it through the House of Commons, to the other place and then back, so we can consider their lordships' amendments. I have no doubt that some members of the Government have a date in mind, maybe a month or so away, when they would like to tell the electorate that they have put the measure on to the statute book. Indeed, the Bill may be the only measure that they can claim to have introduced in the current Session.

The timetable that the Government are insisting on has not been discussed before today. Opposition Members will be content to vote against the motion because we do not believe that the business of the House should be conducted in such a manner. We do not know how much consideration will be required by hon. Members who have an interest in the Bill, yet the Government are insisting on the motion. We will oppose it for that reason, and ask them to reconsider it.

It is a flagrant abuse of the House to use programme motions on every Bill, but the Government have done so since the current Session began. However perverse they might feel it is for Opposition Members to complain at great length about lack of time, and while I do not want to detain the House, I must make it clear that we do not believe that such timetabling is the right way for business to be conducted. As has been pointed out on a number of previous occasions, the motion is a sign of the Government's discourtesy.

Paragraph 4 of the motion states:

"Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading."

Last week, when the House considered a similar motion in relation to the Vehicles (Crime) Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) said that he was not familiar with that aspect of Sessional Orders. He made inquiries and discussed the matter with the Clerks, and discovered that the

"Sessional Orders do not merely provide for, but are supposed to insist on, the creation of a Programming Committee, which comprises several individuals almost as of right and meets explicitly and exclusively to determine the allocation of time when considering a Bill on Report and on Third Reading."—[*Official Report*, 30 January 2001; Vol. 362, c. 200.]

That Government are now inviting the House to disapply that Sessional Order and to substitute for a Committee and proper cross-party discussion a brief motion that they doubtless intend to ram through on their payroll vote.

If the Minister is sincere about the need to be open-minded about the workings of the new procedure, it is extraordinary that neither he, as the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, nor the hon. Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig), a Government Whip—who, as he should

[Mr. Walter]

be, is currently silent—has made any attempt to communicate with my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), who was the Opposition Whip on the Standing Committee, with me, or with any other Conservative who served on the Committee about the allocation of time for Report. They have ignored Sessional Orders, and devised a cheeky form of words enabling them to insist on devoting only an hour or so to the remainder of the Bill.

Mr. Hanson: I would not wish the hon. Gentleman inadvertently to mislead the House. I understand from my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) that he discussed the matter with both the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) and the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown).

Mr. Walter: I cannot comment on what happens through the usual channels, but I understand from my discussions with those gentlemen that there was no agreement on the amount of time to be allocated. I understand that a discussion may well have taken place, to which I was not party but which—as is often the case when discussions take place with Ministers and Whips—was rather one-sided. I understand that it was a case of, "This is our business. We propose that this will happen. Of course, you will have every opportunity to discuss it during the debate on the programme motion."

That, clearly, is what we are doing now. We are debating the programme motion, and the probity of it. As I have said, however, I think it extraordinary that the Government should use their solid majority to overrule the rights of the House. It is wholly unacceptable for the Government, at the beginning of a Session, to introduce Sessional Orders permitting a programming Committee to decide on the length and content of debate on Report, and then to table a motion asking us to disapply those orders a bare few months later, in favour of a motion severely limiting our discussions on Report and Third Reading.

No amount of protest from Labour Members about there being cross-party agreement on the need for the Bill will change the fact that the Government have treated the House with disdain, indifference and contempt. The allocation of time is unsatisfactory. This is not a proper way for the House to do business, and it is not a way for the Opposition, or Labour Back Benchers, to scrutinise the Government's legislation.

I am sorry that Ministers do not take their legislative responsibilities as seriously as they might, but my hon. Friends and I do, and I know that Labour Back Benchers who served on the Standing Committee, in particular, took theirs exceedingly seriously. The many Members who also take their responsibilities seriously, and who share my view that inadequate time has been allocated, will doubtless wish to register their concerns shortly.

4.33 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I oppose the motion. I regret to say that I have had to oppose such motions many times since we returned from the Christmas recess at the beginning of January. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), I oppose programme motions because I think they are wrong in principle. We will not refrain from protesting about them and voting against them, even if in a particular instance there is enough time for debate, and even if the time taken by discussion of a programme motion is subtracted from time for the substantive debate.

A number of us find this deeply offensive. I shall articulate again the reasons why: they are very similar to the reasons that I have given on many occasions in the last few months. The first applies not only to this Bill but to any Bill that is the subject of a programme motion. The basis on which accountable government works, and the reason for people's willingness, in a political commonwealth, to accept legislation that has passed through the House, is the belief of those people that the legislation has been properly scrutinised by their elected representatives. The plain truth is, however—this cannot be said too often—that a timetable motion prevents a Bill from being properly scrutinised by their elected representatives. In time the electorate will come to recognise that, and when they do they will appreciate that the existing legislative process is a farce—and a disgraceful and shameful farce at that.

My first and, I believe, wholly compelling objection to programme motions is that important legislation is not properly scrutinised. My second objection is also one of principle. It was hinted at—in fact, expressly stated—by my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) when he said that amendments might be necessary, but that they would be tabled in another place.

There are at least three comments to be made about that. First, I think that my hon. Friend felt obliged to say what he did because he did not think we would have enough time today to discuss properly the amendments that he had in mind. That is shameful. I do not mean that my hon. Friend's action was shameful; I mean that it is shameful that he should have been put in such a position. Surely substantive amendments tabled by those on the Opposition Front Bench should be debated here, not in the other place.

That was my main point. My second is this: amendments will be debated in the other place, and possibly passed; they will then come back to this elected House, where they will be debated again—if at all—on a very tight timetable motion. As a consequence, proper measures of change will not be properly debated in an elected Chamber. That cannot be right.

Mr. Win Griffiths: How often did the right hon. and learned Gentleman make this speech when his party tabled guillotine motions during its time in office?

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman has been here for a long time. He will remember what happened under the last Government, of whom I was a member for 13 years. We did not guillotine Committee stages until 100 hours or so of debate had taken place. It was not our practice to guillotine Committee stages; nor was it our practice, as a matter of routine, to put down timetable motions on Report. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman's intervention was plainly misconceived.

Those of us who are interested in parliamentary government—representative, accountable government—are deeply concerned about the fact that the Chamber is increasingly deserted. There is a reason for that, although

it is not the only reason. The hon. Member for West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire (Mr. Ainger) points to the Conservative Back Benches. That is fair enough; I now point to his.

If a debate is confined to a few minutes, an hour and a half or whatever, Members who might otherwise wish to participate will know full well that they will not have a chance to do so, or that they will be sat on by Whips from one side or the other. That is a way of reducing the amount of debate in this place. If debate is restricted by artificial limits, there will not be Members in the Chamber. I consider that process extremely dangerous.

I think it was the Minister who, quite fairly, pointed out that only two new clauses had been selected. It is possible—I made the point earlier—that in this instance there is time enough to consider them. I do not pretend that I have followed the debate on this particular Bill very closely.

Mr. Forth: I am surprised that my right hon. and learned Friend is prepared to be so generous. He will note that six, seven or eight Members are present, and they may wish to speak. Two new clauses have been selected; two times six or seven is 12 or 14; we have been given only an hour. Even my right hon. and learned Friend may rapidly conclude, having divided an hour by 14, that only a few minutes will be left for each Member to consider the new clauses. In all conscience, does he consider that adequate?

Mr. Hogg: It may or may not be adequate. I am not trying to pretend that I have been following the debate on the Bill very closely. I am prepared to accept, as a basis for argument, that on this occasion there might be adequate time. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst says that that is not the case. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset has already made the point that he will have to cause amendments to be tabled in another place because there is not sufficient time to debate them here. Perhaps my assumption is, therefore, unduly generous.

Mr. Walter: If I may correct my right hon. and learned Friend slightly, he will see from the amendment paper that three new clauses and two amendments were tabled. Although it is not for me or any other hon. Member to question the Speaker's judgment in selecting amendments for debate, I suspect that the allocation of time was such that Mr. Speaker, in his wisdom, could choose only two amendments for discussion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Mr. Speaker would select the amendments that he thought appropriate. He would not be influenced by the time available.

Mr. Walter: I withdraw my suggestion, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Hogg: I was proceeding on the basis that the Speaker's selection was as it is, and I was not seeking to go beyond that. However, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset makes a sound point in saying that amendments will have to be tabled in another place because of the restriction of time. That is a serious observation.

Although it is true that there are only two new clauses to debate, hon. Members often use debates on particular amendments or new clauses as an occasion on which to articulate concerns arising out of the issues that are their subject. That is an important mechanism, whereby hon. Members can bring to the Floor of the House constituency-based problems and refer to them in the debates on new clauses. If one cuts down such debate, either by cutting the number of new clauses to be debated or by restricting the time available, the opportunity for right hon. and hon. Members to articulate such concerns is inevitably lost. That is a sad state of affairs.

I must also remind the House that the first occasion on which the House as a whole has the opportunity to discuss the detail of any Bill is on Report. We are frequently told by Ministers—no doubt the same thing happened when I was on the Government Front Bench—that the new clauses are but a reflection of what was promised in Committee. That may be true, but it does not satisfy or conclude the argument, because that is the first occasion on which the House as a whole—even if we are but 12 in number now—can consider those new clauses and amendments. Promises, assurances or statements made in Committee are neither here nor there, so far as hon. Members who did not serve on the Committee are concerned. A process is being put in place that tramples on democracy.

I know that I have said all this before, and I shall say it again. At the root of the matter, democracy is being denied. The Government are denying democracy and deliberately trampling on it. That is a scandal, and I shall take every opportunity to bring that fact to the attention of the country. I hope that at the forthcoming election, the people of this country will understand that this is a tyrannical and despotic Government.

4.44 pm

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): The programme motion offers a brief timetable for seeing the Bill through. I have seen crocodile tears being shed, and a bit of a song and dance going on, rather like in a university debating society. However, the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) said that an important principle is at stake, and there is no doubt about that.

Two new clauses have been selected; there are eight clauses in the Bill. Two other possible amendments were tabled for debate, but not selected. The Government have decided to pass the Bill in its entirety without accepting any amendments—or, at least, not wanting any votes on them. The reason is that the Bill impinges on constitutional issues relating to the Government of Wales Act 1998, and perhaps we shall get to the bottom of some of them in the short debate that follows this one. I do not think that the Government will give way on any of them because there are important legal principles at stake, but I am sure that they will be examined in great detail in another place. We shall see what the Bill looks like when it returns to the House and we debate the Lords amendments.

Most hon. Members agree on the need for an independent Children's Commissioner for Wales, and the Liberal Democrats do not want to delay that process. However, we also want the best possible independent Children's Commissioner, who will serve the children of

[Mr. Richard Livsey]

Wales and in Wales. There is undoubtedly an element of determination behind the Bill, and it would be better for us to get on and to debate it on Third Reading. This is no time for pontificating; it is time for getting on.

4.47 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I share the view of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) on this matter. It is incumbent on the House, each time the Government introduce a programme motion, to give it proper consideration. However, these programme motions are guillotines: we are being subjected to serial guillotines.

The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths) rather mischievously implied that such proceedings had been perfectly routine under the previous Conservative Government, and that things were no different now. The hon. Gentleman's brain has obviously been addled by his years in Europe. He must remember that, during the glorious 18 years of the previous Government, when a Bill had had very lengthy consideration in Committee and been gratuitously obstructed by the Labour party in opposition, the then Government would introduce a motion to curtail debate and to move on. However, the Labour Government have routinely guillotine Bills from the off before having any idea of the likely length of time needed for proper consideration in Committee, on Report and on Third Reading. That is a key difference, which I hope that even the hon. Member for Bridgend will concede on reflection.

Mr. Win Griffiths: The right hon. Gentleman also served in Europe. I do not want to cast aspersions on his time there and the effect on his brain. However, does he recall the time when we served on a Committee that considered an education Bill in 1992–93? The proceedings were guillotined well before the 100 hours to which the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) referred as the magic number that the previous Government had used.

Mr. Forth: I do not want to fall out with the hon. Gentleman, with whom I have perfectly civilised relations outside the Chamber. Perhaps we could settle the matter over a cup of tea. I remember matters differently. When I first became a Member of Parliament in 1983, along with you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it was not unusual for a large Bill—the Bill to which the hon. Gentleman referred had approximately 350 clauses and 50 schedules—to receive 150 or more hours of consideration in Committee before a guillotine was even suggested. Guillotines were introduced after less time much later. However, today we are discussing not hours, but minutes. We are being allowed only minutes in which to consider key stages of a Bill.

It is all very well for my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) to agree with the Minister that the proceedings were consensual and chummy and that people were on first name terms and so on. That is beside the point. Every Bill deserves proper scrutiny. The more horrendously consensual the approach, the more scrutiny the measure deserves. Some of the worst legislation to emanate from this place had the ghastly appellation, "all-party support". In the legislative world, there is nothing worse than a Bill with all-party support. It inevitably ends up as sloppy, loose and damaging.

It is not good enough to say that the Lords will sort matters out after we have been happily consensual, failed to do our job, or rushed matters through for political reasons or because we believed that a particular measure would be attractive to the electorate. It is even worse to rush through a measure because we believe it has a title that is too good to oppose. All those reasons apply to the Bill. It is unacceptable to rely on Tony's cronies, the unelected Members of another place, properly to scrutinise a Bill that we have fiddled through.

Let me remind hon. Members of the Government's intention. They tell us that we have from 5.15 to 6.15 pm on Report; they allow the House of Commons only one hour. It has been pointed out that the amendment paper contains two new clauses. New clauses are serious provisions and deserve proper scrutiny. The fact that they have been selected shows that they are important and deserve the House's full attention.

It is possible that 400 hon. Members could turn up in the next half hour, pack the Chamber and want to contribute, as they are entitled to do, to consideration of new clauses 2 and 3. My arithmetical ability just about extends to making the calculation: 400 Members of Parliament, each considering two new clauses in an hour. There is not enough time for each hon. Member to have a proper opportunity to do that.

To be fair, the position that I outlined was theoretical. Let us consider the real position. Three Labour Back Benchers, one Plaid Cymru Member, one Liberal Democrat and, happily, four Opposition Back Benchers are present. Even if no other hon. Member attends the debate, seven or eight hon. Members may wish to participate. Seven hon. Members multiplied by two new clauses is 14. Sixty minutes divided by 14 equals a maximum of four or five minutes for each hon. Member to make a contribution on the new clauses.

I do not know whether Labour Back Benchers believe that they can represent their constituents adequately on the matter that we are considering. I am sure that they will return to their constituencies and issue press releases that state that the matter is very important, the Government are wonderful, the atmosphere is consensual, the public are lucky to have the Bill and that they have been dying for such a measure. I bet they do not add, "By the way, I had four minutes to discuss it on your behalf in the House of Commons." However, that is the time that the Government are allowing hon. Members to discuss the matter on behalf of their constituents. It is inadequate; hon. Members should not be put in that position. I almost feel sorry for Labour Members when I think of them having to account to their electors for their Government allowing them only four minutes each to consider the new clauses.

Mr. Hogg: Is not the point further aggravated by the fact that we are considering new clauses? In effect, our proceedings will constitute Second Reading of the new clauses. What has happened to the Committee stage? There will be no detailed discussion, and that makes the position even worse.

Mr. Forth: My right hon. and learned Friend is correct. I will not discuss the substance of the new clauses

because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would not want me to do so. However, new clause 2 says that the commissioner

"may at any time give advice to the Assembly".

That could be worth discussing. It might even be somewhat controversial.

New clause 3 talks about

"requiring persons to allow the Commissioner access to institutions which include children to whom this Part applies."

That is important. Allowing somebody called a commissioner access to institutions smacks of what we thought we had put behind us. The commissioner will have access to institutions with the power of statute behind him. At the very least, that requires considerable thought. I wish we could table amendments to the new clauses, because I would be tempted to do so. In fact, that would have to be done by Tony's cronies at the other end of the building, not by the elected House of Commons. The more we consider this matter, the worse it becomes.

The Minister thought that he was being clever when he challenged my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset and asked why, if there was so much interest, there were not more amendments. My hon. Friend pointed out that amendments were tabled and were not selected. We cannot discuss or challenge that, but that is not my point. My point reflects that made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham. The tragedy is that, because hon. Members know that the Government will allow only an hour for the Report stage of a Bill such as this, I suspect that many of them say, "What on earth is the point of tabling amendments when they will almost certainly not receive proper consideration?".

Mr. Hogg: We know that to be the case because my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset said as much in respect of his amendments.

Mr. Forth: There is growing evidence that the arrogant automatic guillotining of legislation in advance of our knowing the nature of the Bill or its amendments or the amount of interest in it—we see it happening before our eyes—is throttling and diminishing hon. Members' interest and participation in the legislative process. There can be no worse condemnation of what the Government are gratuitously doing to this House and the legislative process than the fact that more and more Members of Parliament are being persuaded that they have no role in the legislative process. They are reduced to asking the Prime Minister cringing, sycophantic questions on the few occasions when he appears at the Dispatch Box, and to doing other trivial things. As a result of this ruthless guillotine process, all-party groups are proliferating because those poor creatures do not have anywhere else to go and have nothing to do in the Chamber.

It is not my place to feel sorry for Government Back Benchers, but occasionally I do. They have to go back to their constituency and say, "Don't worry, I took part today in the all-party group on chocolate. You can be assured that I am representing your interests at Westminster because I have attended several important all-party groups on all sorts of important matters." If someone asks whether they participated in the legislative process or scrutinised the Government, they have to say, "No, I did not have time. I worked out that I would have less than a minute to make my contribution on your behalf if I ventured into the Chamber." That conversation will be taking place up and down the country as hon. Members try to give an account of themselves. I bet they are not out spinning or boasting about how much they have influenced the Government. I bet they are telling their constituents that the all-party group on chocolate was as far as they got.

All in all, we find ourselves in a desperate situation. I share—I often do—the sentiment and undertaking given by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham: that each of the programme motions stands on its own and requires the same amount of attention and debate. If I can, I will participate in a Division or, if necessary invite the House—

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): I always enjoy the right hon. Gentleman's attempts to fill up time. I have enjoyed those attempts in Europe, and I enjoy them here. However, I do wish that he would not present the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) as a great martyr—

It being forty-five minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Order [7 November 2000].*

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 254, Noes 134.

Division No. 112] **[5 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth

Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wareing, Robert N
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Don Touhig and
Mr. Ian Pearson.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Livsey, Richard
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian

Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. James Gray and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Children's Commissioner for Wales Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 16th January:

Consideration and Third Reading

1. Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading shall be completed at today's sitting.

2. Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at quarter past Six o'clock.

3. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Seven o'clock.

4. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Consideration of Lords Amendments and further messages from the Lords

5. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any programme motion to supplement this order or to vary it in relation to—

(a) proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments; or

(b) proceedings on any further messages from the Lords,

and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

Children's Commissioner for Wales Bill

Not amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

New Clause 2

ADVICE TO ASSEMBLY AND TO LOCAL AUTHORITIES

'The Commissioner may at any time give advice to the Assembly on—

(a) any changes which the Commissioner thinks should be made, for the purpose of securing improvement in the quality of services provided by the Assembly or local authorities in Wales in the exercise of their functions; or

(b) any other matter connected with the exercise by the Assembly or local authorities in Wales of their functions,

where the exercise of those functions affects children.'.—*[Mr. Walter.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

5.16 pm

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

As was stated in our deliberations on the programme motion, the basic principle of the Bill is not a matter for great debate across the Chamber. In fact, there was a great deal of agreement in Committee about what we wanted to achieve. However, we failed to get the Government to agree to widen the scope of the role of the Children's Commissioner in a number of areas. New clause 2 is part of our general aim of widening the scope of the commissioner's role.

We believe that the Children's Commissioner should have the widest possible powers available to him to enable him to carry out the role of advocate for children in Wales and to look at cases of abuse and the whole range of children's rights, particularly those contained within the UN conventions to which we have signed up. I shall not deal with those points now, because they are outside the scope of the new clause, but no doubt there will be passing references to them on Third Reading.

The new clause deals with the advice that the commissioner can and should give to the Assembly and to local authorities. The Bill as drafted states only that the commissioner may review the effect on children of the exercise of functions of the Assembly or other people. Our new clause goes much further, allowing him to give advice on changes to improve the quality of services provided. The new clause includes all local authorities, while the schedule refers only to county councils and county borough councils.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): The hon. Gentleman's new clause makes an important statement about the functions of the commissioner. However, as clause 2 gives the commissioner extremely wide-ranging powers, is that not sufficient to cover the points that he raises? The hon. Gentleman will be familiar with clause 2, but I remind the House that it amends section 72 of the Care Standards Act 2000 and that it states:

"The principal aim of the Commissioner in exercising his functions"—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. This is developing into a speech. I think that the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) will have understood the point that is being made.

Mr. Walter: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

[Mr. Walter]

Before tabling the new clause, we were of course cognisant of the existing wording of the Bill. However, we did not feel that it was sufficient to achieve the purpose that the new clause is intended to serve. Although I am intrigued by the comments of the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths), his short intervention does not convince me that the existing clause meets that purpose.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Is not the reason why the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths) is wrong that clause 2 is only a statement of the purpose or objective of the commissioner and does not actually give the commissioner powers? It is the new clause that would confer powers on the commissioner.

Mr. Walter: My right hon. and learned Friend has rightly noted that we are trying in the new clause to give the commissioner powers that were not previously conferred.

We discussed the matter in Committee, although we did not force it, or any other matter, to a vote. In Committee, the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey)—who is in the Chamber and who may want to speak—moved an amendment stating that

"The Commissioner may make appropriate representations . . . about any matter affecting the rights or welfare of children ordinarily resident in Wales."

He said:

"It would mean that the remit of the commissioner could encompass all aspects of the rights and welfare of children who are ordinarily resident in Wales. The amendment would allow the commissioner to be a truly independent watchdog and champion of children, and would strengthen the Bill in four key ways."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee F*, 23 January 2001; c. 61.]

We expressed our concern that the definition in that amendment was far too wide. It would have allowed the commissioner to comment on anything, including family life. We have always made clear our anxiety about such an extension to the commissioner's powers.

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): The motives behind the new clause are laudable. We want to improve the quality of the services. However, would the provision not create even more confusion concerning who exactly was responsible for certain matters? The new clause refers to giving advice; that is extremely subjective—such advice could easily be ignored. It refers to the quality of services. What is the quality of services? Perhaps the drafting of the Bill is at fault because it is not tight enough but perhaps there should be some reciprocity in the process.

Mr. Walter: The hon. Gentleman is correct that there is a fault in the drafting, which is why we are proposing the new clause. I hope that, as I develop my argument, the hon. Gentleman will understand why it would be a useful addition to the Bill and to the scope of the Children's Commissioner.

If the amendment proposed by the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire in Committee had been taken at face value, it would have allowed the commissioner to take upon himself powers to act rather like a health education authority. He would have been able to set out what was good practice and to tell parents that good practice was to do X, Y and Z. We do not want him to do that. It is right that he should consider child abuse in the home and, as we argued in Committee, problems in non-devolved bodies and cross-border issues. However, we were concerned that he should not somehow become the arbiter of good practice in bringing up children in normal family situations.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) said in Committee, it is clear that, under that amendment, the Children's Commissioner could say anything about anything. We have made it clear that we do not wish the commissioner to be handcuffed, but confusion could arise about whether he could make pronouncements willy-nilly about family life styles and so on. That is not to say that we do not want him to refer to abuse that takes place in the home. We want his remit to cover abuse; what we do not want is for him to have a general remit that covers the various types and qualities of family life styles.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Will the hon. Gentleman clarify whether, under new clause 2, the commissioner could make representations about the adequacy of services for homosexual young people or young people who are seriously questioning their sexuality?

Mr. Walter: New clause 2 would give the commissioner the power to advise local authorities about the services that they provide for children. If a local authority offers services specifically geared towards children who are in the circumstances to which the hon. Gentleman refers, that would fall within the Children Commissioner's remit. However, giving advice in those circumstances to children in a normal family environment would not fall within his remit.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) *rose—*

Mr. Rogers *rose—*

Mr. Walter: I am very conscious of the fact that, as we said in the debate on the programme motion, there is only a limited amount of time available. However, I understand that hon. Members want to intervene, so I shall give way—briefly, I hope—to the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd).

Mr. Llwyd: Is not the crux of the argument whether the definition of the word "review" includes giving advice? Local authorities and the Assembly are, by virtue of schedule 2, bodies that come under the Bill. If the Minister were to say that the word "review" included giving advice, new clause 2 might be otiose. It is up to the Minister to respond on that point.

Mr. Walter: I shall obviously be interested in the Minister's response, but I do not think that using the word "review" necessarily means that the commissioner can advise local authorities. That is the reason why we have tabled new clause 2. We believe that the commissioner should have the power to give advice to local authorities.

Mr. Rogers: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. I become very disturbed when he talks about closing down the commissioner's remit on what he terms

normal family situations. Given that most abuse takes place within families—what happens in institutions is dramatic and should not take place—the general suggestion that families should be left alone will leave many thousands of children vulnerable. I should be very much disturbed if the commissioner's remit were not extend to that.

Mr. Walter: What disturbs me is the suggestion that most families are somehow guilty until proven innocent in such matters. Clearly, the commissioner's responsibilities include child abuse that takes place in family situations. Those powers are already vested in local authorities and social services departments; they already exist. The concern that we expressed on Second Reading and in Committee was that the commissioner would suddenly become the arbiter of good practice within a family situation. It is quite right that the commissioner should be the arbiter of good practice for children in care and children at risk, but not in a normal family situation.

5.30 pm

I fear that we have digressed. The new clause would cover the issues that I have mentioned and would deal with any function that the Assembly carried out in relation to children. It would also deal with incidents in which the Assembly failed to carry out a duty. There was broad agreement in Committee on that aim. I recall that the Liberal Democrat and Plaid Cymru representatives and some Labour Back Benchers all supported the aim and moved similar amendments to try to force this principle through. The Government made little response to our arguments in Committee, but this new clause would strengthen the powers of the commissioner and would be very much in the interests of children in Wales.

Mr. Llwyd: I shall be brief. By virtue of schedule 2A, the National Assembly and local government are bodies that come under the general purview of the clause. Therefore, the commissioner will have a right to review the exercise of functions by the Assembly and other persons, including local government.

I support the general thrust of the new clause; at the very least, it is a good probing new clause. The issue turns on whether the word "review" includes giving advice. In my respectful submission, it is inconceivable that the word "review" would not include giving advice. If the commissioner were to review a situation that was far from tolerable or far from acceptable and he were unable to give advice, his post would be virtually worthless. He would merely report, but would not be able to make recommendations. That would fly in the face of the Welsh Assembly's document, "A Children's Commissioner for Wales", which says:

"We want the Commissioner to ensure that children and young people are listened to and enabled to play an active part",

and that they come into

"policy-making, planning processes, and provision for all relevant services."

The Minister would persuade hon. Members fairly easily if he said that the word "review" included the giving of advice. I find it inconceivable that it should not. If it does, I suggest, with respect to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter), that the new clause might be otiose.

Ms Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): I shall speak briefly to agree generally with the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd). I, too, find it inconceivable that the word "review" would not cover the suggestions that are made in the new clause.

The remarks of the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) on the family are a distraction from what the Bill seeks to do. It reflects badly on the Conservative party that it has taken this opportunity to throw up this issue. We should concentrate on the wording of the new clause, and I think that its provisions are covered by the current wording of the Bill. I shall be interested to hear what my hon. Friend the Minister says when he winds up the debate.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I apologise for not taking part in the proceedings on the Bill's earlier stages. I once worked as a social worker in a children's home and, as a member of the Select Committee on Education and Employment, I have taken a keen interest in the early years of children's development. A few weeks ago, the Committee published a report on that subject.

A couple of years ago in the House I raised the issue of au pairs. I mention that for the following reason. There are many areas over which the commissioner has not been given jurisdiction but where, nevertheless, children may be at risk of harm. On the other hand, the commissioner has been given jurisdiction over, for example, the behaviour of teachers. Teachers are governed by the law of the land and are extremely well trained in handling children. One of the advantages of new clause 2 is that it would be possible for the commissioner to advise the Assembly on new areas to which his jurisdiction might be extended. I have in mind the issue of child carers.

During the Select Committee inquiry into the situation in Wales, as well as in England, we understood there to be something of a conflict. On the one hand, there is the need to have the highest quality of child care in the home so that mothers who want to work can do so. On the other hand, many working mothers do not attract a high level of pay. If the costs of paying for child care rise too much because the standards required are so high, many mothers who can now afford child care in the home will not be able to do so. If the commissioner were to recommend that his jurisdiction should extend into that sphere, I hope that that conflict, which is particularly relevant in Wales where low pay is an issue, would be borne in mind.

An issue arose in relation to au pairs two years ago, and I warned the Government about it. It continues in my constituency. Agencies that are active there but serve the whole country tell me that there is a problem. Since August 1997, au pairs have no longer been required to register with the police once they have been here for six months. That has had a bad effect on how we keep checks on that level of child care. Although we want to encourage cultural exchange with other countries—that is the purpose of the au pair scheme—inexperienced young people come to look after our children and the authorities have no idea whether they are doing the job properly. A commissioner given an advisory role in the Assembly could look into such matters and advise the Assembly that, although the Government in Whitehall were not prepared to reintroduce a registration system for au pairs, it might be appropriate in Wales.

The Select Committee also looked into the issue of smacking children. The all-party Select Committee has striven in all cases to reach a unanimous view by the time

[Mr. Nick St. Aubyn]

we produce a report—despite evidence today on another report. We took a great deal of evidence on smacking by child carers and whether it should be regulated by law. Many of us who instinctively feel that there should never be a law against parents smacking—what parents do to their children will always be restrained by love—nevertheless believe that there should be a legal restraint on child carers. That was the Committee's unanimous decision.

While we were reaching that decision, and the Minister concerned knew that we were reaching it, she conducted her own focus group research of a few hundred parents and concluded, based on that very small group, that it would be unpopular. Without waiting for our recommendation, she declared that there would be no such restraint on child carers.

Ms Julie Morgan: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that at this very moment a consultation exercise is taking place in Wales about whether child carers should be allowed to smack children in their care. The indications are that in Wales it will not be allowed.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I welcome that information. I was not aware of it, and I am grateful to the hon. Lady.

If we are to have a Children's Commissioner for Wales, we would want the commissioner to be involved in consultation in this area. It is not clear to me whether, in the absence of new clause 2, it will be possible for the commissioner to play a formal role rather than a series of informal roles, which I gather the Minister has intimated during previous proceedings would be appropriate. If we are to have a formal post, and it is to be paid, there should be formal responsibilities.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the Bill. I have only a few insights to offer. I am sure that we should not be proceeding with such haste in respect of Wales without also considering the situation in England. If the new commissioner were to be given a wider remit under new clause 2, I would hope that he could give advice to the National Assembly for Wales on how to tell the Westminster Parliament—and, so long as we have a Labour Government for the next few months, a Labour Government—how to get its act together so that we have consistent provision of advice and a consistent framework so that children moving from one part of the country to another are given a seamless service by those in charge of them.

Mr. Rogers: As the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) said, the new clause is useful in that it enables us to consider various issues. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will acknowledge that any review should mean advice, or that the commissioner has the right to give advice beyond that. However, I am disturbed by some of the supporting arguments of Opposition Members, especially the continual reiterating of the argument that the commissioner does not really have a role within the family structure.

My first reservation, as I said in Committee, is that I would hate to see a tsar of child care telling local authorities that they must do this and that. Local authorities must be left to do their job, but they have manifestly failed to do so. That is why we are introducing the post of Children's Commissioner for Wales. If the commissioner is to be able to do anything, he must be in a position to lay down what is good practice. He must then ensure that local authorities implement at least that minimum level of good practice.

The Opposition are putting forward the idea that there will be somebody knocking at the door of family homes in the middle of the night and prying. That is nonsensical. As most child abuse takes place in families, there must be a way of adopting that approach eventually, but the commissioner does not need to do it. We must ensure that local authorities carry out their duties.

Mr. Walter: By means of the new clause, we want the commissioner to be able to give advice to local authorities on good practice. Part of good practice is being able to pick up at an early stage any cases of child abuse which, under current legislation, would come within the remit of the local authority's social services department. My references to the commissioner not being intrusive on the family were with respect to an amendment tabled in Committee which would have given him the power to lay down good practice within families, which I think is inappropriate.

Mr. Rogers: I beg to differ on that issue.

I return to the substance of the new clause. I have reservations about just giving advice and the quality of the process. I hope that the Minister will take cognisance of the fact that there is not any feedback or reciprocity in the suggested process. One can give advice ad nauseam, but whether it is taken up and acted on is another matter. Until the commissioner has a specific function in that respect, there will always be a weakness in the general process.

5.45 pm

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): I shall make just a few points, as most of those that I was going to make have already been made. I stress that it is important that the new clause broadens and extends powers. The hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) rightly pointed to amendments that I tabled in Committee, which extended powers much more widely than does new clause 2.

Obviously, "advice" is the key word. Reference has been made to the quality and standard of services provided by the Assembly and local authorities. If there is to be a children's champion—a Children's Commissioner for Wales—he must oversee a service with an extremely high standard. My experience of local authorities in Wales is that, on the whole, they are conscientious and want to carry out their tasks. Very often, however, they are underfunded. The standards and improvements that the commissioner would, I am sure, wish to instate will sometimes not be attainable because of lack of funding.

Two issues are involved. Crucially, funding of the National Assembly for Wales, which comes via the Welsh block, is decided here through negotiations and is eventually negotiated by the Secretary of State with the Assembly. There ought to be provision in the Welsh block to achieve adequate funding of local authorities and social

services departments within those authorities. That funding often varies because of the different priorities of different local authorities in Wales.

The role of the Children's Commissioner should include being able to give advice so that standards are maintained and improved. I should like to think that the new clause is a probing one, which tries to ensure that that would be brought about. By the same token, that could be solved by the Minister responding to our debate with a clear statement that "review" and "advice" are virtually the same thing, and that advice can be freely given by the Children's Commissioner for the benefit of children.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I hope that I will be able to satisfy hon. Members on the points that they have made to the Government. I respect the views of the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) on the matters that he raised. However, on reflection, I hope that he, other Opposition Members and my hon. Friends will accept that there is little difference of view—dare I say, no difference?—between the Government and Opposition Members on the principle behind new clause 2. I hope that the hon. Member for North Dorset will accept my assurance that the power to give the advice envisaged is already encompassed in the Bill.

Clause 3 introduces a new power for the commissioner to review the effect on children in Wales of the exercise of any function of the Assembly and of any function of local authorities, as well as other public bodies listed in schedule 2A. That power includes reviewing the effect of the provision of services. Indeed, as has been mentioned, clause 2 states:

"The principal aim of the Commissioner is to safeguard and promote the rights and welfare of children to whom this Part applies."

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan) and the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) mentioned, the Government believe both that the commissioner will be able to report on the outcome of his reviews and that his reports can include recommendations and advice for action. I very much share the view of the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy—and the spirit in which it was expressed—that that is the intention of the Bill; I hope that it reflects the intention of the Opposition's new clause.

The commissioner may also give advice and information to any person in connection with his functions. The Bill therefore provides fully for the intention of the new clause. Indeed, I envisage that giving such advice will be one of the commissioner's central functions. That is the hope of the Government and the National Assembly.

I shall try to cover the points raised in the debate. The key point, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for North Dorset, relates to family policy. The National Assembly for Wales considered the matter. In its report on the Children's Commissioner, the Health and Social Services Committee recommended that the commissioner should focus on policies and services that affect children.

In the Assembly debate on the report, which took place on 7 June last year, it was accepted that it was not the intention that the commissioner should exercise functions, such as investigations, in respect of families. Those powers are rightly held by different bodies accountable to the Assembly.

That does not mean that the commissioner will never comment on issues that affect family life. There are many issues affecting children on which he may want to bring broad conclusions to the attention of the Assembly or, informally, to the attention of Government. I remind the hon. Member for North Dorset that his colleague in the Assembly, David Melding, helpfully clarified the fact that a fully effective Children's Commissioner will be available to offer great support to parents, without undermining the responsibility of the family in any way. Given the general principle that we held throughout Committee—that it is not the prime function of the commissioner to investigate individual cases—I hope that I have dealt with the point.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) has left the Chamber, as he contributed to our short debate. He mentioned a range of issues relating to child care. I hope that he will reflect on what I shall say when he has an opportunity to read *Hansard* on the train in the near future.

Provided that the services are regulated by the National Assembly, the commissioner has a direct responsibility, under the Bill, to examine those areas. For areas not regulated by the Assembly, he does not have that direct responsibility, and those are areas that we can consider.

I had intended to answer the point made by the hon. Member for Guildford about England, but as he is not present I shall leave that for another day. Perhaps he will reflect on his contribution and consider whether he wants to write to me about those matters. He spoke only seven or eight minutes ago, so it is important that he should allow the Government the opportunity to respond.

The final point relates to the fact that the post of commissioner is a statutory office. It therefore has functions conferred upon it by law, but those functions are guided by the principle that the National Assembly for Wales has responsibilities, which are the areas that the commissioner will examine.

As I said repeatedly in Committee, in the course of his work the commissioner may receive representations on a range of issues, including non-devolved matters. The commissioner is perfectly entitled to bring those matters to the attention of the relevant Government Departments. That does not give him substantive functions in non-devolved areas, nor will he have formal power to require information in relation to such matters, but he will be able to make informal comments.

I am pleased that the hon. Member for Guildford is back. I was not trying to disparage him in his absence, but I have responded to some of the points raised in his contribution. I hope that he will read my response.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I hope that the Minister will accept my apologies for being temporarily absent from the Chamber.

Mr. Hanson: In the spirit of close co-operation that existed in Committee and on the Floor of the House, I graciously accept that. None of my comments were intended to disparage the hon. Gentleman, but in his absence it was difficult to respond to his comments.

I shall deal now with the hon. Gentleman's point about England. Obviously, the Bill is the product of devolution. The National Assembly and the Government are working in partnership to establish a Children's Commissioner for

[Mr. Hanson]

Wales. I understand that the Northern Ireland Assembly has expressed the wish to establish a children's commissioner for Northern Ireland. The British Government will examine the implications and reflect on that as it relates to Government policy for England. The Scottish Executive will also have opportunities to reflect in due course.

I hope that I have reassured the hon. Member for North Dorset. I emphasise my belief that there is no difference of view between the Government and the Opposition on the principle of the new clause. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not press it to a Division, that he accepts my explanation and that he will ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Mr. Walter: I am conscious that only 20 minutes remain because of the pernicious guillotine under which we are working, so I shall not say an awful lot. I accept the Under-Secretary's assurances and I hope that the practice of the commissioner will allow him to give the advice that we sought to insert in the Bill through the new clause. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 3

RIGHT OF ACCESS TO INSTITUTIONS

'( ) In section 74(3) of the Care Standards Act 2000 (examination of cases) before paragraph (a) insert—

"(a1) requiring persons to allow the Commissioner access to institutions which include children to whom this Part applies;".'.—*[Mr. Win Griffiths.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Win Griffiths: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

I am glad that we have the opportunity to debate the new clause. The Standing Committee's debate on access and the helpful letter that the Under-Secretary circulated to its members mean that we can deal with the proposal within the time allowed.

During the debate in Committee, it was recognised that the hierarchy of supervisions, if I can call it that, already contained provision for the social services inspectorate to access institutions in which children were in care. However, one of the points made by the Waterhouse report was that the social services inspectorate sometimes did not do its job properly. Hon. Members were concerned that the commissioner might occasionally find it essential or worth while to visit a children's home to get a feel for the issues at stake in a complaint that he is considering, even though that might not happen often. He might want to visit an institution if a complaint had general ramifications for the way in which children's services are provided in Wales. Although it will not be the commissioner's role to investigate each of the complaints that are received, some of them may involve a general concern. He would be acting well within his powers if he were to make an investigation in respect of such complaints.

The Committee listened to the Under-Secretary's words about the role of the social services inspectorate and his assurances that the commissioner would not need to make such visits very often. He told us that he would consider how the commissioner might ensure that he obtained necessary access. I would like to make other hon. Members aware of the letter that he circulated. In relation to examination of particular cases by the commissioner, the letter states:

"given the background that will inform the Assembly's regulations on the types of cases which may be considered, I consider the possibility remote."

It further states that it would be possible for the Assembly to make orders by virtue of regulations under section 74(3) of the Care Standards Act 2000.

After reading the letter, I went on to read that section 74 of that Act ensures that the Assembly would have power to

"make provision for the examination by the Commissioner of the cases of particular children to whom this Part applies."

It goes on to state:

"The regulations may include provision about . . . the circumstances in which an examination may be made"

and

"the procedure for conducting an examination, including provision about the representation of parties."

On reflection, I felt that the Under-Secretary had pointed out a way in which access could be dealt with.

6 pm

In his letter, the Minister wrote:

"if the Commissioner considered that his examination of a particular case would be aided by a visit to an establishment that came within his jurisdiction, there would be nothing to prevent him from making an appropriate request to the establishment. Provided the request was reasonable, I think a refusal would be very shortsighted, given the adverse publicity that could ensue."

Could an institution refuse the commissioner permission to visit when his intention to visit related to an issue arising from the public funding of a place in that institution? I am not talking about privately funded institutions, although the Minister might wish to consider issues relating to those. I should not have thought that a publicly funded institution would have the right to refuse the commissioner entry when he was investigating a particular case. However, I am satisfied that the Minister's letter covers the main points.

Mr. Llwyd: Although the hon. Gentleman and I are striving to achieve the same end, I take a contrary view. Surely the inspectorate, rather than the commissioner, would be responsible for any such investigation.

Mr. Griffiths: I was trying to go a step further. We have to assume that the commissioner would want to visit only if there had been a problem with the way in which the inspectorate had conducted its own visit. I want to know whether, in the exceptional circumstances I have cited—given that the places would be publicly funded—an institution could refuse entry to the commissioner. There is also the possibility that the commissioner would want to visit an institution with privately funded places.

I hope the Minister can respond to the points that I have raised.

Mr. Livsey: I want to know how the satisfaction expressed by the hon. Member for Bridgend

(Mr. Griffiths) can be wholly realised, and how we can ensure proper access to institutions and proper examination of cases.

In the latter context, the obtaining of information, explanations and assistance is particularly important. Almost regardless of the circumstances, people should have to give the commissioner the necessary information, or require those who hold or are accountable for information to provide the commissioner with explanations or other assistance. That must enable the commissioner to have direct access to institutions.

Standards vary in residential children's homes. Access to such homes is important. The new clause is also relevant to detention centres, although here I am casting the net a bit wider. There are not many detention centres in Wales—I know of only one—and it worries many of us that young people are often miles from their homes, culturally removed and in an alien environment that their parents are unable to visit. That issue—which is currently dealt with under non-devolved regulations—underlines the need in Wales for more facilities of that kind that the Children's Commissioner could examine. The children's ombudspeople in the rest of Europe are empowered to monitor and report on anything affecting children's human rights. Such human rights will be at the forefront of the commissioner's examination of cases that come before him.

The Government have made it clear that the commissioner would not necessarily need the power to enter institutions, and that inspectorates already have the right of access. We debated that issue earlier. However, experience has demonstrated that the greatest risk to children exists in the small number of cases in which the parties are obstructive. The Children's Commissioner would not be involved in the work of such inspectorates, except in the case of an alleged failure.

The Children's Commissioner should have the express power to visit, and have access to, institutions such as residential children's homes, and to obtain information from foster parents—an issue that has not been discussed a great deal—as well as to require bodies or persons to provide information. I should be grateful if the Minister would address those points, because they lie at the crux of the new clause. The jury is out on whether he will be able to convince us.

Ms Julie Morgan: Many of the points that I was going to raise have already been covered, so I shall be brief.

The new clause is important, because the Children's Commissioner should have the specific power of access to institutions, both public and private, in which children are cared for. The issue of the care standards inspectorate has been raised in Committee and in the House. We accept that the inspector's role, as part of a separate agency, is to inspect services for looked-after children, and that the commissioner should not duplicate that role. However, the commissioner should have a specific role in relation to failures of the inspection service.

One of the lessons that we have learned from all the tragedies in Wales and throughout the UK is that children are not always listened to, and that the inspection systems can fail. That is why it is so important that the Children's Commissioner should have the right of access in cases where the inspection system may have failed.

I accept what the Minister said in his letter about the refusal of admittance to any establishment being short-sighted and quite unlikely to happen. However, there have been major scandals in the care system. People who sexually abuse often target the care system and try to get jobs that provide access to vulnerable children. We must do everything in our power to prevent that from happening. Although most institutions are very caring places, we know that there is a network of abusers who target the care system. Granting the commissioner the right of access would help in the process of opening up the care system to scrutiny. It would also make a difference to the behaviour of some of the very dangerous people who sometimes get into the system.

The Minister said in his letter that the statutory right to physical access was, by its nature, an invasive power that should be granted only when absolutely necessary. In many cases, the institutions in question would be children's homes, so we should be careful about giving people the power to enter them. However, in view of all the problems that have arisen, an invasive power—as the Minister described it—is necessary. It would not be used willy-nilly. The commissioner will work strategically and would not demand entry to children's homes as a matter of course. The new clause gives the commissioner more teeth and sends a clear signal that we will not tolerate any more abuse in children's homes in Wales. That is an important step towards safeguarding all our children in Wales.

Mr. Llwyd: The third paragraph of the letter that has been mentioned states that the Children's Commissioner's work includes neither regulation nor inspection. I do not take much comfort from that. I accept what is said in a later paragraph about when the inspectorate has failed, but it is a bit late to act at that point, when traumatic reports will doubtless be made.

As the hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan) said, we need to allow the commissioner to move in sufficiently early. There is nothing wrong with the new clause; it does not involve duplication. The NSPCC is worried about the matter that we are discussing and supports the new clause. Plant yng Nghymru—Children in Wales—also strongly favours including such a right of access in the Bill.

As the hon. Lady said, some abusers are sophisticated, and every possible measure must be used against them. The new clause constitutes a minor amendment. If the Minister claims that it is substantial and that it somehow alters the Bill, I respectfully remind him that at least two measures that are being considered grant an invasive power. For example, the Vehicles (Crime) Bill grants a new, sweeping power to move into scrap yards and places where number plates are produced. If that is allowed, surely we can permit a power that will protect children who may be at risk. I ask the Minister to reconsider.

Mr. Hanson: I have little time, but I shall try to deal with the points as best I can. First, as I made clear in Committee and in the letter to hon. Members, I want to ensure that the Children's Commissioner has all the necessary powers to prevent a recurrence of the circumstances that led to the Waterhouse report.

The Bill gives the commissioner an impressive armoury. First, he will be able to inquire into, and report on, the actions of the care standards inspectorate. As I

[Mr. Hanson]

said in my letter, regulations under section 74 of the Care Standards Act 2000 grant the commissioner the right to information, explanations and other assistance in making such inquiries. He will be able to inquire into the actions of a body that runs a children's home or an institution and the relevant social services departments. Those inquiries can be strongly supported by the right of access to information, explanations and assistance. Such powers will be more than helpful if the commissioner decides that there is a reason to investigate a social services department or even the care standards inspectorate.

If the commissioner believed that it was necessary for him to visit premises, nothing in the Bill would prevent him from requesting a visit. It is unlikely that such a request would be refused. If that happened, I am sure that the commissioner would make a strong report to the Assembly on the reasons for the refusal and the grounds on which he wanted to examine the premises in the first place.

In answer to questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths), all premises, private and public, have the right to refuse the commissioner access. However, let us put that in context. The commissioner would make such a request only because of the failure of the inspectorate system, which he examines. That system will undertake regular inspections; it is the commissioner's duty to inspect the inspectors.

Fewer than 10 per cent. of looked-after children in Wales are in homes; most are in foster care. I hope that the system is sufficiently robust. On the basis of my letter and my comments today, I hope that my hon. Friend will withdraw the motion.

Mr. Win Griffiths: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for the reassurance that he has given. Perhaps the Government will reconsider such a provision in another place, but as there are probably powers to enable the Assembly to make appropriate orders, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Order for Third Reading read.

6.15 pm

Mr. Hanson: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Labour party went into the elections for the National Assembly for Wales committed to the creation of an independent statutory Children's Commissioner for Wales. The Government have shared that commitment by acting swiftly and sympathetically to ensure that the required legislation is put in place. I believe that the whole process has been a testament to successful partnership working between the Government and the Assembly, and—to give credit to those who served on the Committee—between the parties in the House and the Assembly. We achieved a speedy passage of the Bill in Committee and on Report.

Last year, the Government acted quickly to amend what was then the Care Standards Bill to establish the office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales and to give the commissioner powers that reflected the recommendations in the Waterhouse report. They relate to children's services regulated under the Care Standards Act 2000, and represented the speediest possible response to Sir Ronald Waterhouse's recommendation of the establishment of a Children's Commissioner for Wales. The Secretary of State's announcement, made so speedily after Sir Ronald's recommendations in February last year, is a testament to the Government's commitment to tackle child abuse, in partnership with the National Assembly.

Wales now has its first Children's Commissioner, Peter Clarke. I take this opportunity to wish him well in his post, which he will take up on 1 March—just over a year after the publication of the Waterhouse report. The Government have introduced legislation to extend the commissioner's powers in response to the Assembly's vision.

By adding to the scope of the commissioner's functions, the Bill will allow the Assembly to achieve its strategy for a statutory, independent commissioner with a wide-ranging role, who can be—I emphasise this strongly—a champion for all the children and young people in Wales.

The Bill has undergone scrutiny in Committee and I thank Committee members for their constructive contributions. I accept that we have made no amendments, but I believe that there has been an exploration of the Bill and that we have achieved broad consensus around the concept of a Children's Commissioner, which has allowed informed discussion and speedy progress.

I recognise that there are some concerns, but I hope that I have dealt with them in Committee and on Report. There will be opportunities for further discussion in another place—to the satisfaction of all hon. Members of both Houses, I hope.

The Bill will introduce a power for the commissioner to review the effect on children in Wales of the activities of the Assembly, local authorities, health authorities and other public bodies sponsored by the Assembly. The public bodies concerned are not confined to those primarily concerned with services for children. They encompass a wide range of organisations whose actions may impact upon children, such as the Welsh Development Agency, the Sports Council for Wales and the National Museums and Galleries of Wales.

The Bill will back up the widened role by extending the commissioner's powers under the Care Standards Act 2000 to examine cases of particular children, and to assist in particular cases. I pay tribute to Jane Hutt and her Committee in the Assembly and to the officials who have supported the progress of the Bill. Assembly regulations will be set out in detail, but the role potentially applies to the activities of all bodies referred to in the Bill.

The extent of the commissioner's power to review and monitor arrangements for complaints procedures, whistleblowing and advocacy will also be greatly increased by the Bill. This power will be applied to a far wider group of bodies that provide direct services to children in Wales, including local authorities.

I apologise to the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) because I had intended to refer to him in an earlier discussion. He mentioned the problem of funding for local authorities. I can only say—I mean this genuinely—that the £10 billion that the Government have given to the National Assembly as part of the comprehensive spending review represents the most significant increase in public spending in Wales in my

lifetime—and, I suspect, in the lifetime of every hon. Member. It is for the Assembly to determine its expenditure, but I believe that much of it will go to local authorities to support the work that they are undertaking.

The commissioner's role will extend to local authorities, the NHS, schools and training organisations. Eventually, Assembly regulations will be able to give the commissioner the power to require bodies to provide him with information if they are involved in the investigation of individual cases, or if arrangements for complaints, whistleblowing and advocacy are being monitored. Legal sanctions are already available for failure to comply.

In performing all the functions under clauses 2 and 3, the commissioner will have principal aim of safeguarding and promoting the rights and welfare of children in Wales. That is a major step forward for children in Wales, and for the Assembly and the Government. The new functions proposed in the Bill will enable the commissioner to act as a powerful defender of the rights of children. His field will be the whole range of devolved public services in Wales, and his task will be as challenging as it is worth while. I am confident that the Bill will give him the statutory backing that he needs.

The House, the Government and the National Assembly for Wales have to do everything in our power to ensure that the horrors dealt with in the Waterhouse report are never repeated. I believe that the establishment of the Children's Commissioner and the powers that the House and the Assembly wish him to exercise will ensure, as far as we are able to, that those horrors are never repeated.

6.21 pm

Mr. Walter: It is unfortunate that our proceedings on the Bill are so rushed. I shall have to keep my remarks relatively brief.

In all our consideration of the Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and I have been consistent and positive in supporting the concept of establishing a Children's Commissioner. I thought that the Minister was a little remiss in claiming credit for the Labour party, while failing to point out that it was my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition who, when he was Secretary of State for Wales, established the Waterhouse inquiry, which led to this legislation.

Last year, my colleagues who were involved in the consideration of the Care Standards Act 2000 supported the provisions establishing the Children's Commissioner for Wales. Even at that time, however, they questioned the lack of an equivalent provision for England.

The National Assembly for Wales has expressed its concerns about some of the limitations on the commissioner's remit. On Second Reading, in Committee, and earlier today on Report, we have alluded to some of the Bill's remaining defects. There is still a lack of clarity in distinguishing between the rights and responsibilities of parents and those of the Children's Commissioner. I have no doubt that those matters will be revisited in another place.

The Bill's most significant defect, however, arises from the devolution settlement. The public bodies in Wales that fall within the Bill's scope are listed in schedules to the Bill. However, the Government of Wales Act 1998 did not create a world in which all child abuse would be committed only by institutions subject to the supervision of the National Assembly, while those who administer other public bodies in Wales would be sanctified and, by statue, become no threat to children's rights. That is clearly nonsense. The immigration service, the Prison Service, the police and the Army are only a few of the many public bodies that operate in Wales but are not covered by the Bill.

The schedules to the Bill cover the Welsh Language Board, but not Sianel Pedwar Cymru, which is probably the most significant promoter of the language. Such a nonsense would not exist if we had a children's rights commissioner for England and Wales, or for the whole of the United Kingdom. It would not exist, either, if we were to recognise in this limited Bill—it is limited to Wales—that public bodies in Wales are both devolved and non-devolved, and that the commissioner could be responsible not only to the Assembly for activities within its remit, but to the House for non-devolved matters.

We must now look to their lordships to improve the Bill as we seek to improve it. Conservative Members both in Wales and in this place will support such change—which is entirely consistent with what has been said in the Assembly by Members from all parties who want the commissioner's remit to extend not only to public bodies that fall within the scope of the Assembly's powers, but to those within the remit of this place.

We must not lose the plot. The Waterhouse report was about children in care, and the commissioner's primary responsibility must be towards children in care and children at risk. He has to get that right. Then we can look to him to be a key advocate in all other areas of public administration, whether they fall within the scope of the Assembly or of the United Kingdom Departments.

In evidence to the Health Committee in January 1998, the Government said that they were considering the matter as part of a response to the UN committee on compliance with the convention on the rights of the child. The report of the Health Committee, of which I was a member, was more definite. We argued that it was right for the United Kingdom to follow the example of a number of other western countries by creating the post of a children's rights commissioner.

We proposed a commissioner who would have the duty to promote awareness of the rights of the child; highlight ways in which present and proposed policy fails to deliver those rights in practice; conduct formal investigations into alleged breaches of children's rights; ensure that children have an effective means of redress when their rights are disregarded; and carry out and commission research relevant to safeguarding children's rights.

The Conservative party in both Westminster and Cardiff believes that it is appropriate that the commissioner should look after children in the care of local authorities and other public bodies, but we do not believe that the Bill is specific enough about his powers.

The Opposition have specific concerns about protecting the role of the family and of parents. We mentioned some of those on Report. The Bill will give the commissioner a wide remit, and we want to be careful not to allow him to supplant the parent. Parents should always be given the first opportunity to speak up for their children. We have said that, and we will oppose any measure that allows the commissioner to intervene unnecessarily in the family unit.

[Mr. Walter]

We also have concerns that the role of the commissioner is confused. For example, he has not been given jurisdiction over many areas in which children may come to harm, but he has specific roles in respect of schools, where teachers already play a vital part in protecting their pupils' welfare.

We feel that the Bill falls far short of the Assembly's vision. The job of commissioner is an independent post, funded by the Assembly, but the legislation makes no provision for him to be made accountable to Parliament. We believe in an effective commissioner who does not supplant parents' role, who has parents' confidence, whose role extends to all public bodies, and whose function could apply as much to England as it does to Wales.

6.28 pm

Mr. Win Griffiths: Getting the Bill through all its stages in the House has been a triumph. The Government responded very quickly to the Waterhouse report, got the post of Children's Commissioner for Wales established in the Care Standards Act 2000 and, following consultation with the National Assembly, introduced the much wider-ranging powers that the commissioner now has under the Bill.

I am pleased that the Children in Wales Commissioner Campaign Group, which encompasses all the major children's charities in Wales, has welcomed the Bill and is pleased with the way in which the Government have acted, although it would have liked the commissioner, in a more focused and statutory way, to have been given a much wider role. Nevertheless, they have welcomed the Bill and want it to be enacted as soon as possible.

I should like to address some of the matters that the members of the campaign group have raised. They felt that under this Bill the Children's Commissioner would be merely an ombudsman for children's services, and that the post did not aspire to being a human rights institution. However, I believe that clause 2 gives the commissioner a basis for such an aspiration. It states:

> "The principal aim of the Commissioner in exercising his functions is to safeguard and promote the rights and welfare of children to whom this Part applies."

The schedule to the Bill means that any child treated in the national health service comes under the Bill, so any child in Wales can be considered.

Moreover, children who ordinarily live in Wales but who are treated in England, and whose treatment is paid for out of the Welsh purse, will also be covered. Therefore, I am sure that a commissioner with the necessary drive and foresight will be able to use the legislation to ensure that his office is a human rights institution. I have every confidence that Peter Clarke will be able to do that. Children cannot be divided into devolved and non-devolved parts, so it will be important for the commissioner to take that positive view.

The Children in Wales Commissioner Campaign Group set out five essential characteristics for the commissioner. They were that he should be able to set his own agenda, that he should be able to use the framework of the UN convention on the rights of the child as a guide, that he should have a special obligation to maintain direct contact with children, that he should act as a spokesman for children, and that he should promote respect for the views of children throughout society. I believe that the Bill enables the commissioner to do all those things. There is certainly nothing in it to prevent him from doing them.

In Committee, we discussed the campaign group's concerns about how the commissioner would operate. The group wondered whether he would be able to report on primary legislation and potential primary legislation, and whether he would have the right to comment freely on non-devolved matters and functions when they have an impact on children in Wales.

The group was also concerned about whether he would be able to represent the interests of children who are ordinarily resident in Wales but who receive services, or who are accommodated, outside Wales, and whether he would be able to consider and make appropriate representations on any matters that, through consultation and other contact with children and young people in Wales, emerge as key concerns. The responses given by my hon. Friend the Minister at the Dispatch Box and in Committee have made it clear that the commissioner will be able to perform all the functions set out by the campaign group.

Nevertheless, some concerns remain. The Government want the Children's Commissioner for Wales to be successful, and they have a liberal interpretation of the way in which he will operate with the powers granted by the Bill. Perhaps the campaign group is right to wonder whether in 50 years time or so, a different Government might take a less liberal view. By that time, however, I imagine that the success of the commissioner in Wales, using the powers granted by the Bill, will have meant that there will be a role for a commissioner throughout the United Kingdom, with complete statutory backing and all the powers that any of us would ever want him to have. It needs to be emphasised that the commissioner introduced by this Bill will be independent. That is very important.

In conclusion, the problem of the relationship between devolved and non-devolved matters will mean that it is very important for the commissioner to network with, and work closely with, people such as the chief inspector of prisons. In that way, he will be able to make sure that children anywhere in Wales will have his backing when it comes to dealing with people in independent posts such as that. With close co-operation between the commissioner and those who hold similar offices, I am sure that the Bill will be a landmark in the progress that we are making to redress the terrors that children have suffered for far too long in many parts of Wales under the old system.

A new dawn is coming, and I believe that there will be further progress. Let us give the Bill the strongest possible support, to ensure that it is enacted before the election.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Order. As many people wish to make a contribution to this short debate, I ask Members to be as concise as possible.

6.35 pm

Mr. Livsey: I will endeavour to abbreviate parts of my speech, Madam Deputy Speaker.

This is an historic occasion, because the Bill is the first piece of primary legislation specific to Wales since devolution. Liberal Democrats welcome the introduction of a Bill to extend the powers of the Children's Commissioner.

Children are a particularly vulnerable group, as has been demonstrated clearly by the Waterhouse tribunal report on abuse in children's homes in north Wales. I commend every member of the Standing Committee that considered the Bill for the sincerity and motivation that they showed in supporting it. It has been excellent. In some respects, however, the Bill has not met the aspirations of the National Assembly. I believe that technical problems were responsible.

The Liberal Democrats had a manifesto commitment in the National Assembly elections to appoint an independent Children's Commissioner for Wales. It is interesting that no amendments have been accepted during the Bill's passage. I believe that many of the amendments tabled in Committee followed pretty closely the wishes of the National Assembly for Wales.

It should be the duty of the commissioner to represent the views of children and to promote, for example, the implementation of the UN convention on the rights of the child. In debates on that issue, we emphasised that such rights were better discharged at small nation level.

The commissioner cannot comment on the decisions of courts and tribunals. That is to do with the fact that the Assembly only has secondary legislative functions and it points to some inadequacies in the Government of Wales Act 1998. The Government should, in another place, try and tease out, among all the parties in that place, the vexed issue of non-devolved matters that impinge upon children in Wales. There is no doubt that difficulties arise in the context of social security problems, legal problems and matters involving children in care outside Wales.

There are strict limitations on the scope of the Children's Commissioner's powers, as they cover only persons and services over which the National Assembly has responsibility. Obviously, I welcome that as a massive move forward. However, we need an independent commissioner who is able to get involved in any matter that may affect the rights and welfare of children.

The Bill broadens substantially the powers of the commissioner. He should be able to make representations on any matter affecting children in Wales, and the Bill goes a long way to achieving that.

The amendments may have been resisted on the grounds that to accept them would in some way undermine the Government of Wales Act 1998. I do not know whether that is true, but I suspect that it may be. It would appear that the Children's Commissioner would be allowed to make representations only about those matters specifically devolved to the National Assembly. If we examine the 1998 Act, the form of the Bill is understandable.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify how that point relates to the commissioner's responsibilities under schedule 2A in respect of matters that might otherwise fall within the ambit of the chief inspector of education in Wales, who reports back to Westminster rather than to the Assembly?

Mr. Livsey: The hon. Gentleman draws attention to several anomalies. The correct assertion that devolution is a continuing process accounts in part for some of them.

Mr. Hanson: To clarify the matter, the chief inspector of schools in Wales reports to the Assembly.

Mr. Livsey: I am not surprised to hear that. I do not have the Minister's resources, so I was not well enough briefed to make that response to the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn).

It is essential that, eventually, the commissioner's powers be extended to cover primary legislation—to encompass aspects such as social security. It has been argued that if the commissioner has statutory powers to comment on non-devolved matters, he will, in effect, have the power to require information from Departments of the UK Government. I suspect that that might be a problem.

Although the power does not seem unreasonable, strict constitutional rules are being rigorously applied owing to the fact that inadequate powers were devolved to the Assembly. It would thus seem sensible to devolve more powers to Wales and amend the 1998 Act in order to include primary legislative powers for the National Assembly for Wales. It is only a matter of time; undoubtedly, that day will come—but possibly not two or three months before a general election!

6.42 pm

Ms Julie Morgan: I am pleased to speak on Third Reading of the Bill. The measure is important for many reasons. As other hon. Members have pointed out, it is the first Wales-only Bill to be requested by the National Assembly for Wales. In that sense, it is historic. It also establishes the first Children's Commissioner in the United Kingdom, although there are children's commissioners and ombudsmen throughout Europe. The Under-Secretary has already noted that Northern Ireland proposes to appoint a children's commissioner—I very much welcome that.

Many children's charities have campaigned for many years for a commissioner. It is important to pay tribute to them and, especially to the Children in Wales consortium, which lobbied hard for a commissioner. It provided information to help members of the Standing Committee and is wholly committed to improving the lot of children in Wales. As hon. Members have said, children's charities in Wales have made a huge contribution to the measure.

I am pleased that it is a Labour Government who have given time for the Bill. I welcome the cross-party support that the measure received in Committee. It formed part of our manifesto commitment, and that of other parties, during the elections to the Assembly. I was disappointed that the Conservatives debated the programme motion for the full time so that we lost valuable time for discussion of the Bill. That was not in the spirit of the Bill's passage through the House so far.

The Bill has been universally welcomed throughout Wales and the UK. Its swift passage and the time allocated to it have been seen as a recognition of the importance that the Westminster Government attach to

[Ms Julie Morgan]

working with the devolved Assembly. The establishment of a Children's Commissioner is obviously a priority in Wales, but not in England. It is right that devolution should work in that way.

All the children's charities welcome the Bill; the debate has been confined to the range of its powers. Although many and varied amendments were debated in Committee, the main thrust of the discussion throughout has been the commissioner's relationship to non-devolved matters. We have made progress in that respect. For example, we now know that the commissioner can comment on any matter that affects children in Wales. Of course, that includes non-devolved matters, such as children in prison. That issue has been raised frequently, because there is enormous concern in Wales about children who are in prison—in some cases, in England and far away from home—and someone must be able to speak on their behalf. We have been able to make it clear that the commissioner can comment on those issues as well as others, such as social security.

We want the commissioner to tackle the curse of poverty that affects children in Wales. Obviously, he is to do that, he must be able to comment on the benefits system and other non-devolved issues. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths) said, it is difficult to split children's issues into little pieces. The Government's thrust is to try to work with the whole person and all aspects of children's lives.

Mr. Rogers: I am sure that my hon. Friend does not intend to suggest that the Bill has been introduced simply because of devolution in Wales. Obviously, the mechanics of devolution have allowed the Bill to be introduced, but the real reason for its existence has nothing to do with Government structures; it has to do with the fact that a horrendous scandal took place in Wales, and with the child abuse that led to the report.

Ms Morgan: The Bill is certainly a response to the scandals in Wales, but it is not possible to deny that devolution produced the Assembly and that it has seized the opportunity to set up the commissioner. We want to treat the problems of children as a whole, so the commissioner has to have responsibility for all children in Wales, not just those who receive certain services. I would welcome further clarification on how the commissioner can respond to non-devolved matters and on how he can comment on them.

Tremendous progress has been made. The Bill began with the proposal's inclusion in the Labour party manifesto. There has been an extensive consultation process in Wales. The National Assembly's Health and Social Services Committee's in-depth consultations led to its report, and the proposals have now reached the House. The House has extended the powers to include not only social services and children in regulated care, but all the Assembly's devolved areas.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend said, we hope that the Bill makes speedy progress so that it can be in place before a possible general election. That we have come this far is a triumph of everyone's working together. I wish the commissioner all the best in his new job. One of the most important things that I hope he will be able to do is communicate with the children of Wales—an issue raised by all the members of the Committee. We want him to hear what they have to say, because they do not have a voice or a formal means of putting forward their views. We want him to be in dialogue with the children of Wales and thus to inform life in Wales.

Commissioners and ombudsmen in other European countries have been very successful in getting children's views heard and using them to influence legislation. Although the Assembly cannot legislate, I hope that the commissioner will influence how we run things. I wish Peter Clarke all the best and pay tribute to the Committee and all the Ministers who have brought the Bill this far.

6.49 pm

Mr. Llwyd: As I was the first person to mention a commissioner, back in 1993, I too am very pleased that the Bill has completed its passage through the House. However, the work has not finished. On Second Reading, the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths) said that I was pessimistic about the prospect of amendments being accepted, but I am afraid that I was right. None of them were accepted.

I shall rush through briefly some of the points that concern the very children's charities to which the hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan) referred. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Cymru has written to us this week on two sheets of A4 paper expressing its concerns about the Bill. Although it welcomes the Bill, it does so with grave reservations.

A provision similar to that in section 33 of the Government of Wales Act 1998 should have been included in the Bill to enable the commissioner to speak about any matter affecting children resident in Wales. The commissioner will not be able to talk about any tribunal or court decision that has been made. That is bizarre and ridiculous, and the problem still has not been addressed. Cross-border issues have not been addressed, nor has the point about including the United Nations convention in the Bill. The Assembly requested action on all those points, but that has not been accepted by this House.

I do not wish to sour the atmosphere, but this whole back-slapping business is getting to me a little bit. We have not done half the job yet, and I hope that the other place will complete the work on several issues that concern organisations such as NSPCC Cymru. It is not politically motivated but, like reasonable hon. Members, it is concerned about the well-being of children and young people.

I have mentioned the UN convention, and there are concerns about whistle blowing and the remit on non-devolved matters, which is covered by the provision in the Government of Wales Act 1998. All those points are important and, on Second Reading, I told the hon. Member for Bridgend that there were four principal matters for debate. Those matters remain. I do not doubt the Minister's sincerity for a second and we have received assurances from him. However, I would always prefer matters to be made clear on the face of any Bill that deals with such an important subject.

Earlier, it was suggested that the commissioner will have access to institutions, but he will have access to them only when the system has broken down. Plainly, that will be too late. There would be nothing wrong in allowing the commissioner to have access alongside members of

the inspectorate. That would have provided further supervision over the inspectorate, which would know that, at any time, the commissioner could move in.

Although I know that it does not sound like it, I welcome the Bill. I served on the Committee to improve the Bill. I have spoken to various children charities and they welcome the Bill as far as it goes. This is the second bite at the legislative cherry, but I hope that we do not have to return in another 12 months to find yet more time to deal with shortcomings in the Bill. None of us wants that. There are flaws in the Bill, and I hope that their lordships in the other place will address them.

I hope that any amendments tabled in the other place will not be stamped on in pre-emptive fashion by this House. That would be wrong and contemptible. We are part way to producing a good Bill but much more work needs to be done. Despite the consensus in Committee, I am disappointed that the Government did not consider any amendments. The most glaring example is the amendment that would have included a provision similar to that in section 33 of the Government of Wales Act 1998. It would have gone a long way to allaying all the niggling fears that charities still have.

Mr. Win Griffiths: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that we discussed outside Committee what would happen if there were a legal challenge to any of the commissioner's work that was based on what appears in the Bill and what has been said about it? If there were a dispute about the meaning of the Bill, the Minister's words could be prayed in aid to clarify its intention. A much wider view can therefore be taken of what appears in the Bill.

Mr. Llwyd: Yes, I agree, and a 1992 case makes that point. However, is it not always better to provide clear legislation that does not have to go to the courts for consideration? Surely our job is to make plain on the face of any Bill what we want to say. We should not leave it to the whim of a High Court judge to consider what the Minister said at the time. It is far better to do things properly the first time round.

6.54 pm

Mr. Dawson: I will be brief, as time is extremely short. I welcome this fine Bill. We should heed some of the wise words of the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), but I hear the optimism and good will expressed by my hon. Friends the Under-Secretary and the Members for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan) and for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths).

The only issue that I want to raise is whether my hon. Friend the Minister considers that the Children's Commissioner as currently constituted meets the Paris principles for human rights organisations set down by the United Nations in 1993. At the heart of this is a human rights issue.

6.55 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): It looks as though the last word will fall, paradoxically, to an Englishman. That may be no bad thing because although this is a uniquely Welsh Bill, it may well prove to be a pilot for wider replication across the United Kingdom. All of us, then, would be affected.

I chide the Minister somewhat for claiming exclusive credit for the Government for implementing this measure. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) made clear, it was as a result of the tribunal set up by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition in 1996 when he was Secretary of State for Wales that Sir Ronald Waterhouse reported his findings.

Mr. Win Griffiths: May I point out that, although my hon. Friend the Minister may not have mentioned that on Third Reading today, he referred on Second Reading and in Committee to the role played by the former Secretary of State for Wales, who is now the Leader of the Conservative party?

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman is extremely charitable and I take his point entirely. I thank him for it. I acknowledge that the measure enjoys the support of all parties, even if there are remaining concerns.

The first recommendation by Sir Ronald Waterhouse in his report was that there should be a Children's Commissioner for Wales. Anybody who has read the report cannot have been other than moved by the sheer magnitude of the abuse that was being inflicted on young people who were often placed in the Principality not by Welsh authorities, but by English ones. I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Member for Bridgend that social services did not do their job. I hope that social services departments throughout the country and particularly in Wales do not regard the appointment of the Children's Commissioner as a substitute for the need for them to exercise vigilance themselves. That would defeat the whole object, which is to improve protection for our children. They must note that it is our intention that they should continue to do the job that the public has charged them with.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset issued a caveat that I also share, which is that the commissioner should not supplant the role of parents. All of us in the House believe that it is the principal role of parents to bring up children. We do not wish the commissioner to supplant them.

Mr. Dawson: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that any decent, ordinary parent would welcome their children's rights being expanded, enhanced and developed by this sort of post? Does he further accept that any ordinary, decent parent has nothing whatever to fear from the Children's Commissioner?

Mr. Howarth: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is right. I am most grateful to him for being sparing in his remarks to enable me to contribute. Yes, of course, I am sure that concern for children is the principal motive. However, it is important to get the balance right between the responsibilities of parents and those of society at large, to ensure that the wider needs of children are recognised.

I am sorry if I end on a slightly discordant note. I raised this point with the Secretary of State on Second Reading and I mention it in passing in the hope that the other place may be able to deal with it. The report states:

> We draw the attention of Parliament to the abuse suffered by B between the ages of 16 years and 18 years in circumstances which appear to have made him question his own sexuality for a period. Much of the later abuse was not inflicted by persons in a position of trust in relation to him and there can be no doubt that he was significantly corrupted and damaged by what occurred.

That was the way in which the tribunal—

It being Seven o'clock, MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Order [this day].*

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 January],

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That, for the current Session of Parliament, Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

LANGUAGE OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCEEDINGS

Motion made,

That (1) this House approves the First Report from the Procedure Committee, Session 2000–01 (HC 47); and

(2) the Resolution of 5th June 1996 on the Language of Parliamentary Proceedings be amended accordingly by inserting, after the word 'Wales,', the words 'and at Westminster in respect of Select Committees'.

Hon. Members: Object.

PETITIONS

Didcot Structure Plan

7 pm

Mr. Robert Jackson (Wantage): I rise to present two petitions on the same subject. My position is a delicate one because one of them calls on the Secretary of State for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to call in plans for the proposed expansion of Didcot in my constituency, while the other asks him not to do so. It is my role, as the Member of Parliament representing these petitioners, to represent all of them—whatever their views—without fear or favour, which is why I find myself in an interesting position this evening.

For the record, I shall describe the two petitions. One of them—it is wrapped in elegant green ribbons—comes from the campaign for a sustainable Didcot. It carries some 3,000 signatures. It prays that the Secretary of State should

"a) direct Oxfordshire County Council to pay due regard in its deliberations to all relevant planning guidances and to follow the clear preference expressed by the Panel of the Examination in Public for the north east option; and

b) to use his powers to call in the structure plan for determination should the county council in his view fail to pay such regard."

The other petition, which is bound in an equally elegant green ring-binder, comes from the group of 13 parishes and carries 2,607 signatures. It prays for

"the Secretary of State for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to resist demands for the decision to be called in which, if acceded to, would only undermine the local democratic process in our County"—

that is Oxfordshire—

"and add unnecessarily to the already considerable costs to public funds."

May I put it on record that the painful dilemma that is reflected in these contradictory petitions arises from the Government's requirement that Oxfordshire must accommodate another 40,000 houses by the year 2006, with the prospect of yet more thereafter?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Order. The hon. Gentleman must confine his remarks to the petitions. He must not make a speech.

Mr. Jackson: I shall present the petitions, Madam Deputy Speaker.

To lie upon the Table.

Gas Prices

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

7.3 pm

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): I am grateful for the opportunity to bring to the attention of the House the damage being done to United Kingdom manufacturing industry by the massive hikes in wholesale gas prices. The issue is of great concern to many Members on both sides of the House. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan), who kick-started expressions of concern in the House by tabling an early-day motion a couple of months ago.

I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe in his place, because I know that he and the Government take the issue extremely seriously. When I led a delegation of energy-intensive users to see my hon. Friend a couple of weeks ago, it was clear that he understood the issues and was determined to act sooner rather than later. We saw that action the following day, when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced that Commissioner Monti had acceded to the Government's request to investigate allegations of anti-competitive behaviour by companies using the interconnector pipeline between Britain and Belgium. That was a very welcome announcement indeed. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to provide more detail about that investigation and—which is most important—say when it is likely to report and whether the Government will consider referring the matter to our own UK Competition Commission.

The backdrop to this debate is a manufacturing industry with contrasting fortunes. The pain and anger felt by communities in and near steel-producing areas at Corus's recent announcement of massive job losses have been voiced both inside and outside the House. Of course, that followed the disbelief of Vauxhall workers at Luton who learned of their fate on local radio. Both are examples of the fragility of part of our manufacturing base and of appalling industrial relations. I should certainly like to add my support to the calls for legislation on information and consultation that were made in Westminster Hall last week.

In contrast to that misery, other announcements have resulted in much celebration. Major investment by Nissan in the north-east, Ford at Bridgend and Vauxhall at Ellesmere Port have secured well-paid jobs for the foreseeable future. Without doubt, however, the most serious decision was that of Corus, the sheer scale of which will reverberate far beyond the immediate community. The difficulties have mostly been attributed to the strength of the pound and the fall in world orders. However, that is not the whole picture.

Steel is one of five major energy-intensive users, the others of which are cement, glass, chemicals and paper. With the exception of cement, all are major users of gas and all are being ripped off. In the past year, wholesale gas prices have doubled. Gas companies are making massive profits while manufacturing is getting caned. The combined increase in the cost to energy-intensive users has added £10 million a week—or £0.5 billion a year—to the bills of those valuable and vital industries in the UK. The bills of the chemical industry have gone up by £300 million; those of the steel industry by £90 million; and those of the glass industry by £10 million a year.

Paper is the greatest constituency interest for me; nearly 1,000 people are employed in the paper and board mills of Chatham and Aylesford, producing 1.4 million tonnes per annum—the largest single concentration anywhere in the UK. The paper industry has seen the cost of gas go up by £50 million a year.

At a time when our manufacturing industry is meeting the challenges of environmental legislation and the weakness of the euro, gas prices in the UK should provide it with a competitive edge. That used to be the case. The UK's competitive gas market was achieved through a lot of hard work. We are one of the few countries to be self-sufficient in their gas requirement. Until last year, our prices were lower than those in the rest of Europe. A typical paper mill bought gas at 13p a therm, but that has now doubled to 26p. UK industry is being charged more for its gas than our competitors in Europe, where there is not a competitive market and where gas prices remain fixed to oil prices.

The big question is why prices have risen so dramatically and why they are higher in the UK than in mainland Europe? In an attempt to explain that, the UK Offshore Operators Association—the industry body for oil and gas—last month commissioned an independent report by ILEX Energy Consulting Ltd. entitled "What influences Gas Prices in the UK and why have they increased through 2000?" That report was produced in direct response to the criticisms of many, including the energy-intensive users. It said that demand for UK gas was increasing as a result of exports to Ireland and the continent through the two interconnectors. It rightly pointed out that there is capacity to export nearly 30 billion cu m per annum. To put that in context, the report goes on to say that total gas demand in Great Britain, without exports, is currently about 90 billion cu m. What the report does not say is that last year the interconnector's full capacity was never reached—nowhere near it. The highest point, I am informed, was 17 per cent. of capacity.

Some of the exports would have been sold under predetermined contracts, which would not have affected price. One must ask what proportion of the amount exported was under predetermined contracts. We do not know. Only those who own and run the interconnector, which in the main are the gas producers, know. Can my hon. Friend tell the House whether the Commission will examine that issue in its investigation?

The UK competitive market, with a self-sufficient supply, has its price determined by a market in Europe that is not competitive. I know that my hon. Friend is determined to press ahead in Europe so that competition will be opened up. That may be years away, and in certain quarters it will be resisted. In the meantime, why should UK manufacturing suffer?

According to the industry's independent report, to which I referred earlier, supply is outstripping demand, even when exports are taken into account. The authors of the report do not know why such a large gap has opened up between the UK and Zeebrugge prices. The effect of the interconnector at best provides inadequate evidence to justify the gas price increases, and at worst is being

[Mr. Jonathan Shaw]

used as a means of manipulating the market. If the interconnector was affecting the market, why has cheaper gas not flowed back to the UK?

The effect of the rises is hitting manufacturing, causing uncertainty and denting confidence among high gas users. One of the larger mills operating in the UK employs technical experts to study the market for the best prices. All have been unable to provide a satisfactory reason for the increases. It needs to be clearly established whether companies are using the interconnector to push prices in the UK up to European levels and above.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry was right to act as he did. I know from conversations with those in the industry that his response was warmly welcomed. Can my hon. Friend the Minister tell us whether the investigation will examine ownership? There should be greater transparency in the gas industry, particularly as there are only a few key players whose interests extend throughout the European natural gas industry.

The dominant forces in the European industry are four large producers, which have a substantial downstream interest. BP Amoco, which has 19.1 per cent. of UK output, has a 25.2 per cent. share in Ruhrgas, the dominant German company. Exxon Mobil accounts for 15.2 per cent. of UK output, and has a 25 per cent. stake in Gasunie, the Dutch monopoly, and 22.5 per cent. in the dominant German company. Shell, which accounts for 9.4 per cent. of UK output, has a 25 per cent. share in Gasunie, 15 per cent. in Ruhrgas and 25 per cent. in Thyssengas, the German regional monopoly. TotalfinaElf, which accounts for 8.1 per cent of UK output, has a 50 per cent. share in both the French transmission companies. It is no coincidence that these main players also own the interconnector. It is a pretty cosy picture.

For some time, experts have been expressing concern to the Government about the European structure. My hon. Friend's predecessor received a letter from Mr. Patrick Heren of PH Energy Analysis Ltd., who is highly regarded in the field. He stated:

"I do not suggest that these companies conspire together to maintain prices. They do not need to. The European gas industry is structured for their benefit. This structure is not conducive to effective competition which the European Gas Directive is intended to foster."

Does my hon. Friend agree with that observation, and does he believe that the existing structure is conducive to achieving the competitive market for gas that we want to see throughout Europe?

Soaring gas prices have consequences that are more damaging than is immediately apparent. In the paper industry, there have been important moves towards installing more combined heat and power plants in mills. Almost 100 mills operate in the United Kingdom, 20 of which have invested in CHP since 1990. The average cost of a CHP plant is about £10 million. Such investments take years to pay back, but competitive gas prices have been an incentive. Some investments have been much larger. Shotton paper mill, which has a capacity of about 500,000 tonnes of newsprint per annum, spent £80 million on a new CHP plant.

The climate change levy is an added incentive for paper mills to invest, as it exempts good-quality CHP. However, I know of two UK paper mills that have cancelled the development of CHP plants since gas prices rose so dramatically. CHP development is crucial to our commitment to cut CO_2 measurements to 20 per cent. of 1990 levels. In 1990, before the installation of a CHP plant, Aylesford Newsprint in my constituency produced 1.2 tonnes of carbon for every tonne of paper. After the installation of the plant, 0.44 tonnes of carbon are produced for every tonne of paper. The site is operating some 450,000 tonnes of paper every year, so the savings to the environment are clear.

A finger of suspicion is pointing at gas producers. Manufacturing believes that it is being ripped off by anti-competitive practices. Many questions need answering, including those on the ownership structure in Europe. We have plenty of gas suppliers and, as I said, supply is outstripping demand, but our industries our suffering. The matter needs resolving quickly if we are to avoid manufacturing job losses. The Commission's investigation should be concluded sooner rather than later. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will reassure hon. Members that the Government will impress upon it the urgency of the matter.

7.17 pm

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mr. Peter Hain): It is a pleasure to appear before you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as you are a Welsh Deputy Speaker and your distinction is increased by the fact that your husband comes from the Neath valley in my constituency.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) on securing a debate on this important topic. I acknowledge his expertise and the energy that he puts into representing his constituency interests and the concerns of industries throughout the country, for which he has eloquently spoken. I valued the meeting that he initiated on behalf of the energy-intensive users group. Following that meeting, I received from the Confederation of European Paper Industries a well-argued submission that I have studied carefully.

I am all too aware that many important industries are paying substantially more for gas than they did this time last year, and that that has potentially serious consequences for competitiveness. I welcome this opportunity to state clearly the major causes of the price rise and the action that the Government are taking to address the problem.

An important cause of the doubling in wholesale gas prices has been arbitrage across the interconnector with high oil-related gas prices in Europe. The lack of liberalisation and competition in Europe and the consequent lack of competition among different gas companies meant that when oil prices went up, European gas prices did also, and British prices followed.

When the interconnector was commissioned in 1998, it did not have a significant upward pressure on prices because oil-related gas prices in Europe were very low at that time. However, as oil prices increased, so did continental gas prices. Trade and the opportunity for trade across the interconnector have caused the British price to rise as well. We have experienced not only physical interconnection, but economic and price interconnection.

Prices have also been affected by the tightening of gas supply and demand as gas has been exported to Europe. The difference in price between the UK and the continent

during 2000 meant that exportation was very attractive and record levels of gas went across the interconnector. Gas demand was 20 per cent. higher on some days last year than it was in 1999. This winter there has also been upward pressure on prices because of slightly lower North sea production than was planned, owing mainly to breakdowns. Imports through the interconnector since October have often helped to meet demand as European prices have been passed straight through.

The situation is serious, and my hon. Friend was right to spell it out, but the Government have been active right across the gas market—from offshore production to the wider European market—in addressing the problems. I shall briefly outline our proposed three-point strategy before discussing the individual parts in more detail.

The key is to increase liberalisation and competition in Europe. The Government want the Stockholm summit in June to drive forward full liberalisation and reform of the gas market in Europe. We are also taking every opportunity to raise the need for liberalisation with our opposite numbers in other member states. This will, of course, not be achieved overnight, but it is at the heart of the problem and must be tackled.

We are looking at ways of improving the functioning of all parts of the market. That involves increasing the amount of information available to the market, both across the onshore-offshore interface and from the interconnector, to achieve full transparency. A well-informed market is an efficient market. Such action will help the market to work more effectively by, for example, enabling it to prepare when it sees that there are planned maintenance outages in the North sea.

We are also acting against potential anti-competitive behaviour, a phenomenon to which my hon. Friend drew attention. The operation of the interconnector has been giving cause for concern for some time, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State therefore wrote to Commissioner Monti requesting a Commission inquiry. The Commission has now indicated that it will look into the matter. We want the report that he will deliver to be finalised as swiftly as possible. This demonstrates that we shall not hesitate to refer any evidence of any kind of anti-competitive behaviour to the appropriate competition authorities.

It is vital for the interconnector to work in a transparent and efficient manner. Therefore, in a separate but related exercise, we are working with the interconnector shippers to establish whether more information can be made available to the market. We believe that that will produce a tangible improvement in the market. I know that some have suggested simply closing down the interconnector as a solution to all our problems, but that is not practical: closing it down would put us in breach of our European Union and wider international obligations, as well as exposing the Government to the possibility of civil action from interconnector shippers for many millions of pounds.

Moreover, the interconnector has a crucial function in regard to security of supply. Our forecasts suggest that Britain will be a net importer of gas by 2005, although there are indications that that may happen earlier. When the time comes, we shall rely heavily on interconnector imports; meanwhile we already need to draw on supplies imported through the interconnector from time to time. For example, this winter we imported for nearly two months—from November to January—and we are currently importing again.

Following our agreement at the Lisbon European Council meeting last year to speed up liberalisation across the European Union, the Commission will shortly propose a directive to bring about a properly competitive single energy market. We welcome that, and the Commission has the Government's full support in pressing ahead with the Lisbon-Stockholm process, leading to early full gas market liberalisation. The Government also welcome the measures that the Commission has been taking from time to time to challenge restrictive provisions relating to the supply of gas to the EU from other areas and other states, including Norway and Algeria. Progress in that respect is essential if we are to achieve the full "gas-to-gas" competition towards which we are all working.

As well as ensuring that the European market works, we need to ensure that the British market works and is seen to work, and is seen as being fully transparent. We have therefore been working with offshore companies and interconnector shippers to see what scope there is for making more information available. I am encouraged by the co-operative spirit that we have seen so far, and believe that it may result in a tangible benefit to all players in the market.

We will act forcefully against anti-competitive practices, which were mentioned by my hon. Friend. If there is evidence of anti-competitive behaviour, the Director General of Fair Trading, John Vickers, has strong powers to act, and should he find evidence of any anti-competitive behaviour prohibited by the Competition Act 1998, he will act promptly.

We acknowledge that recent higher gas prices add to the burdens on businesses, and we take seriously their concerns on the matter. However, the climate change levy is being introduced as part of our response to the real, long-term threats posed by global warming.

The recent upward movement in gas prices reflects short-term fluctuations in the markets, but the climate change levy is intended to produce significant carbon savings, up to and during the Kyoto target period of 2008 to 2012. That mechanism will stay in place, and we are working with industry—particularly highly intensive users of energy—to minimise the impact of the levy on them. The Chancellor has introduced an approach that will achieve that.

As part of the climate change challenge, the Government are serious about their target of achieving at least 10,000 MW of combined heat and power capacity by 2010. That will make an important contribution to meeting our climate change objectives set out at Kyoto. The Government will be consulting on a draft strategy shortly, setting out measures already announced, and other new ones that will help to achieve that target.

High gas prices may have had an impact on investment in combined heat and power. By affecting the relative price of gas and electricity, they may make CHP less attractive in the short term. However, our commitment to CHP is long term, and high fossil fuel prices tend to sharpen commercial incentives to use those fuels as efficiently as possible. Recently, I had a meeting as a result of representations by my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), because CHP forms an important part of the electricity market in Slough, and we

[Mr. Peter Hain]

want to safeguard its interests. We are working with the entire industry to advance its opportunities and protect it against uncompetitive attack.

The paper and board industry occupies an important place in the UK economy, and my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford drew our attention to that most appropriately. The industry has some 20,000 employees in about 90 mills spread all over the country and contributes more than £4 billion in gross value added to our GDP. Despite that enormous contribution and large turnover, the profit margins of the industry are very small—minute, in fact. I was given a figure of about £150 million by the delegation from the paper industry that my hon. Friend brought to see me.

The industry has already spent an extra £50 million as a result of this enormous explosion in prices in the gas market. That represents a big squeeze on profits, and it is unsustainable. I recognise that, and we want to work closely in partnership with the industry to ensure that it will not be affected in too dramatic a fashion as a result of that squeeze.

Although the industry faces competitive challenges in a global marketplace and employment is contracting, output has continued to increase and productivity has been increasing substantially, much to its credit. Nevertheless, I recognise that the industry faces a number of economic challenges to ensure its future strength. We want to put in place an action plan with the industry to overcome those challenges, and I hope that my hon. Friend and others will work with us to achieve that.

In summary, I agree with my hon. Friend about the seriousness of the matter. The Government recognise the damage caused by the artificial behaviour in the gas markets, which is difficult to explain. We have identified the principal causes and are well on the way to providing solutions. I want to work with the gas industry, the associated oil industry and those who have to pay the increasingly high prices, to tackle the problem as quickly as possible.

I call on our colleagues in the European Union to work with us because an uncompetitive gas market does not benefit Britain and is also damaging to Europe's long-term future. We are suffering although we are innocent. We have put our house in order and reduced gas prices, but are suffering from artificially induced pressure on gas prices.

I thank my hon. Friend for bringing the matter to the attention of the House and for the opportunity to set out the Government's action programme, which is clear and dynamic and shows that we are committed to solving the problem. We will leave no stone unturned.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 9 February 2001

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Orders of the Day

Road Transport Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

9.33 am

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Exceeding the speed limit, driving while using a mobile telephone, failing to observe basic seat-belt rules are things that we all do every day although we know we should not. Road safety across the nation would be greatly improved if we took better notice of those things that we know we should be doing. My Bill helps to address that issue.

My Bill will also help to improve driving safety in icy and snowy conditions and to reduce driving speeds, we hope, on rural roads and in villages; and, very importantly, will enable elderly and disabled people to use their concessionary bus passes in neighbouring local authority areas. The variety of the Bill's sponsors would suggest that I am right to hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will agree that those are laudable aims and give the Bill a fair wind.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Gray: It is early, and I dare say that we shall be hearing a great deal from my right hon. Friend during our proceedings, but I happily give way to him.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. In fairness to him, I should say that I certainly would not want to give his Bill a fair wind. Specifically, at this stage, can he tell me what proportion of cars in the United Kingdom have telephones installed in them, or what knowledge we have of the number of those who use a telephone in their car? Is there a danger that he is seeking to legislate for a very small minority rather than for the majority?

Mr. Gray: I am very grateful to hear that my right hon. Friend does not approve of my Bill. That means that it joins the distinguished company of the wide variety of measures of which he does not seem to approve. I look forward to hearing more from him later.

People who take the opportunity of standing in a London street and watching cars go by will know that they can bet their bottom dollar that the cars that are driving towards them, swerving back and forth, failing to indicate properly or driving at the wrong speed in the wrong lane are being driven by people with a mobile telephone pinned to their ear. We all do it.

Mr. Forth: How many people do it?

Mr. Gray: My right hon. Friend should know that there is no answer to the question of how many drivers in the United Kingdom own mobile telephones—just as we cannot say how many drivers own bananas. Such a statistic is not available and could not be available to the Government. However, there is very powerful anecdotal evidence suggesting that the use of hand-held mobile telephones while driving should be cause for severe concern.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: All I have done so far is to make a few introductory remarks and I am keen to get into the meat of my speech before I deal with quite so many interventions—but if the hon. Lady promises not to bounce up and down too often, of course I shall give way to her.

Maria Eagle: I make no such promise. When I was promoting a private Member's Bill I was very generous in giving way to the hon. Gentleman, and I am glad to see that he is reciprocating. I was just wondering which part of the Bill's long or short title deals with bananas.

Mr. Gray: Although we can have a lot of fun with the Bill—I am looking forward to it—it must be said that it contains some important provisions, such as those on bus passes for the disabled and the elderly, so I do not intend that the debate should become frivolous or lightweight. I made the point about bananas when trying to deal with the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) made concerning the number of people who own mobile telephones. I do not know the answer to his question, and I do not know about bananas either. I hope that that will satisfy the hon. Lady. I should now like to deal with some of the serious, worrying and important matters dealt with in the Bill.

I pay tribute to and declare an interest in my Bill's supporters. The AA has been extremely helpful both in providing a wide variety of briefings and in paying for most of the costs of the parliamentary draftsman. I have registered that matter in the Register of Members' Interests. Age Concern is another supporter of the Bill and has been helpful, as have Wiltshire county council, North Wiltshire district council, and the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety or PACTS—that excellent organisation which does so much good work in this place.

I am particularly indebted to the Public Bill Office Clerk, Mr. Priestley, who has been very helpful; and to Angus Walker and Bircham Dyson Bell, who have drafted the Bill very expertly for me.

I am also particularly grateful to my Bill's sponsors on both sides of the House—four of whom are Labour Members, four of whom are Conservative Members, and one of whom, the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth), is an Ulster Unionist Member. That list includes two former Secretaries of State for Transport,

[Mr. Gray]

a former special adviser to the Department of Transport, a joint Chairman and two other members of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, and a member of the Opposition environment, transport and the regions team. It is a cross-party group with demonstrable expertise and knowledge in transport.

I acknowledge that some elements of my Bill—like any Bill, but it is particularly true of complicated, Christmas-tree Bills such as this one—need to be improved. I very much look forward to debating those matters in Committee and, consequently, producing a worthwhile and workmanlike Bill.

The inspiration for the Bill comes largely from my own constituency. In areas such as North Wiltshire, transport—both public and private—is an overwhelmingly important issue. Last year, I went round all 60 parish councils in my constituency, and all of them raised with me issues such as road gritting, road speeds and road safety. Most of them also raised with me a variety of public transport issues that are beyond the scope of a private Member's Bill, to do with standstill Britain, as we call it, and the Government's attempt to prevent us from using our trains and roads successfully and safely.

I am the president of an excellent organisation called BCLAS—the Bath and Chippenham to London Action Society—which is the largest single commuter group in Britain. Representatives are coming to see the Minister shortly to let him know our concerns about the poor state of the Chippenham to London line. It costs 8p a mile more than Concorde and the service is a great deal less good than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. That and other issues of public and private transport are beyond the narrow remit of a private Member's Bill, however.

The issues in the Bill are of huge concern to people in my constituency and to people across the nation. This morning, I did 15 interviews on local radio stations, and I am told that there were a large number of bids from other stations. That demonstrates how important such issues are to people in local areas. They may not be earth-shattering—it may not be a case of "Hold the front page"—but these are important local matters, as the interest from local radio this morning demonstrates.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I share my hon. Friend's concern that we should have a serious debate, because some of the issues in the Bill are of the utmost seriousness. As he says, there are concerns about safety on local roads, and I shall be drawing attention to some of them if I catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker. On one road running through my constituency, 40 people have lost their lives over the past 10 years. It is time that something was done about it.

Mr. Gray: My hon. Friend makes a telling point, and I hope that he will, indeed, catch your eye later, Madam Deputy Speaker. In an area such as Yorkshire, part of which my hon. Friend represents—and represents so well—issues of road safety are hugely important, as they are in Wiltshire.

That brings me to the first issue in this Christmas tree of a Bill—the gritting of roads in icy and snowy conditions. About 1,000 people a year are killed on our roads as a result of icy and snowy conditions. There are two reasons for that. First, there is insufficient gritting, as we all know. We cannot grit every road across the nation every time it becomes icy and snowy. However, we can do slightly more than we have been doing. I am aware of the resource implications of my proposal. It costs about £25,000 to do a morning's gritting in an average rural area, so it is not cheap, but the Bill does not propose gritting everywhere, all the time.

The second problem is that people have no way of knowing whether the roads have been gritted. Broadly speaking, council officials wake up in the morning, look out of the window, decide whether or not it is cold, and work out how much of their budget they have used in the year so far. Then they may or may not send out the gritting lorries.

The Bill would require local authorities to publish a clear plan of which roads they intend to grit, when, and under which conditions. The motorist would then know which roads were safe to use. Equally, voters would know how large an area the local authority intended to grit or how small the gritting plan was and would be able to take a view in the forthcoming local elections.

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): I presume that when the hon. Gentleman speaks about local authority officials looking out of their window on cold, snowy mornings, he is referring to those in his constituency. The people of Sefton are rather more well prepared than that.

Mr. Gray: I am delighted to hear that the hon. Lady's local authority is more well prepared than those I described. However, there is no requirement under the law for her local authority to do anything other than to carry out gritting on a haphazard basis. The law does not require her local authority to make provision in a satisfactory, planned way. Figures across the nation show that. In Scotland, 40 per cent. of all roads are gritted regularly. In Devon, the figure is 19 per cent. In my county of Wiltshire, 26 per cent. of roads are gritted normally and a further 26 per cent. will be gritted in extreme, severe weather, making a total of 52 per cent. There is no overall plan with regard to who grits and when. The hon. Lady makes a grand claim for Sefton. I have not looked at Sefton in detail, but I am delighted to hear about it.

Wiltshire has produced exactly the sort of plan that I suggest should be produced across the country. I propose the production of a clear plan, perhaps with a map, such as that included in the leaflet issued by Wiltshire county council. The plan would show which roads were to be gritted, when they would be gritted and the weather conditions under which that would take place.

Maria Eagle: I can see no requirement in clause 1 for the local authority to produce a plan, although I accept that it may be a very good idea. Does the Bill achieve that?

Mr. Gray: Yes, it does. I am delighted that the hon. Lady is taking such a detailed interest in the Bill. We had a little conversation earlier this morning about some other equally detailed matters. I therefore very much hope that the hon. Lady may be prepared to consider serving on the Standing Committee considering the Bill, if we are lucky enough to reach that stage. I know that the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) is also very keen to take an active part in the detailed discussions in Committee.

The notion is to make it plain which roads are gritted and when and to find a way of encouraging local authorities to increase the use of gritting. This matter has been highlighted by the judgment in the case of Goodes *v.* East Sussex County Council last year. The Law Lords concluded that the Highways Act 1980 placed no general duty on a highways authority to pre-salt any road. In making the judgment, however, Lord Hoffmann indicated that a person who has suffered injuries owing to ice on the road had a right to expect a remedy. That is a very important point.

Paul Watters of the AA says:

"this year is a landmark year because local authorities know that they don't now have a statutory duty to salt all the roads in their areas."

They should. Across the nation, people believe that local authorities should grit and that they have the right to expect that to happen. At present they do not know whether roads will be gritted.

The Bill would replicate the situation in Scotland. Clause 1 is taken from the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984. The Bill would let people know whether the roads were to be gritted.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I am struggling to understand the hon. Gentleman's earlier response to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) in relation to clause 1. He said that clause 1 would require local authorities to publish plans, as he outlined. My understanding of clause 1—and I have re-read it since he said that—is that authorities will be bound to

"take such steps as they consider reasonable"

to prevent snow and ice from endangering pedestrians and drivers. I cannot see how taking such steps as they consider reasonable to prevent snow and ice from endangering people would include publishing in advance a plan of their gritting programme. I should be grateful for clarification.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It sounds as if we have in him another volunteer to serve on the Standing Committee, as he is showing a keen interest in the detail of the Bill.

The answer is the word "reasonable". The word is taken from the 1984 Act to which I referred. It means that authorities must take reasonable steps to clear snow and ice from the roads—something that local authorities in England do not have to do—and that includes producing a plan.

Maria Eagle: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I have given way to her twice, including once on this point. Gritting is a very small part of the Bill, and I intend to make a little progress. Perhaps she could contain her excitement until she is serving on the Committee, which I hope that she will be happy to do. The Bill would improve the quantity of gritting across the nation and improve the driver's knowledge of whether roads are gritted.

Something like 1,000 deaths a year are caused by people driving at the wrong speed on the wrong roads. AA research demonstrates that the issue is not simply about enforcement and penalties and, indeed, the Bill does not deal with enforcement and penalties. The Bill deals merely with what speed limits should be applied where.

The AA research demonstrates that where drivers understand the speed limit, know what it is and believe it to be sensible, broadly speaking they obey it. People know that in most towns the speed limit is 30 mph, so they go at 40 mph, although they should not: they observe the speed limit in the breach. Equally, on motorways, they know that the speed limit is 70 mph, so they go at 80 mph. They observe it in the breach.

However, in rural areas, people do not know what the speed limit is. In rural villages where no other speed restriction operates, and on single-lane country lanes such as I have in my constituency, the speed limit is 60 mph. That is absurd. One could not go at 60 mph through most villages or on most country lanes. People do not know that that is the speed limit, but if they did, they would not observe it, because they would think it silly.

The aim, which I believe the Government have in the back of their mind, although they plan to implement it within a longer time scale than I envisage, is to introduce speed limits across the nation which make sense and which drivers understand—or, in the AA's expression, buy into. Drivers will know what the speed limit is, they will recognise that it is sensible and they will observe it, albeit in the breach. For example, it might be sensible to implement the suggestion of the Council for the Protection of Rural England that there should be a speed limit of 30 mph in most villages, and perhaps 40 mph on single-track rural lanes. At present, speed limits across the nation are haphazard, people do not understand them and therefore do not observe them. They make up their own rules on speed limits.

The excellent *Malmesbury Standard*, my local newspaper, reports in its editorial this week that Mrs. Lewis of Ashton Keynes says that she is

"sick and tired of having cars pulled from her front garden"

because nobody pays attention to the speed limit in and around the village of Ashton Keynes. The newspaper calls for exactly the measures that I propose in my Bill—slower speeds and greater ability to apply speed limits, particularly in rural areas and, to some degree, in towns.

Last year the CPRE produced an excellent report entitled "The rural traffic fear survey", which revealed that 65 per cent. of people felt threatened all or some of the time by speeding traffic. It is a huge problem. I discovered from my parish council a couple of years ago that the biggest problem that we have in rural areas is cars going too fast through villages and round bends. Horse riders—I am a horse rider myself—are terrified. Even in the smallest rural lanes, cars travel at speed, for no reason at all, and they are not breaking the law.

Clause 2 would require local authorities to produce a plan setting out what they believe to be sensible speeds for the particular conditions in their area, subject to national guidelines. Under the Transport Act 2000, the Secretary of State is required to produce a hierarchy of speeds in rural areas within 12 months. I believe that that was a CPRE-inspired amendment to the Bill, on whose Standing Committee I served, as did the Minister.

My Bill would require the Secretary of State to produce a plan in a shorter time than that required by the 2000 Act, or in any event would remind him of that obligation.

[Mr. Gray]

In Committee, I shall be happy to listen to the Minister's explanation of what the Secretary of State intends to do with regard to speed limits in rural areas. The clause may become superfluous if the Secretary of State produces a clear plan for dealing with rural speed limits. Clause 2 thus tries to find a way of making speeds in country areas in particular both understandable and sensible.

The present procedure for introducing speed limits is extraordinarily complex and burdensome. Wiltshire county council, which proposed the relevant part of the Bill to me, told me that under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, to introduce or change a speed limit, or even to move a speed limit a small distance entails various stages: initial consultation with the police and local council; drafting of a notice and traffic order; obtaining the formal views of statutory consultees; advertising in the local press the intention to make the order; formal consideration of objections; and publishing a notice that an order has been made. Finally, the speed limit is introduced, changed or moved, and the appropriate sign is put up.

Typically, I believe, that takes six to 12 months and costs about £5,000. For example, in my constituency, in Corsham, St. Michael's Roman Catholic school is just outside the 30 mph speed limit. That means that people are driving past the entrance to the school at 60 mph and slowing down when they come to the 30 mph speed limit. We have been campaigning for some years to have the speed limit moved by 100 yd, so that the school will be within the speed limit in Corsham town. To do that, as I said, costs about £5,000, and the county council simply does not have the money to do it. The town council, on a tiny precept, also cannot afford to do it.

The Bill proposes doing away with the burdensome, bureaucratic and expensive procedure for bringing in and changing speed limits. The local authority would have to consult only the police and would then introduce or alter a speed limit.

Maria Eagle: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: The hon. Lady is being extremely assiduous. I shall give way to her one last time.

Maria Eagle: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. His Bill ranges over many different subjects, so I hope that he will not think that I am being excessive. Would clause 2 require consultation with local people? It is not clear to me that it does.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Lady is quite right: the clause does not require consultation with local people at all because that is precisely the burdensome part of the present procedure. One must presume that the local authority acts because it seeks to get the local people's votes at the forthcoming local council elections. The point of local democracy is for the council to do what it believes local people will like. Plainly, if a local authority introduced speed limits all over the place that local people did not want, the chairman of roads would have difficulty in justifying what he was doing.

Most local people want speed limits sensibly applied in their local area. The Hooray Henrys and general speedsters who do not want speed limits are not people whom we ought to consult. The hon. Lady is right to say that the Bill cuts out consultation with local people.

Mr. Greenway: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I am sure that this is a technical matter that could be resolved in Committee, but if a review is undertaken, one assumes that people would get to know about it and would gladly send in their opinions. When the local authority undertakes such a review now, it is usually because there has been significant pressure from local residents, particularly in rural villages.

Mr. Gray: My hon. Friend makes a good point. His experience in Yorkshire is clearly the same as mine in Wiltshire. There is an extra element. Under clause 2, the local authority would be required to produce a review of every speed limit in its area, and to produce a clear plan of the speed limits that it proposed. Under clause 3, it would become significantly easier to put those speed limits in place.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: I am listening with great interest to the hon. Gentleman's comments about consultation and the notion that consultation should end with local authority members. Is he aware that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has introduced community strategies the purpose of which is to do something about the democratic deficit? Under previous Administrations, the views of people whom an authority purported to support were totally ignored. That situation could not go on because people became disenchanted with it. The community strategy implies that people living in the community have a right to express their views on matters such as these he is discussing. Has the hon. Gentleman heard about that, and would he support it in his own constituency?

Mr. Gray: The hon. Lady makes her own point in an interesting way, although I suspect that the quango, and the spinning that she describes, which DETR is so good at, are not quite within the remit of the Bill. I do not support the innovations that she describes. The Government love launches, fancy titles and the fancy leaflets but they do not increase democracy at all.

In my view, democracy means people voting for parish councillors, town councillors, district councillors, county councillors, Members of Parliament and Members of the European Parliament. That is democracy.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: Not at the moment.

If those councillors do not do what local people want, they take the consequences at the next election. To set up some new DETR-run quango with a fancy leaflet to try and overcome what the hon. Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis–Thomas) describes as the democratic deficit is the wrong way to go about things. We want to reinforce democracy by strengthening parish councils—not by doing what the Minister for the Environment suggested at a fringe meeting at the Labour party conference two years ago. The right hon. Gentleman said that parish councils

had served their time and were a waste of space and that Labour would abolish them. He has since gone back on that view, because he realised how unpopular it was, but the Labour party does not really support parish councils—*[Interruption.]* I do. Parish councils are vitally important. The Minister made his views clear at that meeting; he has withdrawn them only because of pressure from parish councils.

That is what I believe democracy to be. I do not like all the committees, reports and quangos; I like straightforward democracy—people casting their votes for the candidates who they believe will do what they want them to do. That is what will happen in May: we shall see how many Labour-controlled county councils there are then. I suspect that there will be fewer than at present. However, Madam Deputy Speaker, you have been extremely indulgent to the hon. Member for Crosby. Perhaps we have moved away slightly from the purpose of the Bill, so I shall not dwell longer on her comments.

I agree with the CPRE and others who do not want the countryside littered with a million new signs. To that end, I have some reservations about traffic-calming measures; they can often ruin the appearance of a village and do not serve to reduce speeds at all. I also have reservations about the plethora of speed limit signs that appear all over the place. In my own tiny hamlet in Wiltshire, there are signs pointing out that the maximum speed limit is 30 mph. My goodness, you could not even drive at 10 mph along some of the roads in the village. It is absurd to have so many signs. Speaking as a Back Bencher, I support the view of the CPRE; we should adopt the French system—the village sign shows a 30 mph speed limit and at the other end of the village a sign with three lines across it shows that the speed limit has ended. A sensible speed limit operates throughout the village, even though there are no signs. I do not want a huge growth of speed limit signs across the countryside.

The next section of the Bill may be more controversial. We have already had a few interventions on it. It would ban entirely the use of hand-held mobile phones while driving. At present, people can be stopped for dangerous driving or for driving without due care and attention, if the police consider their driving to be less than first class because they are using a mobile phone. However, there is no absolute ban in the United Kingdom—with one honourable exception. Curiously, that is in the Isle of Man; the Manx Parliament introduced a law banning the use of mobile phones while driving—well done to them. My provision is based on that law.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Gray: My right hon. Friend has only just arrived in the Chamber. I fear that he may not have heard some of the earlier parts of my speech, so he will doubtless forgive me for not taking his intervention. I am sure he will have an opportunity to catch your eye later on, Madam Deputy Speaker, although whether a right hon. Gentleman who misses the opening speeches is then entitled to take part in the debate is a matter that you may have to consider—*[Interruption.]* My right hon. Friend says that in that case, he will leave now and not bother with the rest of the debate. I am sure my hon. Friends will be happy to wave goodbye as he leaves. He is a close and dear friend; I was his special adviser when he was a Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, so we go back a long way. That is why I am able to be so rude in a light-hearted way. I know that he will forgive me.

The truth is that we all drive while using mobile phones. I do it. I am the first to admit it. We drive along using our mobile phones. When the phone rings, there is a terrible temptation—*[Interruption.]* Several self-righteous Labour Members are shaking their heads, I see.

Mr. Dismore *rose—*

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman doubtless wants to declare that he does not talk on his mobile phone while he is driving. Let me issue a challenge to the local papers and television companies in the areas of all the Labour Members who are shaking their heads so self-righteously: if they see an hon. Member using a mobile phone while driving, it should appear as front-page news.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): The hon. Gentleman casts an outrageous slur on the driving habits of hon. Members on both sides of the House. I can say categorically that I have never driven and used a mobile phone at the same time, for the simple reason that I have never learned to drive—I am not a car driver.

Mr. Gray: We take the general point. It is useful to know that the Minister does not drive. I thought he was going to say that he does not use a mobile phone because he does not own one. Had he done so, I would have taken my hat off to him.

I cast no slur on anyone, because I have already said that, in the past, I have used my mobile phone while driving. In that context, I am no virtuous character. I have done so and I know that it is bad driving. We only have to look around the streets locally—

Mr. Dismore *rose—*

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman is jumping up and down like a jack-in-the-box.

Mr. Dismore: The hon. Gentleman said he would give way.

Mr. Gray: I am sorry, but I have taken enough interventions about mobile phones. I do not intend to take an intervention from the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps he could sit quietly, take it easy and listen. There may be some opportunities for him to have his say later on. My experience of previous Fridays in this place is that he has a great deal to say on most subjects. Perhaps he will be lucky enough to catch your eye later, Madam Deputy Speaker. I shall take no further interventions from the hon. Gentleman; he will be talking about his own Bill later.

I do not want this debate on important matters to become too frivolous. Labour Members seem to be straying into frivolity. We need to give the measure careful consideration. Many lives depend on road safety. We are talking about children crossing the road. Although levity from Labour Members is fine for a while, it might

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be sensible if the House settled down and listened, and thought carefully about the important provisions in the Bill.

We all drive while using mobile phones. I have done it. I do it all the time.

Maria Eagle: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: I am sorry but I shall not give way. I have given way to the hon. Lady three or four times already—rather more than she allowed me when she was promoting her ghastly Fur Farming Bill. She was quite reluctant to give way. We should make progress and consider these difficult issues.

We all know that we should not drive while using mobile phones. If I knew that it was prohibited, I certainly would not do it. More and more people have mobile phones and most people would welcome such a provision.

The Government support clause 5, which tightens up some flaws in the existing legislation on seat belts. Since the law requiring the wearing of seat belts was introduced by the Conservative Government in 1988, compulsory seat-belt wearing has saved about 550 lives a year and prevented about 9,000 serious injuries a year. Even though the libertarian wing is not keen on the compulsory wearing of seat belts, it saves a great many lives.

The one exception, which, by and large, I wholeheartedly endorse and accept is granted to drivers of delivery vans. Postmen, milkmen and so on could not possibly keep putting on and taking off their seat belts every few yards. The exception is perfectly sensible. However, it is being abused by many van drivers.

The statistics speak for themselves. Van drivers currently wear seat belts 64 per cent. of the time. Their passengers wear them even less—only 53 per cent. of the time. By comparison, car drivers wear seat belts 91 per cent. of the time. The Transport Research Laboratory estimates that if all van drivers were required to wear seat belts most of the time, about 20 lives would be saved and about 270 serious casualties would be prevented annually. The clause is a small provision, but it would save lives. I suspect that such a law would be happily accepted by most of the van drivers who blatantly do not wear seat belts when they know they should.

Clause 6 would correct a small anomaly in sentencing for the non-wearing of seat belts. At the moment, if people sitting on the front seat do not wear seat belts, they pay a £500 fine, but if children or others sitting on the back seat do not wear seat belts, they pay a £200 fine. We all know of tragic cases in which people sitting on the back seat go through the windscreen, so it is just as important that people wear their seat belts when sitting in the back seat as it is for people sitting in the front seat. Clause 6 would equalise the penalty at £500 for not wearing a seat belt wherever someone is sitting in the car.

Clause 7 would correct a very technical anomaly in the Road Traffic Act 1988 in relation to whether the Secretary of State pays for medical checks for the exemption from wearing seat belts. Those three measures would simply tidy up the rules on the wearing of seat belts, but they would be valuable none the less.

I am keen to allow hon. Members, who obviously want to express their views, time to speak in the debate, so I turn, finally, to question of concessionary fares. Last year, during consideration of the Transport Act 2000, the Opposition tabled amendments to suggest that elderly and disabled people should be allowed to use their concessionary bus passes in other local authority areas. Age Concern, which supports the Bill, would like people to be able to use their bus passes in any local authority area across the nation. There is a precedent for that. For example, all 32 local authorities in London recognise one another's bus passes. There is some sense in that; it allows people to go wherever they like. However, I realise that there could be large resource implications if that were suggested.

I have therefore persuaded Age Concern to compromise with the Government by introducing a de minimis but sensible concession under which pensioners and disabled people would be allowed to use their bus passes in neighbouring local authorities. Often, especially in rural areas, the neighbouring authority will be a unitary one like Swindon, which is just outside my constituency. People only three or four miles away at Wootton Bassett in my constituency cannot use their bus passes in Swindon, and vice versa. That is, frankly, crazy. Elderly and disabled people travel into their local towns to do their shopping or go to the hospital or cinema or whatever, and it is crazy that they cannot use their bus passes there.

Under the Transport Act 2000, local authorities can do deals with each other and try to find reciprocal ways in which they can recognise each other's bus passes. I am pleased to say that North Wiltshire district council has been very active and has done deals with Swindon, which will be implemented shortly, and also with Bath and Bristol. So some local authorities are making such arrangements, but they are not required to do so. A local authority may, or may not, do such deals. Under clause 8, local authorities would be required to recognise one another's bus passes. That is an obvious, simple, very cheap and cost-effective provision, but it would be of huge benefit to elderly and disabled people throughout the nation. I am certain that most charities for elderly and disabled people would welcome it.

Maria Eagle: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: For the last time, I shall happily give way to the hon. Lady.

Maria Eagle: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, as we have moved on to a different subject. He says that the concession would be very cheap. Does he have any figures on how cheap or expensive it might be?

Mr. Gray: No figures are available because we do not know how many elderly and disabled people from one local authority travel to another local authority at the moment. There is no such census.

Mr. Dismore *rose—*

Mr. Gray: I am sorry; I have said that I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman again because he has had more than enough time. Moreover, it is important that I should answer the hon. Lady's question before giving way to anyone else, and the fact that the hon. Gentleman is jumping up and down while I am trying to do so seems a little silly.

Although we do not know how many people travel from one authority area to another, it is reasonable to presume that there will not be all that many since we are only talking about the neighbouring area. Anyhow, such arrangements would be reciprocal. People from North Wiltshire would go to Swindon and people from Swindon would go to North Wiltshire, so the cost would be extremely small.

Mr. Dismore *rose—*

Mr. Gray: I have been discourteous to the hon. Gentleman, so I happily give way to him.

Mr. Dismore: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the arrangements in London and those between counties. The Bill does not deal with London. My constituency, which is in London, borders Hertfordshire. Many people from Hertfordshire—for example, from Watford—may wish to travel into central London to do their shopping or to go to entertainments there, or whatever. How will the Bill address the problem of people from outside London wanting to avail themselves of London transport? I am pretty sure that fewer people will want to travel from London to Watford than will want to go from Watford to London.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman is, of course, right, but the local authority could do a deal with the Mayor, or with individual London boroughs, to ensure that its bus passes are recognised in London. However, the Bill does not represent an attempt to cure all ills in all places. Other people have raised with me the problem that people might not want to travel to the next local authority but the one beyond that. In some geographical areas, the main centre may well be two authorities away. The Bill would not deal with that problem; it is a very modest little Bill, which would address particular difficulties in certain places.

Mr. Maclean: Perhaps I can help my hon. Friend. As he seems to have information that suggests that the Government are keen on the Bill and that it should be considered in Committee, perhaps he will enter into discussions with the Government—I hope they will agree—with a view to introducing a new clause or an amendment on Report to deal with that London problem. I am sure that the Government would co-operate with him.

Mr. Gray: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. I very much hope to hold those discussions with the Government when the Bill is being considered in Committee. My right hon. Friend brings me on to another interesting subject.

I had thought that this was a modest, sensible, down-to-earth and rather quiet little Bill, rather than an earth-shattering, front-page news one. It is a decent, normal Bill, which has cross-party support. Indeed, I was encouraged to hear during informal chats with the Whip and the Minister that the Government would be neutral on the Bill. I take great comfort from that. Although it is a matter for all hon. Members, I understand that the Government intend to let the Bill be considered in Committee.

In that context, I was more than a little surprised to be handed a letter last night from the Leader of the House to the Minister who will be looking after the Bill. It says that they have discussed the Bill and they propose that

"the Government remain neutral on Second Reading".

I take great comfort from that, but the right hon. Lady then says:

If the Bill proceeds to Committee, then we would make it clear to James Gray that it would be blocked on Report unless all the provisions apart from those on seatbelts were removed."

In other words, the Leader of the House is saying, "Here we have a big fat Bill, with lots of stuff in it to help elderly and disabled people, but we shall pretend to be neutral on Second Reading and then we will tell the hon. Member for North Wiltshire what his options are. He can drop all the first-class stuff that would help the elderly and disabled, and just have one tiny clause that would tidy up the law on seat belts"; in other words, "If you don't want to do that, you ain't going to get the Bill."

The Government are trying to appeal to my ego. They seem to suggest that I will chuck all the principles away and do anything, saying, "Please, please, Government, let me have my own little Bill." That seems to be a sort of parliamentary blackmail, and it is perfectly bizarre.

Mr. Maclean: With all my hon. Friend's years of experience as a special adviser to the previous Government and in the House, has he ever come across such a shabby letter or such potentially underhand dealings on a Bill that the Government profess to like?

Mr. Gray: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely good point, and no, I have not. It is extraordinarily interesting to hear those on the Government Benches falling about guffawing with laughter when I quote the letter from the Leader of the House. The right hon. Lady does not treat the matter with such levity.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas *rose—*

Mr. Gray: The hon. Lady should allow me to finish my quotation. No doubt she is very concerned about the fact that the Minister has been given instructions to block most of the Bill in Committee. She is concerned for the good reason that doing so would damage disabled and elderly people and not help to save 1,000 lives a year on the road. All those measures would be blocked by the Labour Government in favour of their little seat-belt provision. The Leader of the House knows that that would be a problem, because her letter continues:

"You should develop a robust handling strategy in the event that we do have to block the Bill, as the Government will be challenged as to why it cannot support"

the principles. I am pleased that the letter was copied to the Prime Minister, who is taking a keen interest in the Bill's progress.

The Government are planning to appear to be neutral on the Bill this morning; to let it be considered in Committee; to apply that complicated blackmail; and to block the Bill on Report if necessary. So elderly and disabled people will not be able to use their bus passes in neighbouring local authorities. No gritting will be allowed to continue on ice-covered roads. Speed limit breaches will be allowed to continue unabated until such time as the Government choose to do something about them. They

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say that they are worried about such matters, so of course "a robust handling strategy" will have to be developed to overcome the embarrassment. The newspapers this morning—*The Guardian* and *The Independent*—realise how embarrassing the letter is for the Government. They have chosen to pick on a small but worthwhile Bill which has cross-party support and which is backed by Age Concern, many other charities, motoring organisations, PACTS and four Labour Members. The Government have chosen to pick on this innocent little Bill to try to apply complex Machiavellian strategies to get one small clause through.

The Government are ditching the people whom my Bill aims to help. When the Minister replies, he must tell us which of those groups he will face up to in the run-up to the general election. Will it be the disabled, will it be the elderly or will it be those who might be killed and injured on our icy roads? To which of those groups will he explain why he wants to appear neutral about the Bill, when he intends to block it in Committee? He will have to explain the letter, and I very much look forward to his doing so.

This is a modest and sensible little Bill, which will make our roads safer. It has cross-party support. I commend it to the House.

10.21 am

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) on his luck in being successful in the ballot and on the way in which he has presented his case. I wish his Bill every success—I support it. As he said, it does not matter which part of the country we represent. The traffic issues and problems that are dealt with by his Bill are the problems that exist throughout the United Kingdom.

On a Bill's Second Reading, we have the opportunity to raise other interrelated matters. When a Bill goes into Committee, we have the opportunity to table amendments and new clauses. I hope that this Bill receives its Second Reading and goes into Committee.

I am a London Member, and those of us who live in London know that we rarely face severe weather conditions. However, we know from what has happened in recent weeks that many other parts of the country suffer from atrocious weather. I am sure that clause 1 will, therefore, be welcomed in the north of England, Scotland and many other parts of the country. All Members would pay the warmest tribute to the people and local authority employees who, in recent weeks, have had to struggle through atrocious conditions to keep the roads open in their areas. They deserve a great deal of credit.

Clause 2 deals with speed limits. As the hon. Gentleman said, this issue causes concern and confusion to motorists and to residents. The speed limits in an area are often not clear, and motorists often wonder what their purpose is. It is clear that, in some areas, the speed limits should be clearly defined. For example, the roads around schools and play areas and the busy roads in built-up areas need to have clearly defined speed limits. That would not cause any problems. It does not matter whether we are dealing with Tooting or with North Wiltshire, because motorists and the general public readily understand the need for clear speed limits. We need to introduce a system that ensures that speed limits are thought through and are clearly understood throughout the country. The chances are that they will then be followed.

I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), and the hon. Member for North Wiltshire will agree that we must do something about the attitude of motorists to the speed at which they drive. In today's *Daily Mail*, there is a report about Mr. David Beckham, the footballer. This week he has again been charged by the police for speeding. The report says:

"It was the fifth time he had been caught in about three years."

It adds:

"Beckham was not available for comment yesterday. A spokesman for him said: 'He was only just above the speed limit.'"

What kind of example does that set? I imagine that tonight and over the weekend people in our constituencies will say, "Have you read about David Beckham? They've caught him again speeding. What a lad he is—he gets away with it." Therefore, there is a clear need for my hon. Friend and his Department to issue clear instructions. If, as the *Daily Mail* suggests, Mr. Beckham has had five convictions for speeding in the past three years, the point will come when he should not be allowed to drive on our roads for some time. It is very well to say, "I was only just over the limit", but what would he say if, sadly, someone were knocked down and killed? We know that can happen at a very low speed. My hon. Friend must consider this issue very carefully.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire said that the views of motoring organisations would be sought. My hon. Friend the Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas) referred to the need to involve the general public and, later in my speech, I shall describe how the public can become involved with an another issue. Seeking the views of motoring organisations is important because they represent the views of motorists, and I agree that we should also involve local authorities and the police.

In some large towns, different local authorities adjoin each other, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) made that point in relation to concessionary fares. Cycle lanes are of great benefit and some London boroughs provide them for their residents and the people who cycle through. However, once cyclists leave that borough, they enter another in which there are no cycle lanes. Without doubt, that causes confusion and adds to the danger of cycling.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): Is my hon. Friend aware that the position is possibly even worse than he suggests? In the glorious outer London borough of Ealing, the cycle lanes are painted red and, in adjoining boroughs, they are painted green. That inspires something approaching cycling schizophrenia in the two-wheeled population. Is he aware of any plans, particularly from the Greater London Authority, to rationalise the system for cycle lanes, particularly with regard to highway markings?

Mr. Cox: I am not aware of any such plans, but my hon. Friend makes a valid point. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will take it on board. It illustrates the need to involve local authorities and to take a consistent approach towards speeding.

I have told the hon. Member for North Wiltshire that I support his Bill. However, if it had only contained clause 4, it would still have been welcome. The problem of people using hand-held mobile phones when driving a car is now totally out of control. One sees that happening throughout the country. I have a mobile phone, but I can honestly say that I have never used it when driving, because I see no need for it. I hope that the problem will be tackled, and clause 4 clearly outlines what action should be taken.

At the moment, the police have no clear policy on mobile phone use. I am sure that in some areas they come down hard on people who drive while using their phone, but that is not generally the case. Like the hon. Gentleman, I have asked Transport Ministers when they will introduce legislation, and I have been told that measures already exist in the legislation on dangerous driving and on driving without due care and attention. However, that simply is not working because it is not being used. I do not have the figures—perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister does—for the number of people who, in the past two years, have been charged with, convicted of, and, one assumes, fined for driving while using a mobile phone.

We know that we now live in a society dominated by mobile phones. One sees them being used everywhere, and sometimes we are surprised at their use. In clause 4(1), the hon. Gentleman has clearly said in 29 words what should be done about the problem. We have all seen what I can only describe as the idiots who drive a car while using a phone. Last week, as I was coming to the House, I saw a young man driving a car along Wandsworth road. He had a mobile phone pushed into his shoulder and in his left hand was a plastic cup from which he was drinking, and he was steering the car with his right hand. What control did that driver have over his vehicle? We all know how near one can come to having an accident—it happens in a second. I believe that people want what the hon. Gentleman proposes in clause 4.

I have been in the House for a long time, and looking round the Chamber this morning, I see only Members, including the Minister, who were not present when we were discussing seat belts. I took part in that debate, and I remember some Members saying that they were opposed to the compulsory use of seat belts, despite all the evidence supporting their use, because it infringed human rights.

I listened to the closing remarks by the hon. Member for North Wiltshire, and he must take up the matter that he mentioned with the Leader of the House, which he obviously has the experience to do. I urge him not to give way if he is pressed on clause 4. When hon. Members on both sides of the House meet their constituents, this subject invariably comes up. They ask when something will be done about the idiots who use a mobile phone while driving. One wonders how urgent some of the calls can be. If a call is urgent, the driver should stop the car, as I do when I want to use my phone. It is as simple as that.

On Second Reading, Madam Deputy Speaker, one has the opportunity to raise issues that are related to the Bill, and with your permission I intend to raise three such issues. Two of them are important throughout the country, and the third relates only to my constituency. The first problem occurs throughout London and possibly even in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I am absolutely appalled every day when I see people of all ages riding bicycles without front or rear lights.

Now, in winter, it is dark in the mornings and in the evenings, yet many of these cyclists wear no fluorescent clothing and have neither front nor rear lights on their bicycle. I am told that it is against the law to cycle without lights. I am not critical of my local police, indeed I have a very good relationship with them, but when I take up this issue with them, they say, "We know what happens but we are too busy to deal with it. We have other important issues to tackle." A former Member of this House, who is now a Member of the upper House, was knocked down and severely hurt by a cyclist a short time ago—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Order. I appreciate that this is an important issue, but it does not relate to the Bill.

Mr. Cox: With great respect, Madam Deputy Speaker, I do not dispute that, but as you and I know, if the Bill gets its Second Reading and goes into Committee, we will have the opportunity to introduce new clauses. The Bill deals with broad, interrelated issues of transport and safety. A cycle is a means of transport, and I have commented on cyclists without lights because action needs to be taken against them.

My next point concerns bus lanes. I am a great supporter of bus lanes, which exist throughout London and, I am sure, in many other parts of the country. However, the restrictions on the use of bus lanes in the morning and evening are not being enforced. Why do we have bus lanes if we allow people to drive in them at those times? The vast majority of motorists respect the restrictions, but there are people who completely disregard them, as there are people who disregard speed limits. I shall be interested to hear what my hon. Friend the Minister has to say about the number of prosecutions that have taken place.

The Bill is fairly wide ranging, and it is not controversial, as its promoter stated. A clause could be added to deal with bus lanes. I hope that the Minister will comment on what thoughts his Department has on the abuse of bus lanes.

Mr. Dismore: Is my hon. Friend aware of the experiment that the Minister sanctioned on route 32 in my constituency which runs down the A5 corridor? There has been a crackdown using cameras in bus lanes and tighter enforcement by traffic wardens. That has made a significant difference to buses' reliability and speed.

Mr. Cox: I welcome my hon. Friend's intervention. I should like to see similar developments elsewhere. It is time to deal with the flagrant disregard of the restrictions which happens in the mornings and the evenings throughout London. Why introduce restrictions if they are not enforced? It would be interesting to know how many people have been charged with driving in a bus lane during restricted hours. We should seriously consider tabling a new clause.

[Mr. Cox]

Mention has been made of consulting the general public. We should make consultation with our constituents our top priority. I am concerned about controlled parking zones in my constituency. I have two secretaries who work in the House and they have been inundated with calls from residents bitterly complaining about the lack of consultation on the introduction of the zones in Wandsworth.

My hon. Friend the Minister represents a constituency adjoining mine and we have worked together on many issues. There is absolute uproar in the London borough of Wandsworth about the council's attitude. Local people say that they are not being consulted and that, no matter what they say, the council does not listen. Not only residents but business people say that policies that they do not want are being steamrollered through.

I certainly hope that we can table a new clause—it would be easy to draft—requiring the fullest consultation on the introduction of new controlled parking zones, the results of which must be published. People often tell me that they have not been consulted, yet the council insists that it has consulted everyone.

I have hundreds of letters on the subject, but I shall read just one, which comes from Earlsfield. It says:

"I am appalled by the council's arrogance and the way they steamroller their policies through. I believe it is against the law for a Council to impose parking schemes to raise revenue and would appreciate if you could intervene and help curb their unlawful and undemocratic behaviour."

Mr. Dismore: I have the reverse problem in my constituency, where people want more controlled zones but the council is having difficulty finding the necessary resources. For example, in Hendon central, which has become something of a commuter trap, it is very hard for local residents to find somewhere to park and a CPZ would help.

Mr. Cox: That is like many things in life. My hon. Friend is a solicitor—

Mr. Pound: Disgraceful.

Mr. Cox: That is a matter of opinion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon would know from his professional background that one presents one argument for the defence and quite another for the prosecution. We know that some people will say that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire is an idiot to try to restrict speeds and curb the use of mobile phones. I am reporting what my constituents tell me. These are interrelated issues.

Hon. Members of all parties often have very good ideas. I was a Government Whip under Harold Wilson and James Callaghan and I have sat on the Front Bench, listened to excellent Bills being introduced and thought that they were something that my constituents would warmly welcome. I hope that the Bill gets its Second Reading.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your courtesy and generosity in allowing me to talk about things that were not in the Bill but relate to the overall issue of transport. I wish the Bill well.

10.46 am

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) on his success in the ballot and on introducing a Bill that gives us the opportunity to debate matters that, as the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) said, are of real concern to our constituents. I am somewhat surprised that there are not more of us here today. The fact that there is not one Liberal Democrat Member here is a disgrace. I know that an event is likely to take place in three months' time that is encouraging colleagues to spend more time in their constituencies, but I am very grateful for the opportunity to raise a matter that I once tried, unsuccessfully, to raise on the Adjournment.

There are five elements to the Bill. I want to concentrate on the first two: the duties of highways authorities to maintain roads, and revised procedures for speed limits. On the other three, I have not reached the position that the hon. Member for Tooting has reached, but I might yet be persuaded that we should have a complete ban on hand-held telephones in cars. It is certainly a matter that Parliament will have to determine before too long.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not mind my saying, as a former policeman, that the illustration that he gave of the phone on the shoulder and the coffee in the hand was plain sailing for a charge of driving without due care and attention. The problem is that it has to be seen by a police officer, but when we see it we are powerless to do anything about it. There are certainly some idiots around, and I have even seen the same thing happening at 80 mph on the motorway. Clause 4 concerns an important matter to which we will have to return at some point.

I am not sure why further provisions on seat belt exemptions are included in the Bill. It seems that that is one of the clauses in which the Government are in favour, and I have no strong views about it.

As the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) suggested, there are problems with travel concessions. He raised a valid issue. I have similar problems in my constituency of Ryedale, which includes the entire Ryedale district, a significant part of City of York council and part of Scarborough borough council. The biggest problem is that many elderly people in rural areas receive no travel concessions.

Mr. Hill: That is down to the local authorities.

Mr. Greenway: I understand that. I am not making a big issue about it, but the Minister knows that if there are no rural buses, the elderly cannot travel on them, whether they are entitled to free transport or not. I should like to see greater uniformity across the country on travel concessions. I know that Ministers both in this Government and in the previous Government have examined that.

The suggestion that my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire makes in clause 5 seems sensible, and I shall listen with interest to what my Front-Bench spokesman and the Minister have to say about it.

Clause 1 is a narrow provision to oblige local authorities to clear snow and ice. When I told my wife that I was spending the day in the Chamber debating this Bill and that it contained such a provision, she was surprised that the obligation did not already exist. Most

people think that it is already a requirement, but those of us who have studied these things know from Goodes *v.* East Sussex County Council that the Law Lords interpreted the Highways Act 1980 differently, so the clause is welcome if it seeks to correct that position in law. My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire did not refer to it directly, but I presume that that is largely what lies behind it.

May I enter a slight caveat? It is all very well to introduce a statutory duty on local authorities, but we must have regard to their resources. My constituency covers several hundred square miles of rural North Yorkshire—England's biggest county. Many miles of its roads are never gritted. No one expects them to be gritted because the local authority does not have the resources to do so. When I was a member of North Yorkshire county council, and in my almost 14 years in this place since, the issue of budgets for winter maintenance has always been topical at this time of year. There is never enough money to do everything that one would wish.

Similarly, there are problems with budgets for maintenance of the road fabric, which are seriously under pressure. I do not make a partisan point; it was the same under the previous Government, and it has not changed much under this one. There is a long backlog of repairs. I take the point made by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) that a plan needs to be published. I understand that the statutory duty works perfectly well in Scotland. The wording that my hon. Friend has used in the Bill, which is technical, is precisely the same as the Scottish legislation. There will have to be consultation, because it is important that people know which roads will be gritted. Clearly, the main county roads that link one place with another and give access to the main urban centres such as York, Scarborough and Middlesbrough on the north side of my constituency—many people have to travel up to Teesside—must be gritted.

There is some dissatisfaction among rural residents of my constituency. They feel that they pay road fuel duty, but that the money is not spent on their roads. We understand the arguments about why that is so. I do not propose hypothecation, but people feel that more needs to be done to maintain the fabric of the rural road infrastructure than merely clearing snow and ice.

Clause 1 is narrow; it aims to correct provisions in the 1980 Act on the duty of highways authorities to maintain a road in good condition, but the issue that that touches on goes further than simply the state of the road surface. Parliament really ought to get its teeth into whether roads themselves are dangerous. The road surface might be dangerous because it has not been repaired, but the alignment of the road might also be dangerous and it might be a contributory factor in many accidents. If so, where should the responsibility rest?

Maria Eagle: I am listening with great interest to the hon. Gentleman. I understand his point about resources, but not his point about the alignment of roads. I have some concerns about the adequacy of the clause. Is he suggesting that some bends are too sharp or that roads need to be changed in some material way to be safer?

Mr. Greenway: In some respects, I am. I want to contrast Parliament's attitude to the state of the roads with its attitude to the state of the railways in the past few weeks. This is the point that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, kindly allowed me to make in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire.

The A64 trunk road from York to Scarborough runs through my constituency for about 37 miles. In the past 10 years, there have been no fewer than 40 fatalities on that stretch of road. That is not 40 fatal accidents, because in some instances more than one person was killed. If hon. Members want to see the road, I can give them the precise details. There were two tragic fatalities recently. There were two accidents in which four people were killed at Golden Hill and Huttons Ambo. Analysis of the 40 deaths shows that 10 were in the section between the end of the Malton bypass and the beginning of the dual carriageway at Whitwell-on-the-Hill. It is a single-carriageway stretch of road with many dangerous bends and people drive too fast and overtake when they should not. That has been a major cause of the accidents.

Two Bradford ladies were killed in a head-on collision on the bend at the top of Golden Hill in September. In late October, a girl of 15 and a boy of 17 from Thornton-le-Dale were killed on exactly the same bend in precisely the same circumstances, coming round the bend too fast, heading south towards Malton. In between those two accidents, four people were killed in a rail crash at Hatfield. The road is dangerous.

Concern about the number of teenagers who have been killed on roads in Ryedale has spurred local people, under the leadership of a local GP from Pickering, to create an accident prevention group for young people. I commend the scheme to the Minister. We are working to ensure that every fifth and sixth-former at Lady Lumley's school has a workshop day on road safety and on being behind the wheel of a car. The police are working hard to help us. If the Minister wants, I shall send details to him, as well as to my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire.

The road is dangerous. In March 1997, Mr. John Watts, then roads Minister, came to my constituency to discuss the future of the A64. Some of the improvements that we are now making were taken on by the current Government; we are grateful for that. The problem at Huttons Ambo was one of the difficulties identified in 1997. Ministers have agreed to remedy the problem at Golden Hill. In September, after the first double fatality, I wrote to suggest that an overtaking lane should be removed; the Minister for Transport in the other place agreed immediately that it would be removed in March or April. We are grateful for the fact that there are only one or two months to go, but the Minister will understand local people's concern about how long it takes. In their minds, they contrast the speed with which, post-Hatfield—an accident in which four people were killed—the entire rail network was brought to a halt so that every danger could be removed, with the fact that it takes six months to remove an overtaking lane after four people are killed on one stretch of road for which the Government are responsible. I criticise not the Minister, but the system: it takes far too long for urgent problems to be remedied.

I concede that my argument is over-simplistic, but my point is that many parts of our road network are, by their nature and because of the volume of traffic now using them, dangerous. I suggest that Members of Parliament—especially Back Benchers putting constituency interests before partisan politics, as the hon. Member for Tooting

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did earlier—start to question where responsibility rests when, as the hon. Member for Garston said, it is obvious that a road, because of its design and layout, is dangerous.

It is now clear to me that transferring transport infrastructure to the private sector will enable us robustly and properly to provide against wrongdoing and shortcomings. The hon. Member for Hendon looks aghast. He might think that people have had to be dragged, kicking and screaming, into taking action, but the enforcement of higher safety standards is occurring on the rail network, precisely because it is in the private sector. It is perfectly valid to contrast the speed of the process when responsibility rests with the public sector.

Mr. Dismore: All the reports on all the train crashes of the past few years that I have read point to a lack of investment by Railtrack—a privatised company—a lack of enforcement and fragmentation of the railways. That is a consequence of privatisation. The hon. Gentleman's argument is nonsense.

Mr. Greenway: I do not agree. The lack of investment occurred when the railways were in the public sector, not after it was transferred to the private sector. When the railways were in the public sector, after a train crash, the action that has in recent months been taken against the rail infrastructure companies was not taken.

Mr. Dismore: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Greenway: No. It is clear that the hon. Gentleman does not agree. However, the public can see that the legal position of Railtrack and the existing enforcement structure enable the Rail Regulator and Ministers to take out their big stick and force the company to act. The fact that people are launching legal challenges against some of the private companies makes my case.

Mr. Dismore: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Greenway: No. The hon. Gentleman will have the chance to make his own speech later. My point is that the rail infrastructure has been repaired and brought up to date in record time because of the—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have allowed a fairly lengthy exchange of views on that topic, but we should now return to the Bill.

Mr. Greenway: I am grateful for your intervention, Madam Deputy Speaker, because the hon. Member for Hendon—

Mr. Dismore: When you are in a hole, stop digging.

Mr. Greenway: I am not in a hole. If four people had been killed in the hon. Gentleman's constituency on a bend in the road that Ministers said was dangerous and it took six months to rectify the problem, he would not regard that as acceptable. It is not acceptable. We have to do something: people pay their road and fuel duties and they expect their Member of Parliament to argue their corner, which is what I am doing. I am grateful for Ministers' agreement that the road has to be changed, but that changing it will take six months is not justified. There have already been several more serious accidents at the same spot; thankfully, no one has been killed, but it has been close on two occasions.

Driver error is a major problem. People drive too fast for the condition of the road. The hon. Member for Tooting spoke about people driving at or just above the speed limit, and he mentioned David Beckham. I am told by police officers that if people drive above the speed limit on certain bends in the road, an accident is likely. The problem is not necessarily people driving well in excess of the speed limit, but people driving at or just above it on a road whose alignment means that an accident is possible.

Maria Eagle: Given the difficulty that would be involved in changing the alignment of roads on a grand scale, does the hon. Gentleman agree that lowering speed limits might be another way in which the number of accidents could be reduced?

Mr. Greenway: Yes. I am coming to precisely that point. My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire was right to question the appropriateness of existing speed limits. In some cases, the speed limit is inappropriate because it is too high, in others because it is too low. We need to review and debate the issue. Appropriate speed limits are important if they are to command the respect and confidence of motorists. Whatever speed limits we establish, enforcement is an issue—there is no point setting speed limits that cannot be enforced.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: Has the hon. Gentleman read the excellent document "Tomorrow's Roads: Safer for Everyone", which was published in March 2000 by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions? I refer him to page 49, paragraph 6.16, in which the Government state:

> "We will revise our guidance to local authorities on the setting of local speed limits to achieve appropriate and consistent standards nationally to reflect, as far as possible, the needs of all road users on different classes of roads. The guidance will help authorities to take sensible measures, including lowering speed limits where necessary, to achieve safer vehicle speeds."

Will he confirm whether his local authority has engaged in that activity? Mine has.

Mr. Greenway: I am sure that North Yorkshire county council, which is Conservative controlled, and City of York council, which is Labour controlled, will co-operate on these matters, but how long will the process take? The Bill requires local authorities to undertake an immediate review in their areas. If the hon. Lady is saying that she believes that that fits hand in glove with what the Government are saying in their White Paper, no doubt the Minister will tell us how much he welcomes my hon. Friend's Bill, and particularly the clause that I am addressing. There must be a re-examination. We must ensure that we have appropriate speed limits.

Motorists are driving too fast on country roads, especially through or near villages. For many country lanes, the 60 mph speed limit is now inappropriate. What we should do to deal with the problem does not permit an easy answer. If we begin to impose a lower speed limit, signs must clearly demonstrate it, whether it is 40 or 50 mph.

We have made great progress with speed limits in recent years. Countless villages in my constituency had no speed limit when I was first elected. They now have a 30 or 40 mph speed limit, traffic-calming measures and much improved road signs. Those features have made a huge difference to road safety in terms of reduced accidents and a feeling of greater safety and protection among families and children who live in the villages when, for example, children are going to school.

We must have also regard to the motorist, who is not always sure what the speed limit might be. We need to spend on signs as well as cameras. There needs to be uniformity, and speed limits need to be easily understood. However, I am in favour of more restrictions in rural communities, and especially near schools. In the York suburbs of my constituency, there are 20 mph speed limits and speed bumps outside school gates. The speed limit outside some rural schools is 60 mph. That cannot be right. We must ensure that there is the same protection for children going to schools in rural areas as in urban areas.

I am not sure that it is necessary for 20 mph limits to operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. However, if there are speed bumps it is not possible to travel at more than 20 mph anyway.

We must redress the balance and local authorities must undertake reviews, with the support and guidance of Government. As has been said, I believe that there must be local consultation. In my constituency, local views are generally well known. Rural residents are already making their views clear to me on speed and on the volumes of heavy traffic on country lanes, which are being used as rat runs. These are not easy matters to resolve, but we should air people's concerns at every opportunity and find some way of dealing with the issue.

There should be a review of speed limits. All the matters that my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire has raised in his Bill seek to address issues of concern to our constituents, whether as road users, pedestrians or parents worried about their children. I believe that these issues will return to us, whether or not the Bill reaches the statute book. I entirely agree with what the hon. Member for Tooting said about that.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing these matters before the House. He has one simple aim, it seems, and that is to save lives. There is no more important matter for the House than that.

11.14 am

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), even though it seems that he got out of bed this morning on the wrong side. I think that he was in a slightly ratty mood. He suggested persistently that everyone in the House breaks the law when it comes to speed and mobile phones. None the less, I congratulate him most warmly on his luck in coming second in the ballot. I, too, have managed to do that during this Parliament, so I know the feeling. As I recall, it is a combination of great elation and then great trepidation as one wonders how one's staff will deal with the deluge—I am sure that the hon. Gentleman recognises the word—of correspondence and suggestions that follows, setting out the most appropriate changes in the law. The additional work can put a strain on any Member's office. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and his staff have had that experience.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman also on preparing a good-looking Bill. It is well written and it has obviously been drafted by those who have some knowledge of the issues. Many Members who have not had our luck in securing second place in the ballot do not necessarily realise that everything is down to the Member who is in charge of the Bill. One cannot use the parliamentary draftsmen and it is necessary to prepare and produce the Bill and get it into the Vote Office in a short time. All that happens after having had relevant consultations with those who have an interest in the chosen subject. It is by no means easy, especially when the Member is also an Opposition Whip. On top of that there is the constituency work to deal with. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman most warmly on managing to produce a good-looking Bill in the short time that he has had.

I have much sympathy with many of the aims in what the hon. Gentleman described as his Christmas-tree Bill. I am not sure whether he meant that it has coloured lights that flash. I suspect that he meant that it deals with a number of disparate but slightly related subjects. I shall concentrate my remarks on some of them.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not be offended—I shall try to do this as gently as possible—when I say that I shall raise some issues about the wording of the Bill and some concerns about whether the clauses will achieve what they have set out to do. If the Bill gets into Committee—I know that I will regret saying this—I shall be happy to serve on it. I have said it now, and it will be in *Hansard* tomorrow. I shall be happy to assist the hon. Gentleman in any way that I can in Committee. The hon. Gentleman should bear in mind when deciding who to suggest to the Committee of Selection should be appointed as members of the Committee that I do not agree with everything that is in the Bill.

The long title is about as long as my arm, and will therefore allow many amendments and changes. That is a good thing in many ways, but for the Member in charge it can be a double-edged sword. My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox), who is no longer in his place, did not try our patience but he was ingenious in introducing many other subjects that he thought should be in the Bill. Perhaps he, too, should be a member of the Committee. Other matters will have to be fitted into the long title and the hon. Gentleman may find that he has one or two problems in keeping his Bill under control once he gets it into Committee, particularly if he has Members on it who have an interest in these matters. There is quite some scope for amendment. The Bill may come back on Report containing about 2,000 clauses. The hon. Gentleman needs to be careful about that.

Clause 1 deals with snow and ice. It is an important subject and local authorities do not always give it the consideration that it deserves. They take the view that it does not snow that often in Britain. It certainly does not snow that often in Liverpool. Local authority policy rests on fingers being crossed and hope. Whether that is a reasonable policy would, under the Bill, be a matter for the courts to consider. Given the pressures on resources to which every authority will always be subject, no matter how many resources they have, there will always be the question of how much should be done.

The House of Lords decision in Goodes *v.* East Sussex County Council was most unwelcome. For many years many of us had thought that a local authority had a statutory duty, at least in respect of its main roads and the

[Maria Eagle]

main trunk roads that are used through cities. In my case the local authority has responsibility for a city. I accept that many Opposition Members represent rural areas and the problems are slightly different in those areas. As the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) explained, it is not easy to grit 700 miles of country lanes. However, there are similar problems in cities, not least because their higher populations mean that there are a lot more road users. The road network may be smaller in terms of the miles travelled, but the potential for accidents and problems in snowy conditions is just as great—in some cases, in fact, it is greater.

Mr. Dismore: A particular problem in cities relates to housing estates. Sometimes it is a little ambiguous which road is under the control of the local authority's highway authority and which is under the control of the housing department. That has certainly led to confusion and problems in my area. Is it the same in Liverpool?

Maria Eagle: I am afraid that it is. I suspect that the local authority will not thank me for that, but it is Liberal Democrat-controlled, so I am not too concerned.

Mr. Greenway: Where are the Liberal Democrat Members?

Maria Eagle: Indeed—not here, for certain. One problem is that if there is any dispute, or if the ice is on a minor road or on one in an estate, people simply do not grit. There is no argument about who should do it; it simply is not done. I am sure that that is a problem in many areas apart from my own.

The judgment in Goodes *v.* East Sussex County Council was unwelcome for several reasons. One has a great deal of sympathy with the original plaintiff in this case, who suffered catastrophic injuries as a result of skidding on black ice. From what I can tell, there is no indication that he was driving badly. His car simply hit a patch of black ice which had not been treated. The case went all the way up to the House of Lords, and the judgment changed at every stage; the plaintiff lost at first, won in the Court of Appeal and lost in the House of Lords.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): Even with gritting, there will be bad conditions on roads. One cannot get away from the fact that there will be ice on the roads—a driver's responsibility is to drive with regard to prevailing conditions. Whether the road is icy, or whether salt or grit has gone down, one should have regard to the conditions. I have a slightly different view of the judgment and whether it was right to compensate someone for crashing a car in those conditions, when, as a driver he should have been aware of them.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman is right that the driver should have been aware of conditions. However, one cannot see black ice on the road, so the hon. Gentleman takes a harsh view of the matter. My sympathy with the original plaintiff, who is not a constituent or anything like that, may derive from the fact that, when I practised as a solicitor, I tended to act for plaintiffs in personal injury cases. I do not think that that is an interest that I should declare, but I used to deal with cases on behalf of people like Mr. Goodes. In such instances, huge changes in the common law are made in the House of Lords, but someone always suffers. In this case, a man suffered catastrophic injuries.

My concern about the law, as it has been left by Goodes *v.* East Sussex County Council, is that there is clearly no liability on any local authority faced with similar litigation. During my time in the House, and from my own experience, I have noticed that when there is no potential liability on an authority for failing to carry out what one thought was a statutory duty, or when that liability is wiped out by such cases, it can be tremendously tempting not to continue to make sure that the liability is protected against. I understand, that in this case, local authority associations, as one would expect, have acted responsibly and said that they will continue to implement their code of practice. However, the case of Goodes *v.* East Sussex County Council cries out for legislative action to clarify the situation.

Looking at the judgment, I noticed that East Sussex county council took such action. Lord Hoffman said in his judgment:

> "Although the council denies it has a statutory duty to keep the roads free of ice, it does in fact make considerable efforts to do so. The Highway Superintendent receives weather forecasts from the Southampton Meteorological Office and decides whether and when to send out the council's fleet of gritting lorries. Each lorry has a route to cover. The council follows a Code of Good Practice issued by the Association of County Councils and three other local authority associations. This says, among other things, that the salting should be completed before the morning rush hour".

In this particular case, therefore, it seems as if the local authority did its best to implement good practice. It did not get to the patch of road that poor old Mr. Goodes was driving on before he had his accident, so it was not gritted.

In general, local authorities have reacted by saying that they will continue to implement the code of practice. East Sussex did that, but that did not prevent Mr. Goodes's accident. I am slightly concerned because, without a change in the law to clarify whether or not liability lies with the local authority in any instance, the case leaves us with no one liable for problems on the road surface rather than those that relate to the fabric of the road surface—it all centres on a definition of maintenance—which cry out for action to be put right as quickly as possible. Clearly liability would not lie with the local authority in every instance: as the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) suggested, if the driver was irresponsible, one is looking at contributory negligence or no liability at all.

I noticed with interest—as may have some of the lawyers here—that the thing that swung Lord Hoffman and the unanimous decision of the House of Lords, went back to a judgment made by Lord Denning when he was Master of the Rolls. One is not surprised about that: Lord Denning always wrote startlingly good, persuasive judgments that were extremely well argued and made a good analysis of previous common law. It may be slightly unfair of me, but I also remember that many of his judgments left us with an absurd piece of law. However, they were beautifully argued, excellently analysed and often persuasive, so I am not surprised that the judgment can be traced back to Lord Denning's minority opinion in a previous case.

It is certain that something will have to be done. I applaud the hon. Member for North Wiltshire for noticing the problem and giving it priority in clause 1. He was

kind enough to thank his draftsmen, so we know that he did not write the Bill himself. They lifted a provision from Scots law and reproduced it in the Bill. That is often a good thing to do, because much of Scots law is slightly more modern than English law and uses slightly more modern language. It can sometimes usefully update the law. However, I notice that, the section of Lord Hoffman's judgment on provisions on snow and ice cites section 23 of the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984, which the hon. Member for North Wiltshire reproduces as clause 1 in his Bill.

One main argument led Lord Hoffman to the conclusion that English law, in its current form as the Highways Act 1980, does not allow for the clearing of snow and ice. He says that a modern provision similar to the Scottish provision that he cites—which the hon. Member for North Wiltshire has reproduced in clause 1—is to be found in section 150(1) of the Highways Act. Lord Hoffman went on to say:

"But the existence of specific provisions dealing with obstruction show that the removal of obstructions was not in itself regarded as falling with the concept of maintenance."

Rather ironically, the existence of the Scottish provision led Lord Hoffman, following the persuasive arguments of Lord Denning in a previous case, to the conclusion that the current English law is inadequate. There is some irony in introducing into English law the clause from Scots law on which the House of Lords judgment was based.

I am not convinced that the provision is adequate, although I am pleased that none of my Scottish colleagues is here to argue that it is. The provision states:

"The authority who are for the time being the highway authority for a highway maintainable at public expense shall take such steps as they consider reasonable to prevent snow and ice endangering the safe passage of pedestrians and vehicles over the highway."

That would impose a duty, not a power, on the authority, which is a good thing; that is the point of the clause. However, "as they consider reasonable" is a subjective test and almost reduces a duty to a power. That may sound pedantic, but we are discussing words that will go on the statute book, and they should be clear.

In Liverpool over Christmas, we had unexpected snow and ice, when we had a couple of bad days of snow followed by sleet and ice. Liverpool does not get much bad weather because of the gulf stream—my hon. Friend the Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas) knows what I am talking about—but that was not the case over Christmas. The local authority completely failed to clear the snow and ice.

On 27 and 28 December, there was utter chaos in Liverpool. The gritting was not done in time, and then there was an enormous fall of snow. The gritting was then done, but it was too late. The city had no snow plough of any kind. In fact, most of the main bus routes were not gritted and buses could not run. People could not get to work and many cars were involved in minor shunts. The council was severely criticised by the local media, rightly, for failing to deal with the snow and ice. Every other city did fairly well, but Liverpool did not, and people wanted to know why.

The council said that the gritters had been out, and they had, spreading 1,220 tonnes of rock salt. The salt spreaders have adjustable nozzles which were turned to maximum, but it was all too late. It should have been done in advance. The council worked out that its eight gritting vehicles covered a total of 5,928 km, but they did not do so in time. As a consequence, there were accidents, buses did not run and people could not get to work. There was a surge in the number of broken legs and hips at the local hospital, which led to some ordinary operations being cancelled.

There were a number of reasons for the chaos. Not only did the city not have a snow plough, it did not take many of the precautions taken by other cities. Many cities have monitors and sensors which allow meteorological officers to forecast in more detail when bad weather is coming. Liverpool does not have those, but it did have gritters.

Were the steps that the local authority took reasonable, subjectively? Would the council think that? If we believe the press coverage, the local authority said that staff had worked hard and that it had done all it could. A senior Liberal Democrat councillor said that the salt was the problem because it did not work to a low-enough temperature. It was the wrong kind of salt. The salt is mined in Cheshire in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall).

Instead, the authority was going to use zoo poo. [HON. MEMBERS: "What?"] Zoo poo. I think that is excrement obtained from zoo animals. It was said that that would have worked. I find it ironic that a spokesman from a party that usually gets elected by promising to remove dog dirt from streets was now proposing to spread it on every road in the city. However, this was probably a diversionary tactic; the council has gone quiet about zoo poo and has decided that rock salt works well. I am glad to hear it. We need to support our local industries and not put a lot of salt miners out of work in Cheshire.

According to the detailed report that I have, which I will not go through—

Mr. Forth: Go on.

Maria Eagle: The right hon. Gentleman tempts me to go through the report, but I have picked out the best bits. I would not want to bore the House.

Would what the council did be considered reasonable, subjectively or objectively? Subjectively, the council thought it was reasonable. Councillors told the local newspapers, radio stations and anyone who would listen that it had done everything in its power. The grit spreaders had gone 5,928 km, chucking out more than 1,220 tonnes of rock salt. That sounded reasonable to the council. The fact that it did not work was just one of those things.

The Bill only requires that such steps as the council thinks reasonable are taken; it would not create any further liability on the city of Liverpool arising out of the accidents caused in the chaos of 27 and 28 December last year.

It would not create any liability that does not exist as a result of Goodes *v.* East Sussex County Council.

Mr. Gray: As the hon. Lady is a lawyer, she will understand that the insertion of the word "reasonable" in

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the Scottish Act gives the judge the ability to interpret the meaning of that word, so that if a local authority has not been reasonable, it will be liable.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. He may well be aware that "reasonable" is one of those words that lawyers love *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind hon. Members that, according to "Erskine May", a debate on Second Reading should not extend to the details of the clauses.

Maria Eagle: I did not read that part of "Erskine May" before I came in this morning. I apologise if I am trying the patience of the House.

Although I appreciate and support in principle the idea of reimposing some liability on the highway authority in respect of accidents caused to people such as Mr. Goodes, I do not believe that the provision, long-standing though it is in Scottish law, is necessarily adequate. There should be a more objective test.

Mr. Forth: Would the hon. Lady go as far as to say that a measure that places an obligation on someone simply to do what they judge to be reasonable is otiose, and that one ends up with a rather unproductive circularity? Does she agree that if we simply left the clause out, matters would proceed in a perfectly acceptable way?

Maria Eagle: I have a great deal of sympathy with what the right hon. Gentleman says. As I said earlier, the clause reduces a duty to a power. It tells the authority with the statutory duty, "Do what you think is right." To the extent that it imposes a duty, it is good, but the duty is then watered down.

The Bill lacks ambition in that it simply attempts to put right a very small matter that has gone wrong. While we are at it, surely we should try to improve the law. Many elderly people in Liverpool have suffered falls on minor roads and pavements. Is the hon. Gentleman open to the idea of extending the range of people who ought to be protected by the duty on local authorities? The clause refers to

"the safe passage of pedestrians and vehicles".

Does it cover pedestrians on minor roads and pavements in city centres?

Mr. Gray: I am advised that the word "highways" covers all roads and pavements, so the provision would cover motorists and pedestrians in all circumstances.

Maria Eagle: If that is indeed the case, it is most welcome. I wonder whether the Minister will interpret it in that way. I am not an expert on the Highways Act. Perhaps my hon. Friend will be able to tell us more.

I have probably said quite enough about snow and ice, so I shall move on to clause 2, which deals with speed limits. Conservative Members have discussed the provision mainly in relation to rural areas. I am aware that the hon. Members for North Wiltshire and for Ryedale represent rural constituencies. I represent a city, where speed limits are just as important. I shall not go into too much of the detail of the clause, but I want to discuss whether it is as flexible as it should be.

The current law is inflexible in respect of changing speed limits. Conservative Members have explained the hoops through which a local authority has to jump in order to change a speed limit, and have given us some estimates of the costs involved. It seems nonsensical that a local authority cannot quickly and easily move a 30 mph speed limit 100 yards down the road to protect children in a local school. It is ridiculous that that should take 12 months and cost £5,000, as the hon. Member for North Wiltshire told us. I therefore welcome clause 2 to the extent that it places a duty on local authorities—I stress that it is a duty, not a power—to prepare a review of all the speed limits in the area and set out what they are and what they should be. That is a good thing. However, it is regrettable—this is why I said that he might have got out of bed the wrong side this morning—that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire should say that local people should not be consulted on such issues. He expounded a view of local democracy which seemed rather paternalistic in respect of the involvement of local people.

I do not accept that voting in parish council elections, council elections and parliamentary elections every year or every four or five years is adequate in respect of community involvement. I should like people to be much more active in their communities in respect of issues that affect them such as speed limits on local roads. I should like them to be included in the provision as statutory consultees.

In that context, I am concerned about the flexibility of the measure. My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting referred to zone parking, and related instances of his constituents complaining bitterly. He waved huge wads of correspondence indicating that people were most annoyed at not being consulted on matters that affected the streets outside their houses.

When local authorities carry out the reviews in clause 2, prepare an area draft order and propose changing speed limits in a swifter and easier way, it is important that local people should know what is happening, be asked for their approval and have the chance to make an input.

Mr. Gray: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I promise not to intervene again as I have had my say and would not wish to delay the House unduly. I did not get out of bed the wrong side this morning; I just got up rather early and I meant the hon. Lady no discourtesy. I am strongly in favour of involving local people in discussing these matters, but, equally, we must avoid delaying things by using excessively formal, complicated, expensive and difficult procedures to consult local people. Of course local communities must be fully involved in discussing exactly where speed limits should go.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman has obviously woken up now and is in a slightly better mood. I am grateful for his clarification that he is perfectly happy for local people to be consulted. It is important to allow flexibility, however, and I find clause 2 quite prescriptive. It suggests that the review and draft order should be prepared and a decision taken whether or not to

implement it. Would the provision allow for amendments in respect of particular local roads if the council felt that it had got it wrong, or had not taken into account strong local feelings that emerged after the draft order had been produced, for example?

Let me give one example from my constituency which has caused huge upset and an enormous surge in community activity, if I can put it that way. It all arose out of speed limits and traffic-calming measures that were introduced in Gateacre drive and Barnham drive in Woolton in my constituency. Gateacre drive is just south of the main dual carriageway that takes most traffic around the south of Liverpool. It has become a bit of a rat-run because anybody who wishes to travel across the city and does not want to use the main dual carriageway can cut across Gateacre drive. Those who live on Gateacre drive did not like their street becoming something akin to a racetrack as people drove down it very quickly—as I have seen—and so were keen on traffic calming. It just so happened that the millennium cycle track was also sited along that street, so the council took the opportunity of obtaining additional funds to introduce some traffic-calming measures. The traffic-calming scheme that the council chose to use was excessive. It included not only speed humps, or sleeping policemen, but pillows and chicanes—which not only made the road look more like a racetrack than it had, but almost forced cars on to the wrong side of the road to get round them.

The scheme seemed to be intended to force drivers to slow down. However, one could argue that its real intention was to protect cyclists on the millennium cycle route by removing traffic from the route, not slowing it down.

The council consulted on the scheme, as it usually does, and included all businesses and residents on the street. The residents said, "Great. That's exactly what we want. We want cars to go slower, or not to be here at all." However, the council did not consult people on neighbouring streets, although traffic-calming schemes displace traffic to other streets. Traffic does not disappear in a puff of smoke, into thin air.

As a consequence of the scheme, speeds on Gateacre drive decreased from more than 40 mph to 20 mph—which is very good—and traffic volumes fell by more than half. However, rat-running began in neighbouring streets which were formerly much quieter. The people who were now suffering from traffic had not been consulted on the scheme or asked whether they thought that traffic calming was good idea in that particular part of the world. They woke up one morning to discover that much of the traffic that formerly used Gateacre drive was going down their street. They were not happy about that.

The neighbours complained to the council and to me. There was a local authority area meeting which was attended by about 200 people. The issue caused a huge surge in democratic participation in local community activities. It also caused some local residents to block off one of the streets with the purple wheelie bins that the council had recently introduced. I must say that to me, as a mere observer, the bins seemed to be very useful for blocking off streets, although of course their main purpose is to hold rubbish.

Having created that enormous fuss, the council was unable to deal very well or swiftly with its consequences. It was put under a lot of pressure by local people and local councillors, and it responded by panicking. It said, "Of course we consulted. We consulted the people who live on the street with the traffic calming. That is our usual consultation process." It did not really deal with the point that it had not consulted anyone else, including those who were bound to be affected by displaced traffic. Another consequence was that it had to deal with the displaced traffic.

Rather than ensuring that it had had a well-designed scheme in the first place, the council was faced with having to placate local people. It did that by removing, at great expense, the chicanes and some of the other traffic-calming measures that it had just installed. It has also had to install, without any planning, traffic-calming measures in other main streets and side streets. Those were the consequences of a badly conceived traffic-calming scheme. Six months later, there are still problems and irate local people demanding that something be done about the fact that their street has become a rat-run. There have also been accidents in streets where there were never accidents before.

I do not want to deal with the case in too much deal, but I think that it demonstrates that local people have to be asked whether traffic calming is appropriate, and if so, what type of traffic calming is appropriate. Local people know better than council officers where displaced traffic will go and which streets will become rat-runs, and the potential problems on those streets—if a lot of young children live on them, for example. The ideal is to ask those people in advance, up front, before implementing traffic-calming measures.

I think that there should be such consultation whenever any type of speed restriction is being considered. I therefore approve of the concept, suggested in clause 2, of a strategic review of speed limits in the whole city or local authority area. However, we have to ensure that, once a draft order is produced, everyone—not only police and local authorities—is consulted. Local people can spot problems that council officers have not even dreamt of, and they will be very quick to point them out. Moreover, they will usually be right. If that happens, the overall plans will be much better.

I am not quite sure—the hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire has popped out of the Chamber, so he cannot tell me—whether the draft orders will be amendable. I think that they will have to be amendable. In the process of consultation after draft orders are produced, problems will arise and issues will come to the fore. I therefore hope that the hon. Gentleman will be amenable—I shall have to ask him later—to accepting an amendment that makes it clear that the draft order and review process will be a flexible beast and not incapable of change. Subject to those concerns, I should be very happy to support the hon. Gentleman's intentions in clause 2.

I really am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is not in the Chamber, because I do not want to be unpleasant to him when he is not here. However, I should like to deal with one or two of the points that he made in his speech. He said very emphatically that he favours cutting speed limits. Cutting speed limits, whether on rural or city roads, is clearly a major contributor to saving lives. The Library's very interesting research paper on the Bill mentions some research done by DETR and other bodies

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that produced startling figures on the correlation between road speed and accidents and road speed and deaths. It concludes:

"The severity of accidents is closely linked to speed: at 20 mph only five per cent. of pedestrians die if struck by vehicle whereas at 30 mph 45 per cent. die and at 40 mph 85 per cent. die."

The paper goes on to say:

"there is overwhelming evidence that lower speeds result in fewer collisions of lesser severity . . . the faster the average traffic speed, the more collisions there are".

Moreover, the faster the average traffic speed, the more likely it is that those who are hit will die. That evidence is quite clear. My hon. Friend the Minister will undoubtedly have something to say in his reply about the evidence that the Government have produced on these matters. As he is nodding, I shall not belabour the point by reading out more statistics. However, I look forward to hearing what he has to say.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire made it clear that his Bill aims to reduce speed limits. However, he went on to say—I hope that I am not misquoting him—that he was not very keen on additional signage or traffic calming.

I do not see how one can achieve cutting speeds in practice—one could do it in theory, of course, by cutting speed limits—without signs and traffic-calming measures.

The hon. Gentleman did not refer to speed cameras, and he would not let me intervene to ask him about them. They are very effective, but they are much more expensive than signs. In the constituency example that I gave, it would, in my view, have been much more effective to stick a camera on one side of the road and prosecute and fine a few of the motorists who drove too fast. That would have solved the problem of chicanes, but of course the council said that doing that would be much more expensive.

I am intrigued to know how the hon. Gentleman, who wants to make it easier for local authorities to cut speeds and therefore cut deaths in their area, intends to ensure that that wish can be translated into practical effect if he is not willing to put up signs or have traffic-calming measures. We may have to wait until the Bill is in Committee or on Report to find out. I do not think that exhortation works. We can exhort drivers to drive more safely and stick to the speed limit all we like, but if there is no enforcement or practical way of ensuring that drivers comply, we will not necessarily see the results that we want.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be amenable to considering this practical aspect of ensuring that his Bill, if it becomes law, works. There is nothing worse than putting a Bill on to the statute book if it has no effect. We are not here to put declaratory hopes on to the statute book; we are here to make law and to ensure that it is enforced and has the desired effect.

I want briefly to discuss clause 4 on the use of mobile phones. This has already been raised not only by the hon. Member for North Wiltshire but by my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting, who made some passionate remarks. He is clearly very keen on banning the use of mobile phones in cars. I can see the point of that.

I, too, have seen people driving not as well as they might, whether on a motorway or in an inner-city area in London or Liverpool. I have seen them clutching mobile phones or, as my hon. Friend said, having a mobile phone under their chin while holding a cup in their hand and therefore not being in control of their vehicle. That is indicative of a driver's complete lack of willingness to ensure that he or she is driving safely. There is no doubt that such a sight shows that the driver does not care whether he or she is in charge of the vehicle and is either underestimating the risk of accidents or does not care. It is certainly reckless, as we would say in the law, and such activity could result in a crash, injury or damage.

Such behaviour must be seen for what it is—recklessness. However, the question then arises as to whether the law needs to be changed. It has already been pointed out that using a mobile phone in a car is not unlawful. It may bring into question whether one is in control of the vehicle, whether one is driving without due care and attention and, in certain circumstances, whether one is driving recklessly or even dangerously, but it is not unlawful. However, I know—as will anyone else who is aware of these matters—that the police can and do stop drivers when using mobile phones and charge them with driving without due care and attention.

I welcome the hon. Member for North Wiltshire back to the Chamber. I am afraid that he missed some of my questions, but I will speak to him outside at some point. I do not blame him for leaving briefly—let me make that clear.

Mr. Gray: I apologise to the hon. Lady and to the House for my discourtesy in having to leave to make an urgent telephone call. I look forward to hearing her questions in Committee. However, after nearly an hour of her speech—which I have greatly enjoyed, as she has said some very useful and important things—I hope that we do not reach the point where she would not have the opportunity to serve on the Standing Committee because we were unable to give the Bill a Second Reading this morning.

Maria Eagle: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. He need not worry too much; I had not realised that I had been talking for quite so long. I am enjoying talking about his Bill so much that I have not got through my speech quite as quickly as I had originally intended. However, I am speaking about the final subject that I wish to discuss. The hon. Gentleman will no doubt be grateful that I will not be discussing all the clauses, otherwise my speech might be closer to two hours.

The use of a mobile phone, when held in a hand that should be on the wheel, is an indication of a lack of care. There is no doubt about that. I do not advocate the use of mobile phones in cars. There is an issue about whether mobile phones that are not hand-held but are plugged into an earpiece, or car phones, are equally distracting. I wondered why the hon. Member for North Wiltshire wanted to ban the use of mobile phones, given that the police think that they already have sufficient powers to deal with the issue. The hon. Gentleman's explanatory notes were most helpful. I am trying to find the relevant part.

I understand that the hon. Gentleman believes that the distraction of the telephone call itself, and the driver's hand being away from the wheel, make the activity one that should be unlawful.

Mr. Mike Hall (Weaver Vale): Paragraph 7.

Maria Eagle: I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Gray: Perhaps I may give the hon. Lady a moment to check the note to which she was referring. It is true that all sorts of things, including speaking into a hands-free mobile phone, divert the driver's attention. Eating, drinking and smacking the kids are other examples of precisely the same thing. *[Interruption.]* I am proud of the fact that I smacked my kids when they were smaller. I am not politically correct in these matters. I am content to admit that, but the hon. Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas) is horrified.

To return to the point, if we could ban all those activities, it would be useful to do so, but no law could do so. The use of a hand-held mobile phone could usefully be banned, although that would not achieve quite as much as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) might have wished.

Maria Eagle: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his clarification.

I have been directed to the sentence that I was looking for, which is in paragraph 7 of the explanatory notes. It states:

"The combination of reduced physical control of a vehicle (while holding the telephone) and loss of concentration on driving (while having a conversation) is seen as posing a sufficiently serious risk".

The hon. Gentleman seems to be saying that there need to be two elements—two distractions. That is what makes a mobile phone worse than, for example, listening to a radio in the car. That is a distraction, but he does not propose to ban it. I have a great deal of sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's view.

Without going into great detail, I shall point out a problem with the clause. It refers to

"using a mobile phone which is held in a hand."

Every mobile phone is, by its nature, a hand-held device. One can use a hand-held device without having it in one's hand. My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting gave us the example of his constituent driving along with a mobile phone on his shoulder, not holding it in his hand, because he had a drink in his hand.

If the hon. Member for North Wiltshire rereads his clause and considers the statutory interpretation of it, he will see that he may be outlawing the use of a mobile phone held in the hand, not the use of a mobile phone that is not held in the hand. He needs to be careful about that.

I shall not provide further examples because of the strictures of "Erskine May", which Madam Deputy Speaker cited earlier. We can discuss the matter further in Committee. I see the hon. Gentleman's point, but I want to see the clause tightened up.

The Association of Chief Police Officers says that the police have sufficient powers now to deal with the use of mobile phones in cars. They charge people with driving without due care and attention. They charge drivers whom they see using mobile phones with not being in proper control of the vehicle.

It is incumbent on Members of Parliament to be careful that when we legislate, we are doing something that is necessary, that will improve the law, and that will make things better—and that we are not just putting declaratory statements, wishes and hopes on to the statute book. I know that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) would be nodding vigorously if he were in his place. I happen to agree with him about that. Laws that we put on to the statute book should make a real difference, otherwise there is no point in our doing so.

Has the hon. Member for North Wiltshire had any discussions with ACPO, or even with his local constabulary, about whether the police believe that the additional power would be useful? The problem is that, at present, the police believe that they have the powers to deal with the matter. They do not believe that the law needs to be changed. How would a change in the law affect enforcement? Perhaps the hon. Gentleman has held consultations with his local police force or with ACPO that have shown him that the change would make a real difference. If there is no real difference, we should be giving the police extra powers—in principle, I am certainly not opposed to that—that they cannot use for various reasons, or will not need to use because their existing powers are sufficient. That will not solve the problem.

If driving while using a mobile phone were to be made unlawful and the penalties in the schedule were accepted, what difference would that make in dealing with those who committed such offences and are punished for doing so? The police say that they already have a way to deal with those offences. The hon. Gentleman may think that his measure is the answer and that it will make a big difference.

Mr. Gray: I am reluctant to keep bouncing up and down because I have had my say, but as the hon. Lady asks me a question, I must answer.

By and large, the police and ACPO tend not to welcome new laws; their resources are so stretched under the Labour Government that they do not want to enforce many new laws. I understand that point. However, that in itself would not be a good reason for failing to bring in a beneficial law. The measure would be a benefit because, at present, the police have to prove dangerous or negligent driving in order to pick up someone for using a mobile phone while driving. Furthermore, it would send out a message to the public and to drivers: "Don't do it; it's against the law". There is an element of public relations.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman makes the interesting point that his Bill would put on to the statute book a declaratory wish that people should not drive with mobile phones in their cars. Although that might be helpful, I am not sure that legislation should be about declaratory wishes—therein lie problems.

I agree that the measure might make the law easier to enforce, but only if the police were to say that the current law is inadequate. They do not say that, however; they say that the law is adequate for the three types of offence on which they can currently prosecute. The hon. Gentleman may remember the widely reported case of a constituent who was given a ticket for eating while she was at traffic lights in her car; she was accused of not

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being in proper control of her vehicle. Anyone using a mobile phone while driving could be charged with the same offence.

The hon. Member for Ryedale is a former police officer. Does he have views on that matter? We must consider carefully before we put on to the statute book laws that are merely wishes for better behaviour; there should be laws that the police can enforce. If the police say clearly that current legislation affords them adequate powers of enforcement, it would be better to omit the provision.

I remain to be convinced, however. During Committee, the hon. Member for North Wiltshire may be able to persuade me. I am not against the idea per se; unlike some of his right hon. and hon. Friends, I do not believe that banning in itself is necessarily bad. If he can convince me and some of my hon. Friends that the measure would make a real contribution to the prevention of the scourge and would ensure that drivers do not use mobile phones, I shall be happy to support the clause.

Is the hon. Gentleman opposed to the use of mobile phones that can be held in the hand, but that also have an earpiece or are car phones? That needs to be clarified. If he is saying that mobile phones should not be used in cars at all, that is certainly clear. However, I have used a mobile phone with an earpiece in my car; I do not consider that is any worse than listening to the radio or to a music tape. The hon. Gentleman may disagree. If the use of a mobile phone in a car is to be made unlawful, the way in which it is used should be made much clearer so that we do not inadvertently break the law. We certainly do not want to do that.

I have probably detained the House for long enough on the few points that I wanted to make—[HON. MEMBERS: "No.!"] I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be glad to hear that I do not intend to deal with any more clauses, but perhaps we can discuss them in the Standing Committee—on which I should be happy to serve if the Bill gets that far.

I reiterate my congratulations to the hon. Gentleman on his luck in winning second place in the ballot this year. Perhaps the only difference between us is that I chose a better year in which to be lucky.

12.15 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) on her speech. I agree with much of what she said. She spoke for an hour, but she made good, salient points throughout. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) left the Chamber, making admiring comments about the hon. Lady's contribution. I understand that he is now broadcasting to the nation, via the Jimmy Young show, on the subject of mobile phones, so he has taken the arguments elsewhere.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) on coming so high in the private Members' ballot and on introducing a Bill on transport. All of us, as constituency Members of Parliament, are aware that our constituents care passionately about many transport issues; they are the subject of much of our postbags. As we have heard today, they are matters of legitimate debate. I am sure that when the Bill receives its Second Reading, there will be many interesting hours of debate in Committee about which of its provisions should make progress.

My hon. Friend is my parents' Member of Parliament. He is a most assiduous Member. He has done himself proud in introducing the Bill, and I am sure that he will do so again in shepherding it through Committee.

We have had a good debate on some pretty important subjects, the first of which relates to the much-quoted case, Goodes *v.* East Sussex County Council. The ruling was that the absolute duty to keep the fabric of the highway in good state of repair did not include the duty to remove formations or accumulations of ice and snow on the road. That ruling, which was given in July 2000, constituted a change in the law. As I said in an intervention on the hon. Member for Garston, that has, no doubt, changed the situation. The Government have been considering the position for some time, and clarification is necessary.

In 1997, in another judgment—Cross *v.* Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council—the Court of Appeal stated that the duty to maintain the highway under section 41 of the Highways Act 1980 was not a duty to keep highways at all times clear of surface water, snow and ice, and that the duty to maintain was limited to taking reasonable steps. A number of judgments and such matters need to be sorted out.

In the case of Goodes *v.* East Sussex County Council, Lord Justice Hutchinson said that the law on such matters was less than satisfactory. Most of us would welcome what my hon. Friend wants to do—to tidy up the law. The solution that he proposes, which is a good one, is to bring the law into line with the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984, under which reasonable steps must be taken. As has been said, that involves publishing plans for which roads have priority for gritting. Local knowledge is relevant. Those in a community, especially those who live in rural areas, have an idea of which roads have priority, but such information would be useful.

We all know that highways engineers' struggling to keep roads safe and passable is as much an art as a science. The United States is large landmass, so it is relatively easy to predict weather patterns. People know that the weather conditions in a town or city 100 or 150 miles to the west will prevail in their area a little later. The Atlantic is to our west and it is sometimes not always easy to predict how the weather will move or what the conditions will be like.

Most authorities have a limited budget for gritting. Therefore, they must be careful to use grit only when it needs to be used to maintain good or better conditions. Sometimes local authorities are a little slow to use grit at the first opportunity. Gritting in moderate weather may mean that the authority will use up its budget before the end of the year. Many local authorities prepare for only one or two weeks of severe weather and have stocks of salt only for that period. This is a key issue.

The Automobile Association, which assisted my hon. Friend with the drafting of the Bill, states that 700 people are killed in winter accidents in which snow or ice is a factor. When we pass our driving test, we all think that we are proficient drivers, but many people do not pay sufficient attention to road and weather conditions. They sit in a warm car, turn on the radio and presume that

everything will be all right. Everyone in politics should consider carefully increased education of drivers on the dangers caused by certain conditions.

Following the outcome of the Goodes *v.* East Sussex case, 12 to 14 people dropped similar cases. My hon. Friend's proposal will make the law a little more straightforward, and it is a good response to the problem. I support that provision in the Bill.

An argument can be made for local authorities to reassess speed limits. However, when I listened to my hon. Friend, I was a little more worried than I was when I read the Bill. When I examined the Library brief, I assumed that speed limits could go up, as well as down, in certain areas, but he tended to concentrate on the prospect of limits going down. I served for 12 years on a local authority and I know that local highways engineers always say that there should not be too much clutter or too many limits in an area. The more there are, the less people observe them. This matter therefore requires careful consideration.

About 1,000 people are killed on our roads as the result of excessive speed. The hon. Member for Garston made a good point when she referred to the Library brief and said that speed limits make a considerable difference not only to the number of accidents, but to their severity.

This country generally has a good record on driver and passenger deaths on the road, but our statistics on children are higher than for the rest of Europe, so examining the need for speed limits on the roads near schools and the better education of drivers and children should be a key priority. Both the Government and the Opposition have taken that point on board.

We can do much more to reduce road accidents and the distress that they cause. When we drive on the road network, we see flowers where someone's loved one had a fatal accident. My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) made a good point about the difficult conditions on some roads in North Yorkshire, and most Members could point to treacherous stretches of road in their constituencies.

Statistics are collected when an accident involves death or injury, but they are not collected as widely as they should be. Many stretches of road are accident black spots even though the accidents do not result in fatalities or serious injuries. On those stretches, serious accidents are waiting to happen. If through luck or judgment people have managed to avoid injury, statistics on the accidents are sometimes not collected by the police. We should do far more to collect information and we could take fatalities and near misses into account in the review of speed limits that has been suggested.

I have reservations about the widespread use of speed cameras. They should be used primarily at accident black spots and not as a means of raising revenue. It is very easy to place a camera at a point where one thinks it will catch many people who are speeding and where it will raise lots of money, but that point might not be an accident black spot. The key priority must be saving lives; the cameras should not be used as a revenue-raising exercise. I was glad to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale, who also speaks, very eloquently, from the Front Bench on occasion.

I have always felt that there is confusion about speed limits. I know that people disregard the limits in certain parts of the road network, and we need to do much more to educate people about speed. We have won the battle against drink-driving because attitudes among the general public have changed. It is now unacceptable to drink and drive, and we are down to a hard core of stupid people who do it and who need to be dealt with very severely. However, we have not yet won the battle against excessive speed. We can do that by changing attitudes as much as by changing the law because, like drink-driving, it is a life style issue. If people appreciated the fact that the danger they were creating on the road could affect their wives, their children or their neighbours, and if they witnessed the heartache experienced by people who have lost a relative in a car accident, their basic attitude might change.

In some parts of the network, however, speed limits are too low. Motorways and dual carriageways are still relatively safe and there are fewer accidents on them than on other roads. Any review ought to consider reducing speed limits in certain areas as well as increasing them in others. Historically, this country has set speed limits that apply 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That has always struck me as odd because road conditions and the amount of traffic affect how safe a road is and what speed is appropriate.

With the new technology that is being introduced, particularly on parts of the motorway network, I wonder whether we ought to consider having variable speed limits. Reducing speed limits on certain sections of motorway helps the flow of traffic, as it has on the M25. However, at 11 o'clock at night, when there is hardly any traffic on certain stretches of the motorway, it may not be appropriate to keep a 70 mph speed limit. As technology improves and the number of signs increases, we should perhaps consider greater variability in speed limits.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire has raised an important issue. Many of the details will have to be dealt with in Committee, but a good review by local authorities would be sensible, provided it was within the guidance suggested by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Secretary of State. Many roads go through three or four local authority areas, and it would be nonsense to have yo-yoing speed limits because each authority, having consulted local people, had a different policy. Ultimately, people are aiming to get from A to B, so co-ordination and common sense are required.

I oppose the clause on mobile phones. I agree with some of the arguments of the hon. Member for Garston. Hands-free technology has changed the way in which people use their mobile phones in cars. The law is adequate, and the police simply need to educate people and to enforce the law. The Association of Chief Police Officers and other policing organisations have not called for a change in the law. It has been suggested that there are many distractions when one is driving a car: children fighting on the back seat, arguments with one's loved one or the radio, CD or cassette playing too loudly. We see people drinking coffee or shaving in their car—

Mr. Gardiner: What?

Mr. Syms: Yes, I have seen people in London using an electric shaver in their car. I do not know whether holding a mobile phone is any more of a distraction.

In recent years, we have had the report of the independent expert group on mobile phones, under the chairmanship of Sir William Stewart. The report said that

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"further epidemiological studies should be undertaken to clarify the relation of mobile phone use to the risk of motor vehicle accidents, and in particular whether the risk differs between hand-held and hands-free phones, and whether the risk of hands-free use exceeds that of other forms of driver distraction, notably conversation with passengers."

At present, we have only anecdotal evidence of people slowing down, but we do not know fully what the effect is. We all know that having only one hand on the steering wheel can be dangerous, but a lot more research needs to be done. We should concentrate on education and enforcing the existing law rather than criminalising a minority who are silly enough to use the phone while driving.

We have considered what is meant by hand-held, and the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) spoke about someone holding the phone with his shoulder as an example of how to get round the provision. Perhaps the definition is too specific. What is driving? Does sitting in stationary traffic count as driving?

Mr. Pound: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the recent case in which a woman was fined for drinking a bottle of water in a stationary vehicle. I have seen someone with a television set on the passenger seat plugged into what used to be called the cigar lighter. Many of us want a wider definition, because the one in the Bill may be too prescriptive.

Mr. Syms: That is a good point. Some cars have televisions fitted for viewing in the back seats. I have been in a very nice Rover 75 with a television. That is a distraction, as even if the passenger is watching, the driver will tend to pick up what is going on.

This may not be a matter for legislation. Do we really want to be a society in which someone who swigs a bottle of water or eats a sandwich in a car can be prosecuted? That would be daft. The traffic police, who do a splendid job, have far more important priorities. When they sort out the aftermath of accidents, they are doing something that I personally would not like to do. The Government undertook a review and thought that the existing provision was adequate, and the official Opposition share that view.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire accepted the provision on seat belts as a Government amendment. I have not yet heard a convincing argument for the need to change. I know that postmen and milkmen do not have to wear belts, and we have heard that van drivers are particularly remiss about wearing them, but perhaps the Minister could tell us a little more about which categories should come under the provision.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale made the important point that travel concessions are a bit of an irrelevance if there are no buses available, as in some rural areas. I am a little nervous about offering a benefit for which there is no costing. As a responsible member of the next Government, I am unwilling to make any commitment. If the Bill goes into Committee, I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire will do more work on the cost.

I understand that the existing law allows local authorities to offer reciprocity. Until we have a cost tag, we cannot go along with that.

Tidying up the law on gritting is sensible. We can support the provisions on assessment of speeds on roads, with amendment. I am yet to be convinced about the rest of the Bill, although I wish it well. I am glad that there are hon. Members who have such enthusiasm for it, even those from the mild and better weather of Liverpool, and that they want to serve on the Committee and sharpen some elements of the Bill so that we achieve decent legislation.

12.35 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) on securing such a high place in the ballot. I am sorry that he is no longer in the Chamber. He seems to have absented himself again, so he is not here to hear my congratulations. I thank him for the kind offer to join his Committee. Unfortunately, I will have to decline it because private Member's Bill Committees sit on a Wednesday morning, at the same time as my Select Committee, and I cannot be in two places at once. I shall follow the deliberations closely for when the Bill returns on Report.

May I tell the hon. Member for North Wiltshire, perhaps via the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms), that I found the letter that he read out at the end of his speech appalling? I hope that the talk about a robust handling strategy did not include me. I have from time to time been seen as part of a robust handling strategy on behalf of the Government, but I assure the hon. Member for North Wiltshire that I should like the broad thrust of the Bill to go through.

I have some severe criticisms of some of the details of the Bill, some of which have been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle), so I cannot support the Bill as it stands. If the Committee has not done its job, I may wish to table amendments on Report. I assure the hon. Member for North Wiltshire that I would deplore any attempt to block the Bill, and I certainly would not be part of it. He referred to the Bill as a Christmas tree. It is probably more of a portmanteau, and he is probably sitting on the case to keep it shut, given the number of measures in the Bill. One or two other measures should be included in it, which I shall touch on in my speech.

I have taken an interest in many of the issues raised by the Bill, as my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will confirm, not least the Goodes case. Before I came to the House, I was a personal injury lawyer for 20 years. I dealt with many road accidents. I suppose that technically I am still a personal injury lawyer; I have a practising certificate, although I have not conducted any cases since I became a full-time Member of Parliament.

The Bill goes some way towards addressing the appalling road accident statistics. There are some 3,500 deaths and 320,000 injuries a year. I hope that the Bill will make a little contribution to reducing those figures.

The first part of the Bill deals with the Goodes case, in which I have taken an interest. I wrote to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary and Lord Whitty about it within days of the judgment. It is a coincidence that the case commenced in the House of Lords exactly a year ago today. We have to ask ourselves whether clause 1 would prevent Mr. Goodes's case from happening again, with the same outcome. The object, of course, is to stop accidents happening in the first place. If an accident happened, would Mr. Goodes be able to obtain compensation?

It is worth reminding ourselves of the facts of the Goodes case, which are set out succinctly by Lord Hoffmann in his judgment. We should note how slowly the law moves in cases such as this. Lord Hoffmann said:

"At dawn on a frosty November morning in 1991 Mr. Geoffrey Goodes was driving his Ford Capri on the A267 at Wellbrook Hill near Mayfield in Sussex. As he moved out to overtake on a straight stretch of road, a rear wheel skidded on a patch of black ice. He lost control and the car crashed into the parapet of the bridge over the Wellbrook. He suffered dreadful injuries and is now almost entirely paralysed."

My hon. Friend the Member for Garston made an important point that drives a coach and horses through the drafting of clause 1. It is illustrated by Lord Hoffman's comments on the council's practice at the time. He said:

"Although the council denies it has a statutory duty to keep the roads free of ice, it does in fact make considerable efforts to do so. The Highways Superintendent receives weather forecasts from the Southampton Meteorological Office and decides whether and when to send out the council's fleet of gritting lorries. Each lorry has a route to cover. The council follows a Code of Good Practice issued by the Association of County Councils and three other local authority associations. This says, among other things, that the salting should be completed before the morning rush hour begins at 7.30. In the present case there had been a forecast of freezing conditions in the early hours and the lorries had been despatched at 5.30. Unfortunately, by the time of the accident, the lorry covering the A267 had not yet got to Wellbrook Hill. It arrived a few minutes later and would have been able to complete its route by 7.30. But a majority of the Court of Appeal decided"—

in the important decision on the facts—

"on the assumption that the statute imposed a duty to keep the road free of ice, that the council was nevertheless in breach of duty. The gritting should have been completed before the time when, according to the forecast, ice was likely to form."

If, as everyone thought it had, the Highways Act 1980 had imposed a duty on the highways authority to grit the road, then, as the Court of Appeal found on the facts, the council would have been in breach of that duty. However, the duty that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire would impose is that the highway authority will decide what it considers reasonable, and the council's defence advanced in the Goodes case would have been based on the assertion that the council considered the action that it took to be reasonable. It would be an absolute defence. Therefore, although I applaud the hon. Gentleman's efforts to correct the Goodes case through the clause, it would not achieve his objective.

Bearing in mind the limits of debate, I shall not attempt to construe the clause at length, but my argument was made well by one of the counsel involved in the Goodes case. Counsel for Mr. Goodes said that

"there should indeed be an unqualified and absolute duty to maintain the roads free of ice or snow, which could be a danger to safe passage. Thus the simplicity and consistency of the old law would be maintained. If it appeared to set impossibly high standards for highway authorities, the answer lay in the statutory defence under section 58 of the Act of 1980. That would enable them to resist claims in all cases except when they had acted unreasonably."

Lord Hoffman said:

"My Lords, it seems to me that this is a view which Parliament might take. There is obviously a case for saying that a person who suffers a catastrophic accident as a result of the presence of ice which, in modern conditions, the highway authority could reasonably have prevented or removed, should have a remedy."

He added:

"I am quite satisfied that Parliament has not yet provided such a remedy."

My concern is that the Bill does not provide that remedy either.

We are told that the wording reflects the Scottish legislation, but it does not necessarily follow that it should apply in England and Wales. We are now in the era of devolution: Scotland can go its own way, as can England and Wales. In addition, we must bear it in mind that, in Scotland, the roads and the weather conditions are very different. In Scotland, there are many more long rural roads that are used extremely infrequently or are wholly impassable in winter, whereas in England conditions are different. They are dealing with a different beast, so it is fair to say that the duty on English authorities should be different from the one imposed on Scottish authorities.

If the absolute duty I have advocated is inadequate or unacceptable, we could impose a duty on local highways authorities to do what is "practicable"—a provision often regarded as the next best thing by those interpreting or drafting statutory duties in respect of responsibility for accident prevention, whether through the Factories Acts or highways legislation such as the Bill before us. The next one down the list is "reasonably practicable", *followed by "reasonable". The list ends with the phrase* used in the Bill, which provides for a wholly subjective assessment of reasonableness. That would not achieve the objective.

We obviously have to do something. I received a note from the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers about this matter. I am a member of that association, and used to be on its executive committee. It represents those who look after accident victims. The note reads:

"It is simply not good enough to expect local authorities to continue salting and gritting roads as part of their Code of Good Practice on Highway Maintenance—voluntary codes are not enough when people's lives could be at stake. It is inconceivable in this day and age that no-one has a legal responsibility for ensuring major roads are kept ice-free. We've seen from press articles that insurers for local authorities are delighted that they now effectively have a loophole which means that they won't have to compensate people who are involved in accidents through no fault of their own as a result of this ruling. The only losers in this will be seriously injured motorists who will no longer have recourse to the law to help them get back on their feet."

We must act. We must legislate. My concern is that the Bill will not achieve the required objective. If it is not tidied up in Committee, I shall be proposing amendments to it on Report. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire was not in his place earlier when I said that I do not want to frustrate his Bill. However, if the issue that I have raised is not dealt with in Committee, I shall come back to it on Report.

Clause 1 refers to the highway authority, and there does not seem to be a reference in the definition clause to whether it includes the Highways Agency and its responsibility for motorways. Does it include Transport for London, which now has responsibility for trunk roads? If my hon. Friend the Minister is aware of the answer to my question, perhaps he will respond when he replies. If not, perhaps it is something that should be probed in Committee. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would like to be convinced that what he is trying to do will apply not only to county authorities but London boroughs, London as a whole through the Mayor, Transport for London and the Highways Agency.

If the Government are not happy with the clause—they may be dissatisfied with it for the reasons that I have given—I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will take

[Mr. Andrew Dismore]

into account when he replies that there is a strong feeling on both sides of the House so far expressed that the issue must be tackled. If the Government cannot see their way to accepting clause 1 as drafted, I hope that they will at least think about bringing forward their own measures at the earliest opportunity, perhaps slightly tougher ones than those presently proposed to deal with a serious lacuna in the law. It has existed for only six months but I can that during this winter, perhaps, there will be a series of severely injured motorists who would otherwise have received compensation and now will not.

Mr. Pound: I am following my hon. Friend's logic, as is most of the House, with considerable admiration. Is he aware that there is a degree factor, and that road gritting and road salting are not in themselves the solution? I draw my hon. Friend's attention to motor-cyclists and riders of other powered two-wheelers, who even on a gritted or salted road may still be in danger. Does my hon. Friend agree that when the clause comes to be re-examined, the quantity and quality of surface preparation should be taken into account, with particular reference to the needs of motor-cyclists and other riders of powered two-wheelers, who seldom survive crashes in such circumstances?

Mr. Dismore: My hon. Friend makes an important point. In terms of how snow and ice should be dealt with, current legislation refers to reasonable steps or an absolute duty. It does not refer specifically to grit or salt.

Perhaps I can reassure my hon. Friend to some extent. The residual Highways Act 1980 places a statutory duty on a local authority that is absolute, and that is to ensure that a road surface is safe, irrespective of ice and grit. The judgment in the Goodes case was that there is no duty to clear ice and grit, but there is a residual absolute duty on the highway authority to ensure that the road is safe in normal circumstances.

When I was practising, I took cases on behalf of motor-cyclists in relation to bad potholes, and won. Perhaps there is some comfort for my hon. Friend left in the existing law, despite the Goodes decision.

May I move on to the issue of speed limits, which is close to my heart and those of my constituents? Hendon has some of the busiest and most important roads in London. The north circular road goes through my constituency, as well as the A1, the A5, the A41 and the M1, to name just a few, which are all busy roads. May I tell the hon. Member for Poole that we have our share of serious accidents on those trunk roads? I was a little disconcerted by his rather dismissive attitude to what can happen on those major roads, which go through areas where people live.

People coming from the north may zoom down the M1, which goes through my constituency, get off at the end and then zoom down the A41 or the A5. However, when doing so, they ought to recognise that they are going through areas where people live. Those major roads have intersections with residential roads, and some of the most serious accidents occur at such intersections. Drivers have not got used to the lower speeds of the urban area, having coming off the fast roads, and run into people who are driving, quite rightly, at a speed suited to that area. That is a main cause of bad accidents at some of those intersections.

I am pleased that the Highways Agency and Transport for London are tackling major black spots. However, some road schemes to reconfigure major roads are phenomenally expensive, running into millions of pounds. If I may put in a plug, my hon. Friend the Minister will know that I have raised the matter of Sterling corner with him on several occasions, and I should be grateful if he dealt with it when he replies to the debate. However, I am pleased that Apex corner is to be attended to—hopefully, in the next financial year.

One major problem is that speed limits are seen not as limits but as the norm. People regard speed limits as targets to be achieved, not as limits which should not be exceeded. People need to be reminded that a 30 mph speed limit does not mean "Thou shalt drive at 30 mph". The law says that one should drive at a safe speed, and no faster than 30 mph.

Mr. Syms: There is also a problem, especially on motorways, when people drive too slowly. Doing 35 mph when the prevailing speed is faster can be a danger in itself. There may also be a case for a minimum speed limit in one or two instances.

Mr. Dismore: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. Personally, I am more concerned about trunk roads in my own constituency. However, the hon. Gentleman makes a fair point in relation to the M1. When I travel from Hendon into central London, I go along the A41 at 40 mph, and someone will inevitably be behind me, flashing at me to get out of the way, then zooming past at 70 mph. I am driving safely at 40 mph, and the person behind me is driving incredibly foolishly. The hon. Gentleman may say that trunk roads are safe, but part of the problem is that people are trying to drive too fast and force others to drive too fast through their aggressive driving tactics.

Mr. Syms: A big advantage of motorways and dual carriageways is that, generally, people are not coming the other way, which is why, in many respects, they are safer. Moreover, there are not as many people coming on to such roads. That was the point that I was making earlier in our debate.

Mr. Dismore: I disagree. If the hon. Gentleman follows the A41, he will see that it goes through a series of major traffic light-controlled junctions. Problems occur at traffic lights when people are travelling too fast and are unable to stop at a red light which they had not anticipated. As a result, collisions occur.

A couple of years ago, as part of its duties under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, Barnet council, which was ahead of the game, conducted as part of its crime reduction strategy a survey of local residents on issues that they considered important. Believe it or not, very high on that list—second, I believe—was the question of bad driving and driving offences, with particular reference to speeding. That shows that residents in my constituency view the problem extremely seriously not just in relation to trunk roads but in relation to rat-running.

As we have been talking about the A41, may I give the example of Audley road in Hendon? One can get on to the Audley road at the A41, just after Brent Cross. People zoom up Audley road and try to get back on to the A41 at Hendon Central in an effort to beat the traffic jam

which tails back from Hendon Central in the rush hour. This is a serious problem to which the hon. Member for North Wiltshire may have provided part of the solution.

What the hon. Gentleman is trying to do is laudable, but there is no point in changing the speed limits if we do not enforce them. We cannot seriously expect a police officer or local warden to be on every street corner all the time. There is no point in proposing a speed limit that does not find favour with local people. Also, we should propose speed limits about which people have no choice using, for example, traffic-calming measures.

I have had a huge petition from the residents of Audley road, asking me to advance the cause of traffic calming. They think it is important because there are lots of children in the street. Frankly, the local authority does not have the resources to meet all the traffic-calming schemes that we would like to see. In the last nine months, I have proposed something like 40 traffic-calming measures on behalf of constituents. However, the authority only has the resources to do a handful each year. Rightly, residents ask whether the authority is waiting for an accident to happen before it does something.

I hope that, in looking at local authority budgets, standard spending assessments and transport settlements, Ministers will see whether we can make more resources available to local authorities for traffic calming. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire may be putting the cart before the horse in relation to allowing local adjustment of speed limits if we do not put in place mechanisms such as traffic calming to make sure that people comply with those limits.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman is right that enforceability and traffic calming are important in some circumstances. However, the AA says that speed limits only work if motorists buy into them. If they understand the speed limit and feel it to be reasonable, they tend to obey it.

Mr. Dismore: That is one of the points I was trying to make earlier. However, if it is physically impossible for drivers to go above 20 or 30mph, it will help to get agreement, if only by default.

We must also look at car design. I have raised the question of bull bars in the past and hon. Members may consider tabling amendments on that subject in Committee. I first raised the issue more than two years ago with my noble Friend Lord Whitty, who told me that the UK had supported a European proposal to tackle aggressive bull bars; sometimes known as "pedestrian chip-slicers". He added that the Government had been consulting on a range of possible options since 1997. Not a great deal seems to have happened since then.

The European Safety Council has claimed that 2,000 lives could be saved and 18,000 serious injuries prevented annually by more pedestrian-friendly car fronts. Why people need giant four-wheel-drive tractors with bull bars in the back streets of Hendon eludes me.

The hon. Member for Poole asked about speed cameras, and said that they should be seen not as a way of raising revenue but as a way of tackling accident black spots. I agree, to an extent. However, we have traffic cameras on the A41. Sometimes they have film in; sometimes they do not. But I know that when the camera goes off, everybody slows down. Although I do not think that many people end up being prosecuted, the use of cameras has an effect on road safety as people think that they are at risk of prosecution. It also makes them think about their speed during subsequent journeys. When those cameras flash, they have an amazing impact on motorists. Perhaps the hon. Member for North Wiltshire should be more open to proposals relating to speed cameras.

Radar detectors are also relevant to the issue of enforcement. There is no point in changing speed limits if they cannot be enforced. I took up with the Home Office recently the activities of a company called Roadnet, which is marketing radar detectors that would allow motorists to anticipate where radars are and thus avoid them. The company quotes in its publicity blurb Mr. Andrew English, the motoring correspondent of *The Daily Telegraph* who

"hails the arrival of the new generation of radar detectors. He says that a radar detector 'will give you the vital early warning of a hazard'."

The hazard is the speeding motorist and not the radar trap that is there to catch him. Such devices are absolutely outrageous and the sooner we ban the activities of Roadnet and its products the better.

I am pleased that when I raised the matter with the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), he replied:

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is due to commence a public consultation shortly on two draft Statutory Instruments which will create tough penalties for both the installation and use of such devices in a motor vehicle."—[*Official Report*, 8 January 2001; Vol. 360, c.428W.]

Perhaps we could jump the gun and suggest to the hon. Member for North Wiltshire that he might incorporate such a provision in his proposed review of speed limits. I am sure that it would fit well within the long title of the Bill. Perhaps the matter could be addressed in Committee.

Mr. Gray: I am told that it is improper for a Bill to cover more than one Department of State and therefore the enforcement of speed limits may not properly be part of this measure. Therefore, I regret that it would not be sensible to include that provision, but perhaps we shall discuss it in Committee.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I have made my point and I hope that in his reply to the debate my hon. Friend the Minister will give me some assurances that the Government intend to take rapid action to deal with the problem.

Consultation has also been mentioned in respect of clause 2. It is extremely important that local residents are consulted for the reasons given by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston. I shall not go into any more detail although I regret the hon. Gentleman's rather dismissive approach to consultation with local residents because they often have better ideas than traffic engineers.

Other groups should also be consulted, including the police and emergency services. The fire and ambulance services often have strong views about traffic-calming measures. We do not want to run the risk of preventing road accidents and then allowing people to burn to death because the fire engine cannot get to them in time. That would surely be throwing the baby out with the bath water.

[Mr. Dismore]

Clause 4 is concerned with mobile telephones. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire said that we all use them. I make no admission one way or the other, but in respect of our earlier exchange, if it is of any comfort to him, I can admit to eating a banana while I was stuck in traffic last week—so perhaps bananas are relevant to the debate after all.

Our starting point in addressing the issue must be the highway code, which says at paragraph 127:

"You must exercise proper control of your vehicle at all times. Never use a hand held mobile phone or microphone when driving"—

and makes the following important prescription:

"Using hands free equipment is also likely to distract your attention from the road. It is far safer not to use any telephone when you are driving—find a safe place to stop first."

I agree with what the hon. Gentleman is trying to achieve in clause 4, but I am concerned that the way in which the provision is drafted may end up giving the impression that hand-held phones are bad and hands-free phones are good.

If just hand-held—or under-the-chin—mobile phones are made illegal because of safety concerns, people may think that hands-free phones are safe. I am concerned that the provision may be sending a mixed message.

We should further consider that issue. First, however, we should have more research on the precise impact of mobile phones on drivers. We could also consider banning the use of mobile phones in moving vehicles. The Library's brief on the Bill states:

"Research from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents in 1999 indicated that using a mobile phone while driving greatly increased the chance of having an accident. The research was carried out using a driving simulator. The study, carried out by the psychology department at Aston university, showed that the danger existed whether the phone was hands-held or hands-free and whether the car was manual or automatic. It also confirmed that the danger remained in the minutes after a phone call had finished."

The latter part of the quote highlights the distinction between using a mobile phone in a car and using a car radio. It is easy to switch off a car radio in traffic. If I have to concentrate more on driving while listening to a tape or a radio play, I can turn off the radio or stop the tape. It is easier to switch off a radio than it is to halt a conversation, particularly if it is a business conversation. After such conversations end, people may also be distracted by thoughts about their consequences. Perhaps we should consider the general issue of mobile phone use—both hands-free and hands-held sets—while driving.

Mr. Syms: I suffer from stress when I have to be at a meeting but am stuck in traffic and running late. I can use a mobile phone to inform someone that I may be late. Subsequently, I can calm down. Mobile phones are not all bad. People can use one—preferably a hands-free one, rather than breaking the law with a hand-held one—to leave a message or to make a quick reply. One advantage of mobile phones is that they can help people to calm down.

Mr. Dismore: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. However, let us not forget that mobile phones, although they seem to have been with us for ever, are a relatively recent invention. We seemed to get by perfectly well without them 15 or 20 years ago. I do not think that traffic congestion is new either.

Perhaps we need to know a little more about mobile phone use. We could address the issue either by banning the use of mobile phones while driving or by accepting the conclusion of the Association of Chief Police Officers that current law is sufficiently flexible to address it. I fully accept the point made by the hon. Member for North Wiltshire that the Bill will send motorists a clear message not to use hand-held phones. As I said, however, I think that it could send a mixed message. As the Bill's current provision is better than nothing, I would support it. However, perhaps we can examine the provision in more detail in Committee and tidy it up a little.

The Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee has published a leaflet entitled "Mobile Phones and Driving". It may not be comprehensive, but it is useful. It states:

"it is safer not to use a hands-free phone while driving . . . never use a hands-held phone while driving".

Additionally—this may deal with the point made by the hon. Member for Poole—the leaflet states:

"use a message service and take regular breaks".

Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister can assure us that a copy of that leaflet is issued to everyone buying a mobile phone or a phone for use in cars. If not, perhaps he will consider making the leaflet much more widely available.

Clause 5 deals with a matter close to my heart—seat belts. My hon. Friend the Minister will know that I have long been corresponding with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on the issue of children's seat belts. I shall deal with that issue in more detail later, when I speak to clause 6. First, however, I should like to deal with a matter dealt with in clause 5—the white-van-man exemption. We need to probe the wording of that clause in Committee, because "prescribed distance" can mean many things. I would hate to see such a seat belt exemption imposed without proper debate and the possibility of amendment.

The House of Commons Library paper refers to fire fighters, who are exempt from wearing seat belts's while putting on their equipment. I know that the Fire Brigades Union is unhappy about that. It issues clear advice that its members should put on their seat belts before the fire engine leaves the station. There is little point in a fire engine leaving the station a minute or two or a few seconds sooner if it then has a crash on the way to the fire, with the result that the firemen are injured and do not reach the fire at all.

I know that that happens from my previous work as a lawyer. I dealt with many cases of fire fighters who were injured when they were thrown about in the back of fire engines because the driver had to brake suddenly on the way to an emergency call. The net result was that the fire engine did not get to the fire because the crew were hurt.

We must recognise the importance of wearing a seat belt. I have some doubts about whether there should be an exemption for van drivers, although I can see the practicality. Let me give an example by describing what happened to me just before Christmas last year. I had been attending a constituency function and was parked in an enormous car park at Brent Cross, with which I was

unfamiliar. Leaving the car park, I had an accident: I was travelling at 5 mph, and I hit a lamp post. That was enough to give me quite a bad cut on my lip, for which I had to have stitches. I was not wearing a seat belt, which was very silly of me, but I thought, "I'm only coming out of the car park. What can happen to me? I'll put on my seat belt once I am out of the car park because I may have to go backwards and forwards." It is surprising how one can injure oneself at very low speeds.

Mr. Syms: Did you sue yourself?

Mr. Dismore: I thought that I would sue the lamp post, but I was not sure that it was insured. Unfortunately, not every accident results in a claim. Never has my advice to disappointed customers in my former profession been more apposite than when applied to myself in those circumstances.

I take full responsibility for what occurred. At the same time, I make the point that slow-speed accidents can cause quite nasty injuries. Van drivers ought to bear that in mind, even when they are hopping from delivery to delivery. The statistics show that light van seat belt-wearing rates are very low—64 per cent. for drivers and 53 per cent. for passengers. I can see no excuse for van passengers not wearing seat belts, compared with car passengers. If seat belt-wearing rates could be increased to those observed in the front seats of cars—91 per cent. and 94 per cent. respectively—it has been calculated, by the Transport Research Laboratory that some 20 fatalities and 270 serious injuries a year could be avoided. Many more white-van men would be alive today if they had worn seat belts, and a lot of serious injuries could have been avoided.

I am concerned that although it is very important that seat belts are worn by children, there is no exemption in clause 6 in relation to an incorrectly fitted seat belt. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire raises his eyebrows. About 15 months ago, I was taking my car in for its MOT—I know that it was more than a year ago because I have had another one since—and my mechanic, who is a very public-spirited chap, said, "Did you know that child seat belts are not tested as part of the MOT?". I think that that will come as a surprise to most people in the House except my hon. Friend the Minister, with whom I have corresponded on the subject. Most people would expect that if they took their car in for its MOT, the child seat belts would be tested along with the driver and passenger seat belts. They are not.

British Standards Institution statistics show that more than 50 per cent. of child restraints are fitted incorrectly. Some 88 per cent. are fitted by the child's parents. They think that they are doing the right thing for their children, but not fitting the seat belt properly probably puts their children in greater danger than not having one at all.

In 1997, 74 children under the age of 15 were killed, nearly 16,000 were injured and more than 1,200 were seriously injured. RoSPA—the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents—estimates that two thirds of those deaths and injuries could have been prevented by proper use of child restraints. The proposal of the hon. Member for North Wiltshire is absolutely on-message, but we must ensure that the seat belts are properly fitted.

Mr. Syms: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Many cars now have air bags, so children are put in the back rather more. As the parent of a seven-month-old, I have struggled with the booklet of instructions for fitting child restraints. That is an important matter for us to focus on.

Mr. Dismore: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that invention. My hon. Friend the Minister is probably getting sick of hearing me raise the issue. I have lost count of the occasions on which I have raised it with him in questions, both written and oral. I last raised it on the Floor of the House during the debate on road casualties almost a year ago. I have since met my noble Friend Lord Whitty. I even took my mechanic to meet Lord Whitty, and I was very pleased that my noble Friend was prepared to meet the mechanic, so that he could explain the problem.

I am glad that the Government are taking some action. They discussed the matter with the motor trade liaison group. The consensus view of the meeting was that it would be impractical to include child restraints as a formal item of test, but it was agreed that MOT testers would in future give advice to vehicle presenters—that is, customers—about the fitting of child restraints, whenever they noticed an apparent problem.

I understand that the Department intended to run a major publicity campaign about child restraints towards the end of January and during February to give advice on best practice on the radio and in *Mother & Baby*, and that the campaign would include the distribution of reminder cards for people to keep.

When my hon. Friend replies to the debate, perhaps he could let us know how the campaign is going. I am afraid that I have not yet seen anything about it, but then I am not a regular reader of *Mother & Baby*. If the campaign does not achieve the objective of making parents more aware and encouraging them to ensure that their children's seat belts are properly fitted, we may need to return to the issue.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am prepared to overlook his suggestion that I am on-message—in no way could I possibly be considered to be on-message—I am interested in the important point that the hon. Gentleman makes. I look forward to seeing the amendment to my Bill which he will doubtless wish to propose, if he is prepared to serve on the Committee, as I very much hope that he will be. We will give it due consideration then.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Unfortunately, he was not in the Chamber earlier when I dealt with that point. Much as I would like to serve on his Committee, I am afraid that private Members' Bills Committees sit on Wednesday mornings, at the same time as the Select Committee on Social Security of which I am a member, and I cannot be in two places at once.

To finish the point on child seat belts, a further problem has recently emerged which was drawn to my attention by the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers. It concerns parents who buy second-hand car seats for their children, who could be buying potential death traps. APIL is concerned about structural defects in second-hand seats. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister will look into the matter.

It is hard to tell whether a seat has been damaged. On the surface, it may look perfect, but a seat that has been in a crash will almost certainly be weakened by the impact

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and should not be used again, let alone sold on to someone else. There is a market in second-hand car seats, as they are expensive to buy new. The Government should do something about the problem through their publicity campaign or by legislating, through the Bill or otherwise, to outlaw the sale of second-hand seats.

The final issue is travel concessions. I put the point to the hon. Member for North Wiltshire in an intervention. The Bill as drafted excludes London, and I am concerned about the effect of that on London. We have mutual arrangements through all the London boroughs, and that works well. It must work, because London is a large, vibrant city and people who live in my constituency, Hendon, want to get to the west end for a show, or may even want to come and watch what I am doing in Parliament, from time to time. Unfortunately, not many have done so this afternoon.

I am concerned about the impact on the neighbouring counties and people who live there. I asked the hon. Gentleman what would happen, for example, if someone who lived in Watford, which is in Hertfordshire, wanted to travel into central London. The hon. Gentleman thought that the answer might be some sort of mutual arrangement between my London borough and Hertfordshire. That will not work.

Some people from Hertfordshire will come into Hendon to go to our big stores, which are excellent, if I may plug Brent Cross as one of the major shopping centres in London. However, they may also want to come to see their Member of Parliament make a speech. To travel from Hertfordshire, they would have to cross the London boroughs of Barnet, Brent and Camden to get to the City of Westminster. A mutual arrangement between London boroughs on that basis is not a practical proposition. It cannot work because several million people live in London—I do not know how many of them have bus passes, but there are probably about a million pensioners—but I doubt that all of them will want to visit Watford.

Watford is a very nice town. Some people travel there from my constituency to do their shopping, but there is no question of mutuality. The idea of implementing such a system countrywide, as the hon. Gentleman wants, falls down when we consider the rural or suburban areas around major conurbations. Probably, the same problem exists in Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle and other big cities.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Age Concern supports the introduction of bus passes that could be used throughout the nation—as do I, but that is not within the realms of a private Member's Bill. Did the hon. Gentleman make that point when his Government introduced a provision that specifically prevented disabled people and pensioners from using bus passes elsewhere?

Furthermore, the fact that the hon. Gentleman sits on the Social Security Committee on Wednesday mornings is a weak excuse for not serving on the Bill's Standing Committee. He makes powerful points on matters of extreme importance to his constituents; we have listened with great interest to his detailed knowledge. I hope that he may be prepared to seek leave from the Social Security Committee on some occasions—perhaps he could come and go between the two Committee Rooms—so that he can give us the benefit of his wisdom in the Standing Committee.

Mr. Dismore: I have to decline the hon. Gentleman's offer. The Social Security Committee is engaged in an extremely important inquiry into the social fund, which also affects many of my constituents. I shall not get a second bite of the cherry in the Select Committee, but I shall get a second bite at the Bill on Report. The hon. Gentleman was not in the Chamber when I assured the House that I am not part of any blocking strategy on his Bill. The measure is important. Hon. Members may think that I hold robust views on private Members' Bills—although not quite on a par with those of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)—but I do pick and choose; this is a worthy Bill.

When I was a member of the Committee that considered the Greater London Authority Bill—the Committee stage lasted for a considerable time—we tried to ensure that there were mutual arrangements within London between the boroughs, and that the existing voluntary scheme was continued. To the extent that the matter affects my constituents, I was concerned to ensure that there were mutual arrangements in London. With the assistance of the Association of London Government, I am pleased that we were able to achieve that.

The hon. Gentleman's object is laudable, but these provisions will not achieve equality throughout the country. Perhaps, through discussion with my hon. Friend the Minister and in Committee, we can explore ways to achieve a mutuality that includes the big cities, but does not cost them as a result. That will be difficult to achieve, and it needs further explanation.

The hon. Gentleman has done the country a service in introducing the measure. It contains many useful provisions, although it needs a few more—including those proposed by myself, my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) and other hon. Members who have spoken today. One or two provisions need to be removed and the measure needs some tidying up, but I wish it a fair wind.

1.24 pm

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. I sincerely congratulate the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray). Despite all the odds, there is always the possibility that his Bill will become law. I know that because I am the successful individual who was drawn 20th in the ballot for private Members' Bills last year, so I was delighted that my Bill became law.

I should also like to mention the excellent, well-balanced and interesting speeches made by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) and the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms). I do not intend to duplicate their remarks because time is pressing and my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) wishes to speak.

Given the views on regulation of the hon. Member for North Wiltshire, I was rather surprised that he was so keen to introduce so much of it himself. Before I comment on the Bill's general remit, I should like to refresh his memory. In the past, he said:

"The setting of standards by which the local authority's delivery will be judged—and the way in which the Government ensure that they are sufficiently robust and demanding—is entirely bureaucratic, to a degree that is beloved of Labour politicians in so many ways. They love committees, bureaucracy, regulations and restrictions. They love telling people what to do. They love to tell local government that they know best, that they will lay down what is best and that if local government does not live up to that, they will intervene. All that is so beloved of Labour in every aspect, and"—

I pause for emphasis—

"so hated by Conservative Members."—[*Official Report*, 23 March 1999; Vol. 328, c. 247.]

Hon. Members will therefore understand why I am so confused about the fact that he has introduced the Bill, which is so fulsome in requiring further regulation, bureaucracy, restrictions and, more important, telling local authorities what they should do. That is at complete odds with his utterances on 23 March 1999.

We can all change position, and therein lies the secret. Being drawn second in the private Members' ballot is such an exciting prospect that none of us can resist the temptation of throwing down our gauntlet and entrusting our hand to new regulation, but we should not be surprised if others do not feel so fulsome in their praise and do not wish to welcome such regulation with so much zeal.

I want to make some constructive points and to concentrate on what the Government have already done to address the serious issues raised by the Bill. I believe that we should stay away from regulations wherever possible, and all that the Government have done to enforce better road safety supports that view. Education and encouragement are sometimes far better than regulation.

I should like to touch on the safer speeds provisions. As has been said, too many people take a cavalier attitude to speed. Speed is a major contributory factor in about a third of all road accidents and leads to far too many deaths. It is the greatest single contributor to casualties on our roads. I am pleased that the Government are doing something about that, but the collation of road accident statistics is so far proving to be extremely difficult because of the number of different authorities that record them.

I hope that the Government might be able to replace that very complex bureaucracy with a much simpler system for the collation of accident statistics. That might take us a step closer to knowing how many accidents are primarily caused by the use of mobile phones, or by any other activity. As someone who is not in favour of smacking, I suggest that a category that includes smacking as a source of accidents would also be very revealing, but perhaps a mite too bureaucratic for most local authorities to consider.

The Government have carried out a complete review of speed management policy to establish where the problems lie, which measures work and which do not and what additional information is needed to develop policy more fully. It is acknowledged that further study is necessary in a number of areas. I know that, because hon. Members will be aware that I am a member of the engineering profession. Many of my colleagues have been called in to give advice to various departments on the range of difficult issues surrounding speed restrictions. That includes advice on speeding cars, unsafe cars, unsafe roads, road surfaces and psychological tests.

The speed review has confirmed a strong link between vehicle speeds and the severity of collisions. There is world agreement on that. I am keen on objective research and, as I shall point out when I briefly discuss mobile phones shortly, one of my primary concerns about clause 4 is that there is insufficient research to support the introduction of legislation. We cannot impose requirements on people unless we can fully and objectively support them.

When a car hits a pedestrian, the degree of injury increases exponentially if it was exceeding 30 mph. In rural areas, however, the damage to car drivers and other people on the roads is much greater than it is on main trunk roads and in urban areas.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire said that he is a horse rider. I hope that he has read the proposals of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on ensuring the safety of horse riders. They call on local authorities to consider horse riders in the development of local transport plans and to consult them directly on appropriate measures for their safe passage. Given his comments about bureaucracy and his unwillingness to consult his constituents, he will have no say in that discussion unless his local councillors are also horse riders. However, he could come to my constituency, where he would be assured of having his say.

Appropriate vehicle speed is an important matter. We know only too well in my constituency, which has roads on which it is possible to drive fast, that speed limits are intended to let drivers know the maximum safe speed in good conditions. Sensible limits should be appropriate to the location and the function of the road, and thus to the safety of all the people who use it. Badly set or inappropriate limits are often ignored and make drivers less willing to comply with the system generally.

We all have anecdotal experiences of speed limits that are ignored because they do not seem to be sensible. Great Crosby is a marvellous small village in my community and a marvellous road goes through that rural area. Local residents do not want lights and they do not have lights. They have a super stretch of road—it could be blessed with potholes, but it is not—with a smooth surface that positively invites people to travel along it at 60 mph.

The signs that houses are close to the road have not led drivers to slow down, so the local authority has been forced to introduce pillows. They are not, to use that politically incorrect phrase, "sleeping policeman"—they have gone. We have pillows in Sefton, with either short bolsters or long bolsters. The road to Little Crosby has little bolsters, which allow the safe, effective passage of emergency vehicles but do not allow the quick passage of normal cars. Normal cars interfere with the pillows, and their speed is slowed. Even in a rural environment where signposting is quite profuse, its impact is limited and physical changes to the road have been imperative. I am afraid that signposting does not offer a long-term solution.

I have referred to the Government's guidance to local authorities, which has been informed by the activities of a variety of institutions and by agencies that support the DETR and its work. I know from my local authority that the guidance notes are particularly welcome.

Technology is marvellous and presents us with many opportunities that are quite expensive. Coupled with the development of technology, however, is the Government's relaxation of practices for changing local

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speed limits, which I welcome. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston went into some detail about speed restriction schemes in her constituency. I must confess that part of me envied her enormously because my constituency had no speed restrictions at all until we received Government funding to fulfil requirements that had existed for years. Measures are desperately needed to reduce speed. We tried speed limits and they did not work, but implementing the new guidance did work. We no longer designate roads by speed limit but by activity. I welcome that shift, which will help the hon. Member for North Wiltshire to achieve his objectives.

My constituency now has roads with a 20 mph limit. We could not have conceived of that just over two years ago, but we now have those limits and the physical restrictions to impose them. That may not suit some people, and in fact those who are most inconvenienced by speed bumps and chicanes are the very people who live in the area where the restrictions are imposed. I know because I drive along such streets every day. Despite the fact that those measures may impede my progress, however, I am greatly relieved because our children are safer. As we get older and have children, as most hon. Members here do, we naturally become better drivers because we know that the child who runs into the road may be our own.

There is genuine concern, however, about appropriate driving behaviour for younger and older people. I welcome the Government's intention to introduce a range of schemes to improve driver performance. I am sure that that will include our performance. How many hon. Members here today have subjected themselves to a test other than the one that they sat many years ago? How many of us know how many regulations we are infringing? My husband constantly tells me that I infringe a great many and that travelling with me is a scary experience. I should therefore subject myself to another test, and I have no problem with that. Now that I have said it, I suppose that I should go ahead and do it just to prove the point. The campaign to raise people's awareness is a process of education rather than regulation. It is a slower process, but in the end it will be more effective.

I think that clause 4, which deals with mobile phones, is absolutely magnificent, but redundant. I refer the hon. Member for North Wiltshire to the Lords *Hansard* of 9 July 1999, when the Road Traffic (Use of Mobile Telephones) Bill was considered. I presume that the hon. Gentleman has had an opportunity to read this excellent debate in which proposals similar to those in this Bill were advanced. Excellent contributions were made, particularly by Lord Carter, who responded for the Government and whose views are the same as mine.

As an engineer, I object to mobile phones and pagers for the same reasons as the noble Lords: they interfere with normal life and can cause people to be rudely awakened. I do not know whether there is mobile phone rage, but I have seen something close to it in railway carriages. I welcome the introduction by Virgin of quiet coaches, much to the relief of all concerned.

Mobile phones have made an enormous difference to all our lives, either because we have been forced to buy them for our children or because they have become a vital necessity to a loved one. I have lost count of the number of older people who now carry them. My staff tell me that they are invaluable when shopping in Liverpool, for instance. The family need no longer horde together; they can walk separately, then home in on one another and congregate in Lewis's. We could not surpass that as a testimony to mobile phones.

The Lords debate concentrated a great deal on sandwiches. I am sorry that we have not been able to dwell on that issue today. Their Lordships had a lot of fun with it, although they made no reference to different varieties of sandwich. They established that eating a sandwich presented much the same problems as using a mobile phone.

The police believe that there is enough legislation for them to deal with mobile phone users who flagrantly disobey the law. Many prosecutions have been taken, and there is no suggestion that that will stop.

If it is true that half the population now carry mobile phones, that equates to approximately 20,000 people in North Wiltshire. If they all use the phone in their cars illegally, that means a potential 20,000 prosecutions, which would be more than for any other offence. I would not support that, because the police have better things to do than to pull up people who are on the phone but driving perfectly safely, as many people do.

The highway code, however, states emphatically that one must not do that. Short of regulation, how do we ensure that people do not? It will probably be a long-term campaign, like the one against drink-driving, which took many years to work but has now proved effective. I suspect that it will be quite a few more years before people will want to put their phones down because they know that using them is not safe, but I cannot support legislation that will make them criminals.

I endorse the Government's action in encouraging mobile phone companies to inform users of their duty to themselves and to the public to use the phone safely. I also congratulate them on their action in informing us directly of our responsibilities and encouraging local authorities to be more proactive on speed restrictions. It is wholly appropriate that roads should be designated according to use, and not necessarily speed, and that we should adopt local solutions for what are essentially local problems, while having a view to the national implications of duplicating various initiatives throughout the country. Such duplication would be to the detriment of road safety.

1.44 pm

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) is an estimable Member, and I believe that this is an estimable Bill. The hon. Gentleman has conducted today's debate well, and in a spirit calculated to see the Bill through to its next stage.

Anyone who listened to today's speeches could have come up with various captions to sum up what has been said. "The hon. Member for Tooting sends off a speeding Beckham." "The hon. Member for North Wiltshire tightens seat belts around Minister's neck." "The hon. Member for Garston goes bananas over zoo poo" Those are just some of the headlines that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire might be able to use in his local press, which I am sure is following the passage of his Bill carefully.

I turn to the serious aspects of the Bill. I have received a letter from a constituent, Mr. Langley, who lives in Glenwood grove in Kingsbury. He says:

"The sight of an elderly gentleman victim left to die, bleeding from a gaping leg wound has stunned your constituents living in this quiet residential road. Clearly far more serious than the regular catalogue of screeching near misses and crashed cars, the use of this road as a speeding cut-through for motorists must now end without delay, and this is now the time for decisive action."

That is a graphic example of the correspondence that all hon. Members receive about road safety problems in their constituencies, the way in which it affects the lives of their constituents, and the reason why the measures on speed limits in the Bill are so important.

Glenwood grove is surrounded by streets in which traffic-calming measures have been put into effect. In Salmon street and Slough lane there are speed bumps and restricted width barriers. There is limited turning out of Slough lane into Roe green. As a result, vehicles that cannot be bothered to use Church lane take a detour through one of the turnings off Salmon street and Church lane and race at great speed down Glenwood grove. To save what? To save a few seconds, but to render an elderly gentleman unconscious on the roadside bleeding to death.

When I wrote to the local council following that accident, I received a fulsome response. It was a positive response, and the council appreciated the concern that residents in Glenwood grove expressed. It said that the council was working in line with Government proposals and the Government's road safety strategy to reduce the number of road traffic accidents nationally by 40 per cent. by 2010. The council pointed out that it had to work within the constraints of the transport for London plan—the interim plan. There are financial constraints, and the council had to prioritise road safety measures. So yet another street has no prospect of any imminent improvement in traffic safety or reduction in traffic speed.

I could just as easily have taken the example of an elderly gentleman who was run down in Preston road outside the Bnai Brith residential home. He did not survive. His tragic death underlined the clear need for improvements in road safety at that point, where sheltered housing and residential homes are located. Elderly people can be expected to take that bit longer in crossing the road.

A new pedestrian phase is to be installed in the existing traffic signals at the junction of Preston road and East lane, but the scheme will not be implemented until the financial year 2001-02, which means that the minimum delay will be six months, and it is possible that as much as 18 months will elapse until action is taken as a result of that fatality. It is therefore with pleasure that I support the efforts of the hon. Member for North Wiltshire to place an obligation on every local traffic authority to review the speed limits that are appropriate in its locality and to take such other measures as are appropriate to reduce the number of fatalities occurring in its area.

The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) spoke of the shocking number of deaths that had occurred on a stretch of road in his constituency which comes under North Yorkshire county council. All hon. Members know of places where action could and should be taken to improve the safety of their local streets and highways. In Wood lane in my constituency, there lives a lady whose garden wall has been destroyed more than a dozen times in the past 20 years. One might think that measures would be taken in respect of such an accident black spot—that bollards would have been installed or other measures adopted to slow the traffic and ensure that traffic is able to pass safely along the road in icy conditions. However, we have yet to hear whether the local council is to implement my suggestion that bollards be installed.

Traffic passes far too swiftly down two streets in my constituency, Grasmere avenue and Windermere avenue; parked cars on either side render those streets tunnels where motorists' vision focuses on the end of the road and they fail to see, for example, a young child coming out into the road, as happened last September on Grasmere avenue. The child was struck down and killed because of the speed the vehicle was travelling. A life was lost to speeding motorists because restrictions had not been put in place, despite the fact that residents had for many years been calling for them. It is essential that there is an obligation on local authorities to review speed limits and safety measures that could save their residents' lives.

I want to be as constructive as possible, because the intention behind the Bill is a fine one. However, I share the doubts that some hon. Members have expressed about clause 1. In an intervention on the hon. Member for North Wiltshire, I stated that I was troubled by his belief that the clause 1 obligation on local highway authorities to

"take such steps as they consider reasonable to prevent snow and ice endangering the safe passage"

leads to an obligation on them to prepare a plan for gritting the roads.

The hon. Gentleman and I might agree that it is reasonable for highway authorities to prepare such a plan. We might agree also that it would be a good idea were they all to do so. However, I cannot see that the wording of the Bill places that obligation on local highway authorities. The clause says that authorities

"shall take such steps as they consider reasonable",

not "as are reasonable". If the clause is to have real teeth and if the Bill is to have real effect in this area, the test of reasonableness must be an objective test on which the courts can make a decision. It should not be a subjective test, which might enable any local highway authority to plead that in its view its action was reasonable and ipso facto it is not guilty even if what was done was not done to an objectively reasonable standard.

In considering the clearance of roads and ensuring that highway authorities take steps to ensure safe passage, I shall touch upon a related issue that is critical when we are considering the usage of roads in local areas. I shall use a case history from my constituency. For many months, I have been battling against a local retailer, Capital Ford, the premises of which are at the junction of Hay lane and Edgware road. I have written not only to Capital Ford but to Mr. Ian McAllister, the chairman and managing director of Ford UK. He took just over a month to reply to my letter, after prompting by two telephone calls. In his letter he was finally able to tell me that the management of the dealership was not its affair but down to another company.

The key issue is that transporters are parking in a small, narrow residential road on a hill that happens to border on a commercial area. Transporters are being loaded and unloaded in that road. That is a clear breach of any safety guidelines for local motorists. It is causing huge disruption to the local community.

The positive ending is that this morning I received a letter from Capital Ford, in which it says that it has spoken to its supplier and informed it that its services will no

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longer be used by Capital Ford. The offending company that was engaged in the transportation of vehicles to the site is no longer being used by Capital Ford. That is a good instance of where "working with the local community" measures can eventually be taken by business to ensure that local roads are kept safe, by making it clear to suppliers that infringements of road safety will not be tolerated when deliveries are being made.

The issue of mobile phones has been dealt with at various stages today and with varying degrees of humour. I do not propose to rehearse the sandwich argument or the banana argument. The Bill—this is a textual comment—at lines 40 and 41 refers to

"a mobile telephone which is held in a hand."

I simply point out to the hon. Member for North Wiltshire that it may well be that if one could show that one was holding the mobile phone with two hands and driving with one's knees that would be a way around the provision. That is not to be light-hearted about the matter, because driving without care and attention is a very serious issue indeed, but one feature of legislation is that Members of Parliament and Parliament as a whole are kept to the words that we pass in legislation. It is therefore important that, perhaps in Committee, attention is paid to tightening the wording of the Bill so that its proper intention can be reasonably debated without Members getting bogged down in semantic debate.

The Association of Chief Police Officers has made its views on that serious issue clearly known. It does not support the clause incorporated in the Bill; it is clear that it has the powers to prosecute any driver who is not driving with due care and attention. Perhaps we need police officers to exercise those powers more forcefully, rather than include a particular proscription about mobile phones in the Bill.

On the question of seat belts, and the clause that deals with the wearing of seat belts by children, I speak from bitter personal experience, as my own niece was a victim of a car crash in the past few years. The driver had not asked or told her to wear her seat belt, and she went through the windscreen, which caused severe facial injuries. I have seen, at rather too close hand, the terrible effect of such stupidity on the part of drivers and adults in charge of children in their vehicles. I have seen the devastating effect that that can have on a child's life, so I give my wholehearted support to the provision, which seeks to raise the penalty for such an offence to level 2 on the standard scale. It should be welcomed by hon. Members on both sides of the House.

The Bill deals with further issues, many of which are commendable. I simply conclude by once again congratulating the hon. Member for North Wiltshire on introducing the Bill. I wish it safe passage through to Committee, and I hope that its essential elements, which are important, will eventually pass into legislation.

2.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) in congratulating the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) on introducing the Bill. It is wide-ranging and even if, as I shall explain in relation to some particulars, the Government are unable to accept every element of it, the hon. Member for North Wiltshire has given us an opportunity to debate several important topics, not least those relating to transport safety.

As with every private Member's Bill, the Government have thought carefully about the contents of the Bill and our approach to them if and when they came to be debated. That is proper, and normal constitutional practice.

The Government have thought more carefully about the Bill than the hon. Member for North Wiltshire thought about our approach to parish councils. It is absolute nonsense to assert, as he did, that the Government are dismissive of the role of parish councils. On the contrary, our rural White Paper contained commitments to a parish transport fund, amounting to £15 million over three years, and funds of £5 million to support the preparation of parish plans. Both of those are due to come in from the beginning of April; not to mention the community services fund for basic services in communities, which will benefit parish councils. Some £2 million funding will be made available for the training and development of parish councils over the next three years.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: Would my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hill: I would love to give way to my hon. Friend, but I have a short period in which to respond to a long debate. As she knows, I have sat here for all but 10 minutes of this five-hour debate, making careful notes. I am anxious to respond to the many important points made during the debate.

The Bill is wide-ranging and has given rise to our customary wide-ranging Friday morning debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox)—my parliamentary neighbour—spoke powerfully about those who exceed the speed limit and the use of the mobile phone. We all look forward to my hon. Friend's active participation in the Committee. I am well aware that he stated his intention to propose further clauses to the Bill. The opportunity to work closely with my hon. Friend on the Committee is a strong incentive to move to a further stage of scrutiny.

My hon. Friend asked how many prosecutions there had been for offences involving mobile phones. He will be aware that because of the character of the law at present, using a mobile phone while driving is not a specific offence. I regret to say that the information is not available.

The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) talked passionately about the A64. I have travelled on the A64 from York to Scarborough and I am aware of the problems on the road. My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) has also been forceful on the subject. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Highways Agency is reviewing the possibility of further improvements to the road. In fact, he has acknowledged that there have already been a number of improvements, including bypasses and an element of dualling.

I note that a commitment has been made to deal with the overtaking lane at Golden Hill, but let me assure the hon. Gentleman that I will seek to expedite progress on

the matter. He will be aware that, before Christmas, I was able to announce the Government's intention to construct a bypass at the village of Rillington in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby.

Mr. Greenway: No, in mine.

Mr. Hill: In that case, it is important that I correct the record. I am glad that we have been able to make that important contribution to improving safety on the A64. I say to the hon. Gentleman that I would be delighted to hear about the road safety days at Lady Lumley's school.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) spoke with singular insight, based on her experience as a personal injuries lawyer, on the Goodes *v.* East Sussex County Council case. I will say more about that shortly. I am certain that the House was gripped by her alarming description of the impact of snow on the normally balmy climes of Liverpool. I suppose the reference to the wrong kind of salt was inevitable. I am absolutely certain that we are all relieved that the Liberal Democrat council has gone quiet on the issue of zoo poo. [HON. MEMBERS: "Where are the Liberal Democrats?"] I propose to come to that in due course.

Let me say to my hon. Friend the Member for Garston that her point about the concept of reasonableness in the Bill was well made and she has certainly inspired us to think further and more carefully about the matter. I should add that the definition of a highway includes roads and the footpaths adjacent to them. My hon. Friend is evidently an enthusiastic supporter of speed cameras, so she will be pleased to know that following an extremely successful pilot scheme in eight districts in various parts of the country, the new Vehicles (Crime) Bill now going through Parliament will permit all highway authorities to ring-fence the proceeds of fixed penalties for speeding offences precisely for investment in the deployment and maintenance of speed cameras.

The hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) spoke for the official Opposition. Let me say at this point that it has been notable throughout the debate that the provisional Opposition—the Liberal Democrat party—has been totally absent from our proceedings today. That is an appalling reflection on its lack of commitment to the important matter of transport safety to which the House has devoted so much time today.

As usual, the hon. Member for Poole spoke with common sense and some originality on a range of issues in the Bill. He asked about the statistics for deaths on snow or ice. According to the road casualty statistics for 1999, there were 69 deaths and 520 serious injuries as a result of snow or ice that year. We are unsure where the report of 200 deaths, which has been quoted during the debate, comes from or how that figure was calculated.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) is another personal injuries lawyer. He asked a great many questions. Time constraints prevent me from answering them in their totality, but I can absolutely confirm that my hon. Friend was the first hon. Member to raise the implications of the Goodes case with the Government and, in his usual admirably assiduous fashion, he has persisted in pressing for a legislative solution. I can assure him and my hon. Friend the Member for Garston that the Government will consider very carefully their observations in today's debate.

I can also confirm that Transport for London is a highway authority. I am glad to hear that the Government have been helpful with improvements to Apex corner in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon and I note his further urgings with regard to Sterling corner. I am tempted to repeat the words of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and say, "Another day, another demand", but my hon. Friend makes a powerful case in relation to Sterling corner.

On the question of resources for further traffic measures in my hon. Friend's constituency, the London borough of Barnet will have benefited from the 22 per cent. increase in transport investment in London for 2001-02 announced by the Government in our 10-year plan for transport last July. In the following year available investment will be 92 per cent. higher than the current base line and in 2003-04 it will be a massive 220 per cent. higher. It is my understanding that the Mayor of London intends passing on those increases to the London boroughs. That really ought to allow ample scope for the large-scale introduction of traffic management measures throughout London. I also draw to the attention of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) the opportunities for the introduction of traffic management measures in the streets in his constituency to which he referred.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon also asked about radar detectors. Draft statutory instruments have been laid and consultation is due to finish at the end of March. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that the Government intend to prohibit the installation and use of such devices in motor vehicles.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon also asked about child restraints. A national publicity campaign on the subject is under way this week. We have had good press coverage on the subject—on GMTV and in newspapers and the local media. Additionally, road safety officers are conducting local campaigns at schools, supermarkets and other places. The campaign includes the advice to beware of second-hand seats. I hope that that, too, will be of some reassurance to him.

I am sure that we all very much enjoyed the way in which my hon. Friend the Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas) teased the hon. Member for North Wiltshire by drawing to our attention the apparent contradictions in his approach to regulation. My long-held observation is that, with one or two obvious exceptions, hon. Members on both sides the House, when they get half a chance, demonstrate an insatiable appetite for interfering in people's lives. It is the duty of a Government such as ours, who are opposed to excessive regulation, to restrain those appetites. That of course informs our approach to parts of the Bill. The House very much appreciated her views on speeding and speed limits, which are born of her expertise as an engineer by training. It was also very good to hear of the benefits of lower speed limits in her constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North reminded the House of the continuing toll of road traffic accidents, not least in his constituency. I am sure that his constituents will be grateful to him for raising those issues in Parliament and drawing them to the attention of both national Government and the local authority. I note his support for the Bill's proposals to review speed limits on roads. I hope to speak about that shortly.

[Mr. Hill]

In the very brief time that remains to me, I should like to deal with the Bill's detailed contents. Clause 1 imposes a duty on local authorities to remove ice and snow from highways and springs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon said, from a very unfortunate accident, in November 1991—the subject of the Goodes *v.* East Sussex County Council case—that everyone of course wishes could have been avoided. Mr. Goodes was very seriously injured when his car skidded on black ice on the A267 near Mayfield in Sussex.

The judgment of the House of Lords in the case, last year, was that there was no duty on local highway authorities under the Highways Act 1980 to remove ice from highways. Nevertheless, I confirm that we expect authorities to continue to salt their roads in icy conditions in accordance with their code of good practice on highway maintenance, which has been in place since 1989. All our soundings with local authorities have shown that none of them intends to cut back on salting roads because of the judgment. Additionally, we have instructed the Highways Agency to continue its usual practice of keeping motorways and trunk roads free of ice and snow.

We have also reminded road users to follow the advice in the highway code that they must take great care in icy conditions. As various hon. Members have said, that is especially important because the reality is that no highway authority can always remove all the ice from all of its roads, whatever its legal duty might or might not be. Even with the best of forelaid plans to salt roads according to a hierarchy of their importance, salting programmes can be caught out by icy weather that arrives more quickly and severely than expected.

Although the judgment meant that there was not a duty in the 1980 Act to remove ice from a highway, we are considering whether a duty is required and the best way of bringing that about. I hope that that is some reassurance to the House and particularly to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon.

Clauses 2 and 3 deal with the review and revision of speed limits. As the hon. Member for North Wiltshire is aware, the Government are committed to improving road safety. In March 2000, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions published the report of its comprehensive review of speed management policy, which was generally well-received by professionals and road safety campaigners alike. Its main recommendations were included in the Government's road safety strategy which underpins our target to reduce deaths and serious injuries on our roads by 40 per cent. overall and 50 per cent. for children by 2010.

I am very glad to note that the hon. Gentleman's own local authority, Wiltshire county council, has taken account of the strategy when developing its road safety action plan. I hope that it can build upon its achievement in exceeding the previous accident reduction targets.

I am also happy that authorities such as Wiltshire are embracing new initiatives like quiet lanes in their search for schemes that balance the needs of motorised traffic with those who wish to walk, cycle and ride horses, like the hon. Member for North Wiltshire, and I wish them every success.

The review acknowledged that for speed limits to be respected they need to be appropriate to the road and consistently set throughout the country. To achieve that, the review recommended the development of a hierarchy of roads defined by their function, an assessment framework to aid decisions on appropriate limits and a simplified method of setting them. Although these initiatives have been broadly welcomed, I am conscious of the need to develop the detail carefully. Public consultation will play a major part in the process and will ensure that the measures implemented are practicable and effective. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is currently engaged in the development of these policies.

Let me hasten on. For the rural road hierarchy, the Transport Act 2000 requires the DETR to undertake a review of the issues that need to be resolved and the Secretary of State to publish a report of the review by November. I am glad to say that that is already well under way. Work has also commenced on the assessment framework and on a new method for setting limits. A provisional enabling clause for the latter will be included in the draft Transport Safety Bill, and will be used as the basis on which we will consult.

I recognise that clauses 2 and 3 attempt to provide new speed limit order-making powers. They also aim to ensure consistency, while allowing the Department's work on hierarchies and assessment frameworks to be taken into account. However, the mechanism employed is rather prescriptive. I am concerned about imposing a large burden such as the assessment of every road in the country on local authorities without consultation. As so much work is yet to be completed on these initiatives, I believe that the clauses are premature. Given my concerns, and the fact that primary legislation has already been identified for any necessary enabling provisions, I have to inform the House that the Government cannot support the clauses.

Clause 4 would ban the drivers of motor vehicles from using hand-held phones. The purpose of the clause is to create a new offence of using a hand-held mobile phone while driving. The penalties would be a level 3 fine and discretionary disqualifications or a fixed-penalty notice, with the licence endorsed with three penalty points.

I fully understand the intentions of this measure. However, we see no need for a specific offence to outlaw the use of hand-held phones while driving. Drivers are already required to have proper control of their vehicles at all times. The police are satisfied that they have adequate powers to prosecute drivers who are not in control of their vehicle for whatever reason. Rules 127 and 128 of the highway code give advice to drivers on the dangers of using mobile phones and other types of in-car technology while driving.

The creation of the proposed offence could even be counter-productive, as the current position provides flexibility. At present, the police may prosecute drivers for failing to have proper control of their vehicle. That is an offence under regulation 104 of the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use Regulations) 1986, and carries a maximum fine of £2,500. Alternatively, a prosecution for careless or inconsiderate driving under section 3 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 might be justified. This carries a maximum fine of £2,500, endorsement of three to nine penalty points and discretionary disqualification. A prosecution for dangerous driving under Section 2 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 may sometimes be appropriate.

This offence carries a sentence of up to two years in prison, an unlimited fine, disqualification for at least a year and a requirement to undergo an extended re-test.

All these powers ensure that the police can prosecute according to the degree of danger involved. The penalty on conviction will reflect the circumstances of each case.

Creating an absolute offence, as proposed in the Bill, could give the false impression that it is safe to use a hands-free phone while driving. The Transport Research Laboratory's research review concluded that the distraction caused by the mental effort of phone conversations is present even with hands-free phones. Although the evidence is largely circumstantial, it all points to an association between phone use and increased accident risk.

Using any type of phone while driving can be distracting, and it is not just phone use that distracts a driver's attention from the road. A specific offence in relation to phones raises issues about other in-car activities. Anything from eating—during the debate, we heard plenty about eating bananas—to tuning a radio while driving can be dangerous and lead to an accident. That is why we think that the current law is satisfactory.

In line with the conclusions of the Stewart group, the Government are committed to continuing to publicise the dangers of using mobile phones while driving. We recently re-issued an advisory leaflet to road safety officers, the police and learner drivers through driving instructors and test centres.

In 1998, we started a national publicity campaign to remind drivers of the dangers of using a phone on the move. We launched a further campaign at the beginning of 2000 to reinforce that message. There will be further campaigns. Mobile phone companies also include advice about the road safety hazards of using hand-held mobile phones in their promotional literature to subscribers.

On clauses 5, 6 and 7, I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Wiltshire for putting the case for the changes in the law relating to seat belt wearing that are contained in those clauses. The Government support them all. There is little these days that is revolutionary in the matter of road safety. Progress seems to be made by small advances here and there which, taken together, produce a benefit that is measurable at the end of the year, when the road casualties figures are published. The changes proposed are minor, but they will contribute significantly to the enhancement of safety on our roads.

Briefly, on travel concessions, the Transport Act 2000 requires the half-fare concessions to be made available on journeys within the area of a local transport authority. In England, that is the district councils, unitary authorities and passenger transport executives. The terms of clause 8 go somewhat wider than those powers. In our view, the existing schemes should be allowed time to bed down before further extensions are considered. We therefore cannot agree to the inclusion of clause 8.

Finally, like the proverbial curate's egg, the Bill contains good parts, as well as bad. The Government are content, if it is the will of the House, to allow it to proceed to Committee, so that we might see whether we can concoct a small omelette of a measure out of its more palatable elements.

Mr. Gray: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I take this opportunity of thanking hon. Members on both sides of the House for their contributions, to which I have listened with great care. There is one notable exception—the party that prides itself on an interest in local matters, the Liberal Democrats, was not represented at all throughout the debate. None the less, we heard a great deal of wisdom, experience and knowledge from hon Members on both sides of the House. I look forward to taking up in Committee the points that were raised. I am glad of the cross-party support and commend my Bill to the House.

2.29 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I have the gravest doubts about a Bill that is peppered with words such as "require", "ban" and "mandatory". I regret that the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) is just such a creature. I belong to a party that opposes bans and requirements and mandatory elements in statutory law—especially with regard to local authorities. My party's belief is that local authorities should be left with the maximum—

Mr. Gray *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 15, Noes 1.

Division No. 113] **[2.30 pm**

AYES

Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baker, Norman
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Cox, Tom
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Greenway, John
Grogan, John
Pound, Stephen
Skinner, Dennis
Swayne, Desmond
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Robert Syms and
Mr. James Gray.

NOES

St Aubyn, Nick

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Andrew Dismore and
Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas.

It appearing on the report of the Division that 40 Members were not present, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *declared that the Question was not decided, and the business under consideration stood over until the next sitting of the House.*

Remaining Private Members' Bills

VACCINATION OF CHILDREN (PARENTAL CHOICE) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 9 March.

ORGANIC FOOD AND FARMING TARGETS BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 6 April.

DIVORCE (RELIGIOUS MARRIAGES) BILL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [2 February], That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 9 March.

OUTWORKING BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 9 March.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 January],

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That, for the current Session of Parliament, Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—[Mr. McNulty.]

Hon. Members: Object.

LANGUAGE OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCEEDINGS

Motion made,

That—

(1) this House approves the First Report from the Procedure Committee, Session 2000–01 (HC 47); and

(2) the Resolution of 5th June 1996 on the Language of Parliamentary Proceedings be amended accordingly by inserting, after the word 'Wales,', the words 'and at Westminster in respect of Select Committees'.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Hinduja Brothers

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

2.42 pm

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I welcome this opportunity to raise an important matter that has not been discussed since events moved on at an alarming rate in the past couple of weeks. The last time that I was fortunate enough to have a debate on a Friday afternoon was in 1998, when I raised the issue of the Prime Minister's press office. Perhaps that was not an entirely unconnected subject.

One never knows what is round the corner in politics. When I opened a particular box two or three weeks ago, I had no way of knowing that the contents would explode on exposure to air sometime shortly afterwards.

The Prime Minister has set up an inquiry into some of the events that have been reported in the newspapers. I very much welcome that as a good move; he acted with commendable alacrity. There are two questions that follow that decision. First, can we be sure that the inquiry will be genuine and independently run and not an attempted whitewash? Secondly, does it have the right terms of reference?

Sir Anthony Hammond QC, who has been put in charge of the inquiry, has spent 24 years in the Home Office and, therefore, is familiar at least with one side of the story. He was the lawyer who advised Ministers in the previous Conservative Government to sign gagging orders in the arms-to-Iraq scandal, and he was responsible for drawing up public interest immunity certificates that suppressed information on collusion by the Conservative Government in the sale of weapons-making machinery to Baghdad in breach of the United Nations embargo. He was criticised in the 1996 Scott inquiry into the Matrix Churchill affair over arms to Iraq because of the advice that he had given to Ministers and, allegedly, for a failure to advise the then Minister, Kenneth Baker, properly. He was also involved in attempts to silence the MI6 agent, Richard Tomlinson, and, according to reports in the *Daily Mail*, he was even sent to Switzerland to attempt to close down his website. Given his record, Sir Anthony is not necessarily the person whom freedom of information campaigners would welcome to chair the inquiry.

However, I went to see Sir Anthony earlier this week and he was kind enough to give me a good deal of his time. He gave me his assurance that the inquiry would be independent and that he had not been subject to any pressure from Ministers. Of his own volition, he has also widened the inquiry to cover the third Hinduja brother. Those steps are welcome. The meeting was fruitful, and the proof of the pudding will be in the eating when the inquiry finally reports. My judgment of how genuine the inquiry is will be suspended until the report is published, which is the only sensible course of action.

It is important that Sir Anthony has the opportunity to speak to all the relevant parties who may be able to throw light on the events of the past couple of weeks. Obviously, that will include the Hinduja brothers, who are prevented from leaving India at present. Can the Minister tell the House whether Sir Anthony will communicate with the Hindujas directly, either by visiting India or by another method such as tele-conferencing?

The Prime Minister announced the inquiry's terms of reference commendably early. Since then, however, several events have taken place and revelations have been made in the newspapers. I fear that if the inquiry concentrates simply on the narrow issue of the passport applications, many questions will be left unanswered. It is in the interests not only of the House but of the Government to ensure that the matter can be put to bed when the inquiry reports, and that no questions linger.

It is important that the inquiry establishes times, dates and details of all ministerial contacts with the Hinduja brothers and between Departments in respect of their passport applications. It is important that we know the identity of all Members who made representations on behalf of, or made contact with, any of the parties. The parliamentary answer to the question that I tabled, which brought the matter to light, referred to other Members. We do not yet know who they are, and we should do.

It is important that the inquiry publishes letters, minutes and transcripts of telephone conversations and any other communications on the matter, otherwise questions will persist. It is important also that it explains how the applications for naturalisation were granted so quickly—within five months in one case—when the normal time scale is between 18 months and two years. What factors enabled those applications to be dealt with more quickly? The inquiry should consider the wider context of communications between the Hinduja brothers, members of the Government, Opposition Members and Members of the House more widely, so that we understand exactly what the Hindujas role has been within the political system. That, I fear, will not be reported. However, those questions need to be answered.

The biggest unanswered questions are as follows. First, how much power and influence have the Hinduja brothers been able to exert in our political system? Secondly, are their methods of carving out influence legitimate in our democracy? Their influence appears to be related to money. I cannot believe that the number and range of contacts that the Hindujas have accumulated in recent years could be achieved by any normal resident of this country or even by a Member of Parliament. They appear to have had access to everybody within the two main parties in the House.

Attempts to use money, position and power to enter the political system are not new. At the last general election, for example, Sir James Goldsmith spent millions of pounds in an attempt to force his agenda on the British public. That attempt was clearly rejected in the election. More recently, Stuart Wheeler felt it appropriate to contribute £5 million to the Conservative party. For a betting man, that seems a rather odd decision. If he put that £5 million into his one-armed bandit, he might get a screen full of lemons when he pulled the handle. Be that as it may, that information is in the public domain, as is the information about Sir James Goldsmith, and people are able to judge those actions accordingly. The same is not true of the Hindujas.

We have heard a lot about the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) and the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), but much less about the Hindujas. They built up their wealth making deals under the Shah of Iran's regime and entered the billionaires' league with oil deals in the 1980s. *Eastern Eye* reported in April 1999 that the two London-based brothers were Britain's richest Asians, with a financial worth of around

[Mr. Norman Baker]

£1.3 billion, and that the family was estimated to have a worth of about £5 billion, built up through interests including the finance and film industries, oil and telecommunications.

The Hinduja brothers are also noted for their alleged involvement in the arms scandal currently working its way through the Indian justice system. In March 1986, India bought 400 Howitzer field guns from the Swedish arms manufacturer Bofors, at a cost of £800 million, and it is reported that £30 million was paid in bribes to facilitate the deal. The scandal brought down Rajiv Gandhi. India's Central Bureau of Investigation has been investigating it since 1987 and accuses three of the four brothers of receiving commission from Bofors for helping to secure the deal by bribing—allegedly—senior politicians and civil servants. Estimates of the scale of the bribery vary between £5 million and £9 million.

It is reported that the money was paid into secret Swiss bank accounts owned by the McIntyre Corporation, which was a Hinduja front company based in Panama. Receiving commission for arms deals is illegal in Indian law, and if convicted the Hindujas could face up to seven years in prison. They deny wrongdoing and argue that payments from Bofors, which they admit receiving, do not relate to the arms deal. A summons for the brothers was issued in December, and they appeared in court in January. It has taken more than a decade to get them to court, as the battle to get hold of Swiss bank records has taken so long. At present, they are unable to leave India.

On 22 January 1990, investigators at the Indian Central Bureau of Investigation named Gopichand Hinduja as a suspect in the Bofors investigation. On 21 February, less than a month later, both Srichand and Gopichand applied for British naturalisation. They were both turned down. There is an interesting link, which is suggestive, if no more.

In 1997, the Hinduja brothers expressed an interest in contributing to the dome, which was then in the care of the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine). In the same month, he launched something called the list of Britain's richest Asians at the Café Royal in Regent street. On 5 March 1997, Gopichand reapplied for a British passport.

In June 1998, the offer to donate to the dome was repeated by the Hinduja Foundation, and on 2 July 1998 there was a telephone conversation between the right hon. Member for Hartlepool and the junior Home Office Minister, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), about Srichand's application. That is the date given by the 10 Downing street website.

On 14 October 1998, the Hindujas formally promised £1 million to sponsor the faith zone, and less than a week later, on 20 October 1998, Srichand made a second application for a British passport. On 29 October 1998, the brothers had a meeting in the House of Lords with Lord Levy about the dome sponsorship. Those dates are not conclusive, but they are at least suggestive.

The links between the Hindujas and the political elite are extraordinary. *The Sunday Telegraph* on 4 February quoted Srichand as saying:

"Did I know Lord Falconer? I know everybody. I'm a businessman. So many other businessmen meet these people. Why ask me?

I don't understand why people are asking only about Mandelson, Vaz and Blair . . . You could name anyone because we have so many contacts."

What exactly are those contacts? We know that the Hindujas met the Prime Minister, when he was Leader of the Opposition and subsequently. It is alleged in *The Guardian* of 2 February that Gopichand spoke to the Prime Minister in connection with the Hindujas bid for Express Newspapers. The article said:

"GP said they really wanted to buy the Express and had had a long call from Tony Blair".

To be fair, the report also said:

"Downing Street last night denied Mr. Blair had discussed the Express with the family."

We know that the Hindujas met Lord Irvine of Lairg on 22 September 1999 at the Hindujas London headquarters. We know from a parliamentary answer that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has met them eight times since April 1999. I commend the Secretary of State for his openness. We know that the then DTI Minister, the hon. Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt), met them four times between February 1999 and July 2000. A further DTI Minister met them once in March 2000. Lord Levy has met them. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has met them. We know that the Secretary of State for International Development has met them, as have her officials. Of course, we know that the Minister for Europe, the hon. Member for Leicester East, has met them on many occasions.

Given the openness and honesty of Ministers in announcing those links, on which I again commend Ministers, I wonder why the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Office, the Prime Minister's office and the Lord Chancellor's Department have refused to announce in response to parliamentary questions whether other Ministers have met with the Hinduja brothers. I urge those Departments to answer questions that have been legitimately asked in Parliament.

It is also true to say that there have been meetings between the Hindujas and the Conservatives. In March 1999, a reception was held for the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) by the Hinduja brothers. He was guest of honour. A week after the event, Conservative officials sent letters to some of those present to offer them meetings with members of the shadow Cabinet in exchange for a £1,000 donation.

We know about Timothy Kirkhope from the newspapers recently. During the election period, he wrote round on Conservative party paper, when he was Minister with responsibility for immigration at the tail end of the Parliament, in connection with the passport application, saying that he was able to move things forward in a helpful way. We know that there was contact with the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) in 1994, although he seemed to give the Hinduja brothers pretty short shrift.

When Baroness Thatcher was leader of the Conservative party, the Hindujas paid £25,000 for a bottle of House of Commons whisky autographed by the then Prime Minister during a party fundraising ball. Interestingly, the brothers are teetotal. Baroness Thatcher also attended one of the Diwali parties that the Hindujas threw each year. We know of close links with the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), who has fully admitted his close links with the Hindujas.

Is it appropriate for anyone to inveigle themselves into the political system just because they have connections and money in such a way as to gain access to the leading figures in both main political parties in this country? I believe that there have also been superficial contacts with my party—before any hon. Member makes that comment. It is not a party point that I am making. It is wrong that people can use power and influence to gain access. It is insidious and invidious, and it needs to be challenged.

We need to review the ministerial code. A number of things have come out in recent weeks that are worrying and unacceptable. For example, the Minister for Europe used Foreign Office premises to deal with an insurance claim by a Soho restaurateur. The story that we are given is that that is in line with the ministerial code. I do not know whether that is true, but if it is, it should not be. It is an abuse of Foreign Office premises for a matter that has nothing to do with foreign policy or the Foreign Office. The Foreign Office should not be used in that way.

I sympathise with the Minister for Europe, who has had tens of journalists chasing him in recent weeks. They have not come up with a killer fact, but they have come up with a picture that is slightly unsavoury. It would be helpful to the Minister and to other Ministers if the code was tightened up, which was after all the recommendation of Lord Neill, who has referred to these matters clearly.

The BBC website says:

"Lord Neill, chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, said the prime minister should make clear his commitment to the government's ministerial code of conduct in the light of the Hinduja passports affair.

He said the code should be rewritten to include a declaration by the prime minister that he is personally responsible for ministers' conduct.

Lord Neill said the code should set out what punishment would be meted out to transgressors."

The ministerial code is not clear, and in the interests of Ministers, the House and democracy, it needs to be tightened up. I hope that the inquiry that Sir Anthony Hammond is conducting will answer legitimate questions that have been posed in recent weeks by journalists and Members of Parliament.

I do not want to get the issue out of balance: we are by and large talking about an excess of spin by the Government, not sleaze. However, as any cricketer knows, spinning too much can cause one to be hit for six, which is unfortunate. The events that Sir Anthony is to investigate are not comparable with those that occurred during the years of Tory sleaze—we had the A to Z of sleaze, with Jonathan Aitken, Jeffrey Archer and Michael Ashcroft comprising only the As. The current Government have got themselves into a mess as a consequence of carelessness and reacting badly. It is important that the inquiry is a full one, that all information is published and that the questions that have legitimately been asked are answered. If that is done, the Government might yet emerge with some credit.

3.1 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): The hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) has chosen for today's debate a subject that has been of considerable public interest for the past two weeks. I am grateful for the opportunity to outline the current position from the Government's perspective, set out the action that we have taken and respond, in so far as I am able, to the concerns that he has voiced.

The specific issue that initially attracted the interest of the hon. Gentleman and others was the applications for naturalisation made by Mr. G P Hinduja and Mr. S P Hinduja and any representations related to those received from my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) and the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz). As the hon. Gentleman is aware, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced on 24 January that he had asked former Treasury Solicitor Sir Anthony Hammond QC to review the full circumstances surrounding approaches made to the Home Office in connection with the possibility of an application for naturalisation by Mr. S P Hinduja in 1998. It is worth reminding the House of the terms of reference of the review as announced by the Prime Minister. They are:

"To establish what approaches were made to the Home Office in 1998 in connection with the possibility of an application for naturalisation by Mr. S P Hinduja, and the full circumstances surrounding such approaches and the later grant of that application; and to report to the Prime Minister"

Sir Anthony Hammond began his review on 25 January. After an initial reading of the papers, Sir Anthony has decided that to fulfil the terms of reference of his review of the application for naturalisation of S P Hinduja, it would be appropriate for him to look at the circumstances of the granting of naturalisation in respect of G P Hinduja, because the circumstances of both applications are so closely related. For the same reason, as the hon. Member for Lewes mentioned, Sir Anthony has also decided that it would be appropriate for him to look at the circumstances surrounding the inquiries about naturalisation in respect of Prakesh Hinduja.

Sir Anthony aims to complete his review as quickly as possible, consistent with the need to conduct a thorough investigation, and I understand that, on the information currently available to him, Sir Anthony hopes to complete the review by the end of February. The report will be published and copies will be placed in the Vote Office and the Library.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will understand that it would be inappropriate for me to pre-empt the outcome of the review through any comments that I make today. He has been good enough to signify his assent to that proposition. I understand that he has written to Sir Anthony—the hon. Gentleman has been good enough to furnish me with a copy of the letter—with a list of specific questions, several of which he has outlined this afternoon, that he would like the inquiry to address. Sir Anthony will, I am sure, respond to those questions in the manner that he deems the most appropriate. I also understand that the hon. Gentleman has already met Sir Anthony to discuss the events and issues surrounding the inquiry.

Despite the limitations on what I am able to say, I shall take the opportunity to set the record straight about one aspect of the inquiry which has been the subject of some public comment. It is the issue of disclosure. There have been calls from some quarters to release specific documents or transcripts relating to the issues being examined by the inquiry. It is important to emphasise that Sir Anthony has access to all relevant papers. The open government code of practice specifically excludes the release of

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"information whose disclosure could prejudice the administration of justice (including fair trial), legal proceedings, or the proceedings of any tribunal, public inquiry or other formal investigations (whether actual or proposed) or whose disclosure is, has been, or is likely to be addressed in the context of such proceedings."

I emphasise once again that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has given a clear commitment to publish the report when it is completed. I believe that the arrangements that we have in place will best ensure that the proceedings of the inquiry are not prejudiced or hindered in any way, while providing as much information to Members and the public as is proper in the circumstances.

The hon. Gentleman also raised questions about the Hinduja brothers' support of the millennium dome, and in particular whether the sponsorship of the faith zone by the brothers led in some way to their improper access to Ministers. Negotiations on the sponsorship of the faith zone, as with all other sponsorship of the dome, was the responsibility of the New Millennium Experience Company. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool, as shareholder of the dome and the Minister with responsibility for the project, was, quite appropriately, kept fully up to date with sponsorship issues. He would also, again quite properly, have met sponsors to be kept aware of any concerns that they had. However, the detailed negotiations were carried out between the chief executive of NMEC and would-be sponsors, and not by Ministers.

The hon. Gentleman spoke also about the ministerial code and raised questions about the role of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in enforcing the code, its ability in its current form to hold Ministers properly to account for their actions, and the need as he sees it to review and update its provisions. It is important that we all understand that the ministerial code is the Prime Minister's personal guidance to his Ministers. Although it is not enforceable by Parliament or any external agency, in introducing the code my right hon. Friend has made it absolutely clear that he expects Ministers to work within the letter and spirit of the code. However, as paragraph 1 of the code makes clear, it is for individual Ministers to determine their actions and to account for those actions to Parliament.

In formulating the code, my right hon. Friend took account of the Nolan recommendation

"that it will be for the Prime Minister to determine whether or not Ministers have acted with propriety in any particular circumstance".

A similar recommendation was made by the Neill committee in its report entitled "Reinforcing Standards", which was published in July 2000. However, my right hon. Friend believes, as did his predecessor, that it must be for individual Ministers to ensure always that they act in such a way as to uphold the highest standards and exercise their judgments accordingly. It is always important to ensure that the responsibility of individual Ministers to account for their own actions is not blurred.

While we are discussing the subject, I feel that it is worth pointing out that the Government accepted recommendation 11 of the report, that the code should be amended to clarify the need for individual Ministers to take full responsibility for their decisions, and accepted recommendation 12 that no new office for the investigation of allegations of ministerial misconduct should be established.

I hope that my remarks have been of some help to the hon. Gentleman—he is good enough to signify his assent to that proposition, too—and to the House. I have of necessity been constrained in what I have been able to say by the on-going investigation into matters related to the Hinduja brothers. I end by saying that we look forward to receiving the final report of Sir Anthony Hammond's inquiry, which I hope and expect will illuminate further many of the issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised during the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at nine minutes past Three o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 30 January 2001

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Area Cost Adjustment

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Mike Hall.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): Good morning, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to initiate this debate.

Area cost adjustment is regarded as a somewhat esoteric subject. However, it is not esoteric in its effects—they are very real and are felt by my constituents in the amount of grant distributed to Cambridgeshire and, indeed, to South Cambridgeshire district council. The area cost adjustment substantially reduces the amount of grant that would be available under a different system of distribution to support local government services. I hope to demonstrate during my introduction that area cost adjustment is important both in its financial effects for local government and its impact on local government services and also because of what it tells us about the way in which the Government have dealt with their election promises during this Parliament.

Immediately before the previous general election, on 30 April 1997, the *Cambridge Evening News* published an interview with the then Leader of the Opposition—the present Prime Minister. The right hon. Gentleman was rightly asked about area cost adjustment because of its impact on Cambridgeshire. He said:

"We will review the area cost adjustment in time for the next financial year . . . Changes in line with the recent Elliot review would bring the county an extra £10 million."

Even at that time, I was keen that the issue of area cost adjustment should be pressed to a conclusion as soon as possible, because of the large financial consequences for Cambridgeshire county council; and that in pursuance of the right hon. Gentleman's commitment before the election, it should be reviewed in time for the next financial year—1998-99. As a result, I secured an Adjournment debate on 18 July 1997, when I pressed the Government to deliver such a review and to reform the area cost adjustment.

Unfortunately, in the space of two months, the Government had already found that it was not as convenient to deal with promises two months after the general election as it was to make them two or three days before. At that time, the Minister for Housing and Planning, then Under-Secretary of State, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, said that a review would take place, but that the matter would be very difficult and he could make no promises about the outcome.

The story has continued in much the same way—with expressions of concern, references to technicalities and so on. Those technicalities will have to delay us for a few moments, because it would be unfair to Ministers if they were not described. No one has ever pretended that there are no difficulties associated with reform of the area cost adjustment. It is useful to remind ourselves of the series of obstacles and hurdles placed in the path of securing reform of the local government distribution system.

In November 1997, the Government showed that there had been problems with the Elliot review. That review advocated a general labour market approach to setting the area cost element in the distribution of grant—thus the grant would be varied by reference to the general labour market in which local authorities were expected to hire staff. There were several problems—for example, with the data to be used for such calculations in the standard spending assessment. There was potential for overcompensation: many local authorities were employing staff on national pay rates, so to compensate such authorities through the grant distribution as though they were simply buying their labour in the marketplace might overcompensate them if the difference between authorities was not so great because of the impact of national pay rates. However, it was always clear that local authorities were employing staff, using national pay scales and their discretion within pay scales in a way that tried to adapt to the labour market and the pay costs in their area.

Geography also posed problems. Cambridgeshire offers a good example. To operate at county level, as the Elliot review proposed, would not necessarily have correctly compensated for the cost of providing a service in all parts of the county. For example, in south Cambridgeshire, there is, in effect, a London labour market as regards not only costs, but some pay and recruitment pressures, whereas in Peterborough, or other parts of the county, the pressures on costs and pay are different. That illustrates the desirability of operating below county level.

That is why I have no substantial problem with the Government's attempts to pursue what was known as the specific cost approach—looking below county level and considering the way in which authorities adapted in practice the use of national pay scales to their labour costs. However, although—in the Government's view—that necessitated a delay in the implementation of a review for the period beyond 1998-99, the specific cost approach led to the publication, in summer 1998, of 21 options for reform of the area cost adjustment. It would have been perfectly possible—if difficult—to settle on one of those options in time for the 1999-2000 financial year.

At this point, I have to depart from the Government's approach because they failed to deliver on their election commitment. In December 1998, the Deputy Prime Minister said that he was not proposing to make a change; he proposed to change some aspects of the SSAs, but not the area cost adjustment. Indeed, he said that he would impose a three-year moratorium, which would take us up to the financial year 2002-03. He did so based on the fact that local government had been consulted about the 21 options—even though it might be argued that such a large number of options precluded meaningful consultation—and there was no consensus.

To complete the chronology, in spring 2000, a document was published on central-local partnership between Government and local government. By late summer 2000, a local government Green Paper had been

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issued that told us almost nothing about the Government's plans for reform of the area cost adjustment, although it told us a certain amount about their desire to reform the grant distribution system in general. That would doubtless encompass the area cost adjustment, but we have no idea how. Yet again, there was no agreement about how such matters were to be undertaken, so there was a proposal for further delay. Another year was to be added to the moratorium, so that we would reach 2003-04 before the Government proposed to initiate any reform of the area cost adjustment.

It is not only that the Government have delayed and, by so doing, have failed to meet the Prime Minister's election promise to review the area cost adjustment in time for the financial year after the previous general election; the date has been moved five years on—with every prospect that the Government will continue to fail to meet their commitment. That, in a sense, is the injury. However, the insult as well as the injury is that not only have the method and data used continued to change in the most recent local government financial settlement, but the consequences are hitting authorities such as Cambridgeshire.

I shall give three specific examples. First, the differential between those authorities that receive the area cost adjustment and those that do not—Cambridgeshire is just off the cliff edge in that respect—has increased because new data have been incorporated into the financial settlement. However, people do not agree about that data, because hourly rates of pay, without overtime—not total weekly earnings—are used in the area cost adjustment. That apparently recondite difference has a significant impact on authorities outside the area cost adjustment, such as Cambridgeshire.

Secondly, the change in the area cost adjustment must be financed by others. Not only is the differential greater so that Cambridgeshire is more disadvantaged relatively, but it must finance the cost to the tune of £1.6 million in this financial settlement. Other authorities are in a similar position. Thirdly, the Government have proposed to try to offset some of the consequences, so floors and ceilings have been introduced in the percentage change in SSA. Those mechanisms do not benefit Cambridgeshire, as it did not have an abnormally low or high percentage increase.

As a consequence of the compensation offered, Cambridgeshire suffered an additional loss of £300,000 in its financial settlement because that money was used to finance the floors and ceilings. So there has been a £2 million overall reduction in the grant available for Cambridgeshire. Alongside other authorities, Cambridgeshire has had to compensate for the alterations in the benefits derived from data changes for other authorities—principally those that benefit from the area cost adjustment.

Far be it from me to say that the Government should not consider reality, and I do not dispute that, in reality, changes in relative labour costs impose costs on local authorities. If the Government are to deal with reality, however, they must consider the changed labour market circumstances outside the area cost adjustment mechanism as much as within it. We must consider adjusting the grant distribution system if it is to take account of costs.

Have the Government simply moved the goalposts? Back in 1998, the SSA, on which all this hangs, was viewed as a mechanism for assessing how much councils needed to spend to provide their services. Indeed, the plain English guide to the local government finance settlement—clearly, an heroic task for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to undertake—stated, in February 1998, that the SSA assessed how much each council would have to spend to provide its services. Therefore, the cost of providing those services formed an essential part of the SSA calculation.

Interestingly, without any announcement or song and dance at DETR, the SSA was not defined in that way by February 1999. It was defined as being the Government's way of dividing up total standard spending between local authorities. In effect, the Government have shied away from the SSA calculations representing a realistic effort to measure what it costs a local authority to provide its services in the light of its costs and needs. So the Government have compounded their inability to reach a decision on the area cost adjustment, and the unfairness continues.

There is absolutely no logic in trying to divide the cake—the grant available to local authorities—without reference either to what it costs them to deliver services or to the needs that must be met. I shall not go too far down that path, but the Government have elevated local authorities' needs, as they have defined them, above costs. It is therefore easier for the Government to justify diverting money away from shire districts into metropolitan areas for their own political purposes.

The consequences can be seen in Cambridgeshire. My constituency includes the border between Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire and that between Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire. Both of those authorities receive the area cost adjustment. Hertfordshire is the best funded local education authority. Cambridgeshire is among the worst funded, with the lowest SSA per head of population for education. If Cambridgeshire were to receive the area cost adjustment on the same basis as Bedfordshire, about £20 million would be added to its SSA, which would have a beneficial effect on the grant. In Cambridgeshire, that represents additional resources for schools of more than £200 per pupil.

Those of us in Cambridgeshire know perfectly well that a comparison of the labour market shows that it is nonsense to suggest that Bedfordshire has higher labour costs than south Cambridgeshire. In fact, the reverse is the case. So, year after year, Cambridgeshire has to spend more than its SSA, which suggests that it is a higher spending authority; but, in fact, its services are being chronically unfunded because of the SSA's departure from reality.

On Saturday, 27 January, the *Cambridge Evening News* reported the fears of parents with children at St. Alban's Roman Catholic primary school in Cambridge that the school may not be able to continue to provide the same service and may consider reducing its staff. The chairman of the governors is reported as saying:

"We have been cushioned for some years by the combination of reserves, income derived from letting school premises, and support from the Parents and Friends Association."

Cambridgeshire county council rightly said:

"The decision by Government to divert £2 million from Cambridgeshire's funding to support other local authorities—

the combination of factors that I have mentioned—

"has meant schools are getting less growth this year than planned."

That shows the direct impact on schools.

In early 1997, I took the opportunity to raise the issue in the hope that the Government would do something about it. They had promised to do so, and I wanted a resolution of the issues that arose under the previous Government, who instituted the Elliot review, as well as under the incoming Government. We now approach the end of the Parliament, and the Government are presumably proposing to enter the election campaign having failed to meet their promises. Far be it from me to suspect that the Government will pull a rabbit out of the hat between now and the election if it is only months away, so a Conservative Government may well have to pick up where we left off in 1997 and use the Elliot review and subsequent reviews to take decisions on the structure of local government finance because the unfairness continues.

I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association. I value what the LGA does in many ways, but I continue to be disappointed that the creation of a single, national voice for local government has not enabled it to cross the bridge and reconcile the different views on the issue among its membership, although it has tried heroically. In a letter, dated 19 October, to DETR officials, Mr. Kinghan, the LGA's director of local government finance, wrote:

"In the longer term, we suggest that the Government should provide additional resources to deal with the entire issue of ACA, so that the support goes to authorities with recognised higher costs without funds being taken from those authorities which do not benefit from ACA."

In a sense, Mr. Kinghan is right—it is inevitable that a mechanism to deal with the area cost adjustment will, in effect, top-slice the local government financial settlement and benefit those authorities with higher costs outside the area cost adjustment. There are two better ways to address the issue of the local government financial settlement more honestly. We either compensate accurately for costs or, if we continue to have a formula-based system—the Government are proposing various formula or plan-based systems—we must deliver a realistic assessment of an authority's relative resources, its relative needs and its relative costs. In the absence of either of those alternatives, no grant system will be fair even if it is predictable.

We want the system to be not only fair, but simple and predictable. It is certainly possible to do that, but it is impossible to do so while we continue to have an area cost assessment that is so obviously perverse in its effects. Despite what the Government have said about a moratorium, the way in which they tinker with the system year on year and introduce new data exacerbates the unfairnesses that derive from the present position.

Although I have been tediously technical in my speech, it is not a technical issue but one of political will. Before the election, the Prime Minister made promises that he must have known contrasted with those made by the previous Government. When the previous Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), was asked about the subject by the *Cambridge Evening News*, he made it clear that it was a difficult issue and that a review should be conducted that would result in winners and losers. My right hon. Friend said that he could not make any promises even though he was a Member of Parliament for a Cambridgeshire constituency.

When the Prime Minister was the Leader of the Opposition, he did not feel so constrained. He felt that he could make promises and try to gather votes in Cambridge, Peterborough and elsewhere on the basis of them. However, he has failed to deliver on them. The responsibility for that cannot be shuffled on to local government by claiming that councils should have mysteriously arrived at a consensus. The formula for distributing grant to local authorities from Government will essentially be a Government responsibility until we arrive at the day, fondly to be sought, when local government to a much greater extent raises and spends its own money according to its priorities. I hope that day comes.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Hear, hear.

Mr. Lansley: My hon. Friend and I perhaps recognise that that day is some way off and may be difficult to arrive at. However, until we get to that happy day, the Government must take responsibility for the manner in which they support local government and the fairness or otherwise of the system. The responsibility cannot be shirked, but it has been. We shall arrive at the election with a Government who have broken their promises. As at the beginning of this Parliament, I return to an issue that is vital to my constituents. It illustrates the prevarication and broken promises that have characterised so much of the Government's activity.

9.53 am

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) on securing a debate on what many Conservative Members regard as an important issue.

For as practically as long as I have been the Member of Parliament for Ludlow, I have campaigned against the formula that determines the amount of money that goes each year to our shire hall. As my hon. Friend said, the formula causes his county similar problems.

To put the issue into perspective with regard to Shropshire, I shall give the House the figures that I obtained in November 1999 and that have not changed substantially in the meantime. The standard spending assessment per pupil means that a primary pupil in the London borough of Southwark attracts the sum of £3,396 while a primary pupil in Shropshire attracts only £2,220. The figure for a secondary pupil in Southwark is £4,377, but for Shropshire it is only £2,837. The differences are dramatic—a 50 per cent. difference in the standard spending assessment for pupils in Shropshire and Southwark.

In a letter to me of 15 December 2000, the Minister for School Standards said that the main cause of the differences in funding per pupil between Shropshire and other authorities was the area cost adjustment. She added that

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"this is a problem we have inherited from the previous Government."

This Government were elected on 1 May 1997, but, as has been alluded to, they intend to do nothing about the formula and the area cost adjustment until 2003-04. That means that, throughout the whole of this Parliament and the first Labour Administration, nothing has been done, and they forecast that, even if they win the next election, nothing will be done for a further two years. For a six-year period, the problem that they identified before they came to power will not be tackled at all.

I simply cannot accept that any reasonable person examining the problem objectively would be impressed by the lame excuse that the present position is a result of a problem that the Government inherited nearly four years ago. Four years is an enormously long time, and time enough for any Government to rectify a problem that they identified at the outset of their term of office. However, the extraordinary fact about the Labour Government is that they have legislated in many areas where there have been neither recognisable problems nor public demand for change. They have gone full steam ahead in many areas where they need not have legislated and where there has been no consensus for legislation. However, on this issue, in which many people have identified a huge problem, they have done absolutely nothing and intend to do absolutely nothing for a very long time.

It is not an excuse for the Government to say that they inherited the problem from the previous Government. They came to power promising to put right all sorts of things that, in their estimation, the previous Government had got wrong. They stand indicted by the fact that they have failed badly to do that.

In a letter to me of 18 January 2001, the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), wrote that

"we do understand the strength of feeling caused by local government finance issues, and in particular the Area Cost Adjustment."

There is no doubt in the Government's mind as to the problem; they know what it is. Why have they not done anything about it? The letter adds that

"replacing the existing system with a better system is not straightforward. We have tried reviewing the ACA in isolation—in 1998 we considered 21 different options. But local authorities were unable to agree on the best way forward.

Is it satisfactory for the Government to fail to legislate on this issue because there is no consensus when they have legislated on all sorts of other issues on which there has not been consensus? Does the Minister ever expect to achieve consensus among local authorities when some authorities, such as mine and that of my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire, are heavily disadvantaged by the system and many others, particularly in the south-east, are advantaged by it? The Minister speaks with a forked tongue when she claims that the Government would like to achieve consensus. It is apparent that consensus is not forthcoming and is unlikely ever to be forthcoming in circumstances in which some local authorities benefit from the system and others are penalised by it.

The reference to consensus was repeated only last week on 22 January by the Minister for School Standards. She told me that

"there was no consensus amongst groups of local authorities about the way forward."

Are the Government saying that no progress will be made until they get consensus among local authorities? If that is the case, it reveals that they do not intend do anything about the problem. The truth is that there is no political will to solve the problem, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire so eloquently explained.

I said that I have been concerned about the issue for almost as long as I have been a Member of Parliament. The problem for my county of Shropshire dates back to 1990, when the grant-related expenditure allowance was replaced by the standard spending assessment. Since then, Shropshire has found itself more and more disadvantaged, to the extent that in 1995, the then Member for North Shropshire, now my noble Friend Lord Biffen, and I were obliged to vote against our own Government on this very issue.

The problem is not new. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire conceded, it was identified in the previous Parliament. The Prime Minister picked up on it before to the election when he said:

"We will review the area cost adjustment in time for the next financial year."

My hon. Friend reminded the Chamber of the Prime Minister's commitment. He also rightly said that it is another broken promise by the Labour Government.

I can guess what the Minister will say. She will explain that the problem is not as bad as we are making out because funds are directed to our counties by other means. However, the fundamental problem remains: the formula is defective. The area cost adjustment is unfair, which means that Shropshire, Cambridgeshire and other counties are severely disadvantaged compared with many other counties. Voters in my constituency cannot understand that.

I want to remind the Chamber that, as my hon. Friend said at the beginning of this debate, the incoming Labour Government undertook to review the workings of the SSA. We all knew that and hoisted it on board. However, at a meeting with the Minister in her office on 28 June last year, I and many other Members of Parliament from all parties heard her say that it was unlikely that anything would be done in this Parliament. That has been confirmed subsequently and we have been told that nothing will be done this side of 2003-04. That is in spite of innumerable letters, speeches, questions and deputations that I have led to Ministers. No one can pretend that the problem does not exist or has not been identified.

Why have the Government not acted? As my hon. Friend rightly explained, there is a total lack of political will to correct the obvious deficiencies of the system. I am not interested in hearing the Minister say that she recognises the problem and that something should be done, because we have heard that before. I hope that she will say when the Government will correct what is, by anyone's standards, a most unsatisfactory situation.

10.4 am

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): I shall be brief. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) on raising the issue of area cost adjustment. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) said, this is not the first time that it has been raised. I have been a Member of Parliament for nearly 14 years and the thorny issue of area cost adjustment has been debated every year.

People in Cambridgeshire are severely disadvantaged by the disproportionate way in which local government finance is apportioned. For the past decade, it has been one of the fastest—if not the fastest—growing counties in the United Kingdom. The pressures on the local authority budget have been immense. Despite representations to do something about the area cost adjustment, the situation has become more perverse because the differential between the funding to Cambridgeshire and those counties over its border—Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Essex—has worsened.

At one end of the spectrum, there is pressure on our schools. Only last week, my local newspaper reported that six schools were bursting at the seams and that there was no money to accommodate the rising number of children who were entering primary classes at those schools. At the other end of the spectrum, there are phenomenal pressures on our social services, which has a significant knock-on effect on the health service because it causes bed blocking. We do not have the resources to give proper community care to our people or to ensure that the elderly can move from hospital into residential or nursing home care.

It is also unacceptable that, despite representations, the Minister has ignored our pleas. In fact, she turned down a meeting with Members of Parliament for Cambridgeshire constituencies and county council officials. It is unacceptable that we cannot put our case on behalf of our constituents to the Minister responsible. The Government's arrogant refusal to face up to the problems and issues that people want to put to them is another sign of the way in which they treat local authorities and Members of Parliament.

We have said that the system is totally unfair. Despite the Prime Minister's assurances and promises when he came to Cambridgeshire, we have made no progress. The Government might be hiding behind the excuse that consensus is necessary, but we know that it will never occur because it requires political will on behalf of the Government to impose a settlement that is deemed fair. That might mean robbing Peter to pay Paul, but it cannot be right that, within 10 miles or less, children at some schools in Hertfordshire receive hundreds of pounds more per pupil than we do over the border in Cambridgeshire.

Another perverse outcome of the area cost adjustment is the inexorable rise in council tax—one of the Government's stealth taxes. That means that we have to put our hands in our pockets to fund the services that are essential for our people in Cambridgeshire.

It behoves the Government to address the problem of the area cost adjustment. I look forward to what the Minister will say, but I suspect that nothing will happen before the election and that the promises that were made before the last election will prove empty and worthless.

10.9 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) on securing the debate. I thank him for his courtesy in indicating that he would use the debate to attack the Government—I would have expected nothing less from him.

We have had an interesting debate about the area cost adjustment and local government settlements more generally. The hon. Gentleman argued that his constituency should receive the area cost adjustment as long as it exists. He said that it is unfair that his constituency does not receive it at present because it puts his constituents and his council at a disadvantage compared with neighbouring authorities that do receive it.

The hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), however, said that we should not have an area cost adjustment because it is totally unfair to councils in the north that there is a mechanism that takes account of extra cost pressures on councils in London and the south-east. We also heard from the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss), whose constituency borders only places that do not receive the area cost adjustment. I am not sure what his argument is. I do not know whether he wants the area cost adjustment or whether he agrees with the hon. Member for Ludlow that we should scrap it altogether.

Mr. Gill: Let me get one thing straight—I did not say that we should scrap the area cost adjustment. I said that the present formula is grossly unfair, and the whole formula must be revised. Does not the Minister accept that it works perversely against counties such as Cambridgeshire and Shropshire because the amount paid is top-sliced against the money that would otherwise be shared equally among local authorities throughout the country?

Ms Hughes: I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman understood that any system that distributes money is a zero sum game, and compensation for higher costs in some areas comes out of the total pot. That is the way in which previous Governments have handled the matter, and it is the only way in which it can be handled.

Mr. Lansley: If it is always a zero sum game, will the Minister remind us who has paid for the increase in the area cost adjustment in this financial settlement? In the past week, the Government have provided between £150 million and £160 million in additional financing for authorities that might otherwise have lost out under the settlement, so who has paid for that? Who has lost out as a consequence?

Ms Hughes: No one has lost out as a result of the additional money being made available.

Mr. Lansley: So it is not a zero sum game.

Ms Hughes: It is a zero sum game in terms of the total pot, whatever the size of the pot.

Mr. Moss: So increase the pot.

Ms Hughes: Hon. Members should let me speak because they have had their time. We have had a period

[Ms Hughes]

of consultation on the settlement, and the total pot has increased as a result and additional resources were made available to respond to pressures. However, it is still the case that a mechanism that compensates authorities for higher costs must be paid for out of the total pot.

Mr. Moss: I am interested in the Minister's argument about higher costs. In education, for example, the bulk of costs for local authorities, particularly the shire counties, are teachers' salaries, which I understand to be the same throughout the United Kingdom. Likewise, local government employees' salaries are the same throughout the country. What, then, are the massive additional costs that mean that Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Essex receive huge sums above those received by Cambridgeshire?

Ms Hughes: I am surprised at the hon. Gentleman's question, as I am sure the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire is, because the subject of the debate is the area cost adjustment, a mechanism introduced by the previous Government to recognise the higher costs to local authorities of many of their employees in London and some of the south-east. I cannot in this debate go back to the basics of why that mechanism was set up; I should have thought that whatever the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire thinks about the current system, he had greater knowledge of the arguments and principles that underpin the recognition that the costs, particularly of employment, to local authorities in some areas are higher than elsewhere.

Distribution is important, and it exercises many councils, which are as interested in what other authorities are getting as in what they themselves are to receive in any individual settlement. However, most important is the amount of investment given to local authorities to improve services and to meet needs in their area. In that regard, the big picture since the last general election is very different from that before the election, and I speak from personal experience in local government at that time.

I remind Conservative Members of the figures. In this year's settlement, the Government grant and business rates will increase by 7.2 per cent., compared with a 5.8 per cent. increase last year. There is an additional £3 billion in the Government grant to local authorities, an 8.3 per cent. increase for education and a 6.2 per cent. increase for social services. We have also announced additional neighbourhood renewal fund money, and yesterday my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced £52 million to help education authorities that are under pressure.

In the past three years, the real-terms increase in investment in local authorities is almost 14 per cent. That compares with a real-terms cut of 7 per cent. in the three years leading up to the election. There has been a massive change in the experience of local authorities and in the investment given to them. That demonstrates the importance that we, unlike the Conservative Government, attach to local authorities and the extent to which we recognise their needs and the pressures on them.

Mr. Lansley: The Minister is getting ahead of herself. We have not yet formed a Government, but I promise her that we will do so shortly. As she is in the business of giving us the broad history of local government financing, does she recall that the consequences for local authorities in the past three years include an average increase of £150 in band D council tax throughout the country?

Ms Hughes: The hon. Gentleman knows well that as the investment in local authorities increased over that period, the increase in council tax has been reduced from 8.6 per cent. to 6.1 per cent. last year. We expect that, as a result of this year's very generous settlement, the increase will be further reduced. Cambridgeshire county council has done rather well out of this year's settlement, with an increase of 4.1 per cent., which is well above the rate of inflation.

I want to scotch one of the political points that the hon. Gentleman made, which is that the settlement has been tinkered with to ensure that additional money goes to metropolitan authorities at the expense of the shire counties. In the past two years, the increase in the standard spending assessment for metropolitan authorities was 3.8 per cent; it is 3.9 per cent. in 2001-02. The increases for the shire areas were 4.7 and 5.1 per cent. Within those shire areas, the counties did much better, with increases of 5.1 and 5.3 per cent.

Those figures are entirely the reverse of the hon. Gentleman's contention, and settlements for shire areas have been significantly higher than those for metropolitan areas in the past three years. That is because we have not manipulated SSA methodology, as the hon. Gentleman contended. We said that we would introduce data changes, and we have done so, but the methodology remains largely the same.

Over the years, numerous projects have tried to find a better method of recognising that there are higher costs in some areas. As Conservative Members said, the previous Government commissioned research from Professor Elliot of the University of Aberdeen. He worked out a model for calculating regional pay based on labour costs for all employees in the local economy. That research was undertaken in July 1996, so there would have been plenty of time for the previous Government to introduce the new method if they had demonstrated the political will to reform the whole system that this Government have shown. However, the Conservative Government balked when it came to implementing Professor Elliot's review. They prevaricated for so long that they were still dithering and deciding that they could not do anything when they lost the general election.

Mr. Gill: Will the Minister take the opportunity of putting on record exactly what will have been done during the duration of the Labour Administration in respect of the area cost adjustment?

Ms Hughes: The hon. Gentleman should recognise that the Government have been dealing with a wealth of neglect and dithering that is the legacy of the Conservative Government. We are systematically working through all policy areas, not only local government finance, to put things right. I shall outline what we have already done and what we intend to do.

The Government, too, have conducted research openly, and with local government, about local government finance settlements, and especially about the area cost adjustment. As promised by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister when he visited Cambridge in 1997, we have conducted a thorough review of the calculation of the ACA before the 1999–00 settlement.

The contention of Conservative Members that a promise is not being delivered is inaccurate. We promised a thorough review, one much more extensive than that which Professor Elliot undertook, and it was undertaken. That review produced a range of different options in the form of models and generated a great deal of debate. Unfortunately, there was no consensus on the preferred option. However, it is interesting that this morning three Conservative Members cannot arrive at a consensus in a debate that was supposed to be about attacking the Government. The three of them cannot get their act together. The chances of local authorities arriving at a consensus were probably much more remote.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire referred to the specific cost approach, which featured in several of the models that were the result of research. As he knows, some of the models would not have helped South Cambridgeshire. At least he acknowledged that the outcome of the review was possible if difficult to implement. I shall pick up that comment and explain why implementation is difficult. I shall explain also why we are taking the route on which we have decided, which is to examine the entire local government finance system and the role that the Green Paper, and events subsequent to it, will play in dealing with the issue that is before us. As the hon. Member for Ludlow rightly said—it is the one point on which I agree with him—the entire system needs reviewing, not only the ACA.

The system has become outdated and it is opaque. Local authorities and members of the public cannot understand how they end up with the settlement that applies to them. The system is intricate and complex and it is impossible for the average person to understand the outcome of the settlement for his or her council.

As for the ACA, one of the issues is geography. Difficult issues arise. Where should boundaries be drawn for any mechanism that recognises higher costs in certain areas? The hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire said that ACA should apply to the area that he represents. However, that area is in the middle of an area that at present does not have ACA. It is some distance away from councils that some would argue face the most pressures as a result of higher costs.

As we could not proceed on the basis of the review, we published the local government finance Green Paper. Conservative Members will be pleased to know that our review of the distribution system that that document catalysed is making excellent progress. We shall not make hasty solutions. As Conservative Members have said today, these are extremely important matters for councils and local people in terms of the money that is made available to provide services and meet needs. We are taking a long and hard look at our shared objectives for the system and the best way in which to deliver them.

The issue goes much further than fighting about slicing the cake. We need to build into the mechanism the right sort of support for local democracy and for front-line services. We need to ensure, as set out in some of the principles outlined at the beginning of the Green Paper, that there is transparency in the system. People might not like the result, but at least they should be able to understand how the result was derived from a formula or another process.

We do not expect consensus, but working and moving along with the local government community on these matters is critical if we are to arrive at a system that has enough support for it to be sustainable for a reasonable period. The last thing that we want to do is constantly to change the mechanism. Local authorities have said that they appreciate the stability that we have introduced into the system. There have been broad parameters of settlement for three years. We said that we would not tinker with the system.

There is still a great deal of work to be done and we are eager to press ahead. That is why we are proceeding with a provisional work programme for developing further the Green Paper proposals with the central-local partnership. We are working towards a White Paper that will explore the issues in some detail by the end of the year.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire said that the Green Paper did not discuss specifically the area cost adjustment. In reforming the grant distribution system in a much broader way, we shall need to reflect the fact that some areas need to pay more to recruit and retain staff than other areas. The precise calculation of the pay cost top-up, as it were, will be considered as part of the overall system. Despite the considerable body of research findings that has been amassed on ACA alone, no robust solutions emerged from Professor Elliot's review or our review. That is why we decided that it would be wrong to change only the ACA element. There was an insufficient consensus among local authorities. On that basis, we felt that we were unable to proceed in the way that we are now proceeding.

We are not rushing to make hasty solutions, but I want to assure all hon. Members that we are working as fast as we can. We want to see the process concluded. The next stage will be a White Paper, which will appear towards the end of the year. Unlike the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, I am sure that the outcome of the next general election will enable us to bring forward that White Paper.

The local government finance system deals with huge amounts of money and supports vital public services. It is important that in any significant change to the area cost adjustment, let alone to the whole system, we get things right. It is important also that any change commands sufficient support so that the mechanism is sustainable for the foreseeable future. That is why we have returned to some first principles in our research for a better system, and why we were keen to carry out the review in partnership with local government and other stakeholders or other interested parties. We are conscious of the need to move as quickly as we can, but we should not rush and make mistakes or set in place a system that is not sustainable.

Mr. Gill: In the few moments that remain for the debate, will the Minister assure us that, in examining carefully the formula that governs settlements, she will take real cognisance of the sparsity factor that affects counties such as mine, where the population is spread over a wide geographical area?

Ms Hughes: The hon. Gentleman does not seem to be aware that the Government introduced, among minor

[Ms Hughes]

changes, a sparsity factor into the existing formula. I think that I am right about that. Clearly, that is an important issue.

The big picture is the amount of investment in local government, and that has increased significantly. For all their political reasons, Conservative Members have none the less raised some important issues. The Government are taking those issues seriously and we will reform the system as a whole.

Bus Services

10.30 am

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): We hear a great deal about the role of Back-Bench Members. I cannot say how grateful I am to have the opportunity to raise the issue of urban and rural bus services, which greatly affects my constituency. I am pleased to have the opportunity to have a debate attended by the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), as he takes great interest in transport and, I know, in transport in Staffordshire. I well remember an interview that he gave when he visited Stafford to look at transport plans being agreed by the county council in conjunction with district authorities and unitary authorities. I very much look forward to a constructive and positive debate arising from this opportunity to put the issue on the parliamentary agenda.

Why this debate and why now? In raising the issue with the Minister I want first to do what one does in a maiden speech and take a little tour around my constituency. Stoke-on-Trent, North is part of north Staffordshire and is in the Potteries. It is very much a place where urban areas meet the countryside. For that reason, it is important that the Government look closely at the way in which the urban network makes decisions on bus services. Clearly, when urban and rural areas are side by side, and people are travelling from one to the other and back again, it is crucial to plan transport where it is most needed.

The local bus company in Stoke-on-Trent is Potteries Motor Traction, which is part of First Group. It changed the service serving Hill Top, which is on the edge of Staffordshire and, as the name suggests, is a rural hill-top community and is about half a mile from Brown Edge. In the thrust to make services commercially viable, PMT removed part of the 69A service, which goes from Brown Edge to the Potteries, so that it no longer went up to Hill Top, where quite a significant number of elderly people and those who use buses to go to school and work live. The effect of the withdrawal of the 69A service left people in that rural part of my constituency stranded.

Those people did not think that that was right and nor did I. As any hard-working Back-Bench Member does, I subsequently arranged meetings with the city council and the county council, bearing in mind the fact that the community needed access to both rural and urban areas. I did a lot of research and contacted people in the area; who were clearly angry about the fact that the bus service had been withdrawn. When I met local authority transport officials, it was clear that the best that we could get—which I do not underestimate in any way, as I pay tribute to the work that the officers did—was four bus trips a week, two into the market town of Leek in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) and two into the city centre of Stoke-on-Trent.

That was a huge step forward, but was nowhere near meeting the transport needs of people in Hill Top. The experience of the 69A led me to take a particular interest in bus issues in the past couple of weeks. We have a short-term solution of four bus services paid for by local authorities out of their transport subsidy. It seems that we cannot make a bid for a rural subsidy challenge grant because there are strict guidelines about cut-off dates. Because the route

to Hill Top was, until recently, a so-called commercially viable route, it cannot be looked at within the context of the additional rural money that is being made available for rural bus services.

We need to look at that. When the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs made its investigation on the transport White Paper and looked at the existing subsidy that was already spent, it questioned whether there should be a review of that cut-off date at some stage so that local authority money could be used to make good the services withdrawn in that way. The time for the review may have come, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will look closely at that. The four trips from Hill Top are just a short-term solution, but that is the best that we could do under the circumstances.

We now have the rural subsidy grant, which is most welcome, and perhaps we could in a new way in the short and medium term arrive at more flexible solutions for getting people from outlying areas to existing fast, efficient, reliable, quality partnership networks. It is too late for Staffordshire county council to include an opportunity for that kind of flexible proposal in the rural subsidy challenge bid that the Minister is considering and on which an announcement will soon be made. Things like this crop up, and even if the Minister does not want to reinstate the old bus service, will he look at other solutions, such as a flexible taxi service using the investment that he has already invested through the rural subsidy grant in outlying areas of Staffordshire, Moorlands? Could he not invite the county council to make a little additional bid that could cover the rural community of Hill Top?

We need to look at the way in which maps determine rural and urban areas. I have set the scene, but the outrage that I experienced concerning the withdrawal of the 69A service was nothing compared with the subsequent meeting that I had with city and county council officers. During that meeting, I was told, almost incidentally, that PMT had started to deregister other services, which affected urban bus services in my constituency. I immediately took up that further issue with the company and local authority officers. The reply that I received from PMT's chief executive in Burslem stated:

"our resources are continually stretched and we are struggling to maintain the full commercial network we have run up to now when faced with increasing costs and declining revenue. Unfortunately, the continual wet weather throughout the Autumn, followed by the snow at Christmas has depressed our revenue in the area. This has been further exacerbated by the number of businesses in the area declaring redundancies in the last few months."

That is in the context of First Group making operating profits of £73 million in 1999, and £94.2 million in 2000. Suddenly, however, the wrong kind of weather causes it to reduce the commercial viability of its bus services. The chief executive of PMT also refers to increasing operational pressures in relation to wage inflation and fuel price rises. Will the Minister have regard to that, as I accept that point?

Further changes were made by PMT to service 86, which goes from Chell Heath to Chell, Furlong road and Tunstall. That loss-making hourly off-peak service has been withdrawn, and Stoke-on-Trent city council is considering whether to replace it. I campaigned strongly for that service because, before its introduction, we had no bus service to take people to a major health clinic in my constituency. It is not right to have NHS facilities that people cannot access.

To the north of Stoke-on-Trent, service 92 goes from Newcastle-under-Lyme to Burslem and Brown Edge schools. That service has been withdrawn and replaced by a half-hourly service from Newcastle to Norton Canes, which divides hourly; one part goes to Ball Green and the other to Endon via Brown Edge. In effect, the route along Sytch lane and Church lane in Brown Edge has been withdrawn because of the small number of passengers using it.

I refer my hon. Friend the Minister to an e-mail that I received from the head teacher of the Brown Edge school. It states:

"Dear Joan,

We have just been informed that the PMT is to withdraw the service 92 which terminates at Brown Edge. This service was the only convenient way some of the Norton Green children got to school, albeit 10 minutes late. The old 69 service used to arrive at 8.55. The new 69 service either arrives for 8.30 or 9.30, leaving the children on the playground unattended for 20 minutes or 30 minutes late for school."

I am sure that the head teacher will not mind if I quote him further, as he continues:

"Please could you stir something up as the company seems to take no notice of anything we say to them."

There have also been cuts to service 94, Newcastle-Burslem-Bradeley, and service 96, Newchapel-Furlong road-Tunstall-Middleport-Burslem. There has been a great public outcry, which was taken up by the local BBC radio station, Radio Stoke, in which I know my hon. Friend the Minister takes a great interest, having been interviewed by that station. I have a summary of the comments made by people who telephoned the radio station. The campaign clearly struck a chord. Similarly, the local newspaper, *The Sentinel*, has been campaigning for integrated public transport, for which I applaud it.

There is a sense of helplessness, which is best summed up by one of my constituents who wrote to me:

"Dear Mrs. Walley,

I thought it was government policy to get people to use public transport, so can you please tell me why the PMT is allowed to cut the bus services in the way that they are?"

I want to find a way forward on all these issues, which are so dear to the heart of my constituents, and explore with the Minister how, through the existing legislative and fiscal framework, solutions can be found for people who have been left stranded as a result of those decisions.

After so many years during which there was no transport planning, the Government's plans for integrated transport are to be welcomed, as is the Transport Act 2000. I welcome also the strategy for urban renewal set out in the urban White Paper and the neighbourhood renewal policies announced last week. As a result of the comprehensive spending review, extra money is being transferred, but too often for additional capital spending, rather than revenue. The extra money being targeted on areas of greatest need, and the Government's response to the urban White Paper and to the local government standard spending assessment settlements are all part of the solution.

What advice and reassurance can my hon. Friend give me and my constituents, and the PMT bus company and local authority officers in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, that our problems are being tackled within the existing framework? While preparing for the debate, I read extensively, including the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs inquiry into transport.

[Ms Joan Walley]

The Socialist Environment and Resources Association considers that many warm encouraging words have been heard about the need to address social exclusion, but, apart from the welcome proposal to cut fares for pensioners, few measures are directly designed to help socially excluded people.

In some respects, the Government have come a long way since the Select Committee inquiry. I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that his report, "Social Exclusion and the Provision and Availability of Public Transport", sets out the agenda extremely well. For people who are socially excluded, those who do not have a job, the elderly, women who do not own a car, people who are retired and can no longer afford to drive or keep a car, people who cannot afford transport, and people who simply believe in public transport for its own sake, to cut down on the emissions that contribute so heavily to global warming, it is crucial that we match our concerns about social exclusion with the transport agenda when decisions are made.

That issue was flagged up by the Audit Commission report, "All Aboard", which reviewed local transport and travel in urban areas outside London. It is clear why local authorities want to support social objectives in transport. We know how public transport can contribute to attaining some of the key objectives and improve people's quality of life, by giving them access to family, shops, doctors, work, training and so on, with reduced congestion and pollution.

In the letter that I have from PMT, the company cites a further reason for withdrawing services that are no longer commercially viable: traffic congestion across Stoke-on-Trent is slowing services and making it more difficult to maintain their reliability. The company estimates that because of delays, it requires 12 more vehicles in north Staffordshire than were required five years ago. That is an absurd vicious circle. The more traffic there is on the road, the more difficult it is to operate a bus service, so the buses are withdrawn and more people use their own vehicles, thereby increasing congestion and social exclusion.

Car ownership is not particularly high in Stoke-on-Trent. One third of households do not have a car. A survey would show that we depend heavily on local bus services. Because of cuts to local services, we cannot reach hospitals and clinics. One the services that PMT has adjusted does not affect my constituency directly, but it takes people from Stafford to Newcastle direct to Stoke-on-Trent main railway station, on which a huge sum is at long last being invested. The station is still served by local bus routes, but we need as many bus routes as possible serving the main places that people need to get to.

I applaud all the work that has been done on quality partnerships, which has increased the use of buses. However, that has been done in a way that prevents people from getting to other parts of my constituency, which they need to access just as much as they need to reach the destinations on the agreed quality partnership routes.

How can we achieve good quality services when, almost on a whim, at six weeks' notice, a company can withdraw a service? As bus services are unregulated, little can be done, other than the local authority trying to make good that service.

The Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers has conducted an extensive survey of the occasions throughout the country when bus services have been withdrawn in that way. The report's conclusions are alarming. It states that the cost of replacing expired public bus contracts is rising well ahead of inflation, although it is less than it was last year. None the less, it is 16.7 per cent. and authorities estimate that by April 2001, they will have increased their local bus support by an average of 5.2 per cent. over last year's figures. They predict a need for further expenditure growth of 9.4 per cent. next year if they are to retain existing levels of service. Almost half of local authorities will have cut supported bus services by the end of the financial year to stay within their budgets.

I suspect that the issue is not isolated to Stoke on Trent. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) recently made clear in Environment questions that his constituency has similar problems. A great deal of priority is being given to the partnership routes, but other services can be withdrawn at whim. The revenue for local authorities is not keeping pace with the removal of services. Yes, more passengers are travelling on fast, efficient and rapid routes, but such routes cannot easily be accessed by people at the margins. I know that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary has already commissioned research into other aspects of bus services. However, could the problem to which I am referring be further considered? A pilot project might even be conducted in Stoke-on-Trent to consider how to deal with the withdrawal of services that are not affected by quality partnerships, but which are equally important to local people.

It is critical for us to consider all the issues. There are revenue implications even for quality partnerships. Local authorities can invest in traffic-calming measures and build new bus shelters, but further money is needed for repair and maintenance. If the shelters are vandalised, as has unfortunately happened my constituency, from where does the money come to repair them? People should be able to travel from Bradeley village, whose population includes a large number of elderly people, to the new wonderful NHS walk-in facility at Haywood hospital, which cannot currently be reached directly from Bradeley. As my constituents need to travel to doctors' surgeries, health centres, the main railway station, Burslem and Tuntsall town centres and to schools, we must deal with more than merely the north-south route across a 13 or 15-mile-long city. All transport needs must be considered.

I know that that is precisely what the local transport plans are meant to do and I look forward to working on the issues with the planning officers and the council. However, we desperately need a level playing field. The former metropolitan authorities spent a significant amount on bus services and public transport, but I am mindful that there is a disparity between the per capita amount that is available to the passenger transport authorities, and the amount that councils, including unitary authorities, can use for public transport. That gap must be considered and consolidated.

My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is currently engaged in talks with the Local Government Association about what action to take on the withdrawn services. Will he draw on the experience of the passenger transport authorities and consider how some of that expertise could be applied to unitary authorities such as Stoke-on-Trent and to county councils such as those of Staffordshire and Northamptonshire? The Northamptonshire branch of the Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers has had a great deal to say on the matter.

Local authorities cannot be expected simply to pick up the bill, but neither should the bulk of non-essential services be withdrawn for commercial reasons when they are as important as other services. We must consider revenue spending and the six-week notification period for withdrawal of services. We must have time to plan what should be done during the next financial year. I welcome the fact that the Government have shifted transport expenditure and other investment to local authorities, whose plans should operate in terms not only of 12 months ahead, but of three years ahead. The requirement for a bus company to provide to the traffic commissioner a six-week notification of the withdrawal of a service makes no sense, as it does not give any local transport plan or partnership an opportunity to get the key players together and sort out access for all the areas that need it.

I am sure that when my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary replies, he will rightly refer me to the urban bus challenge. I see him nod. The £40 million extra investment that is being provided over three years is wonderful and I welcome it. It is far more than we have ever had before, but I point out that the amount currently available for revenue services in the Stoke-on-Trent area is about £270,000. That money is not ring fenced. I shall encourage those concerned to bid for urban bus challenge, but will my hon. Friend explain his timetable for the scheme? Will people be invited to apply, or will everybody apply and only a tenth of applications be successful?

I have a more fundamental point for my hon. Friend. Of course we want innovation, and I hope that the bus challenge funds will be used for innovative work that produces new solutions and addresses the Government's modernisation agenda. However, if the money is restricted and cannot be used to make good some of the essential services that are not affected by quality partnership and cannot otherwise be assisted, how can the basic minimum standard of service be achieved? Unlike my hon. Friend, I did not have the advantage of considering in Standing Committee the Bill that became the Transport Act 2000. However, should not we consider the contracts spelt out in that Act? Might not that be a way of ensuring cross-subsidy between the so-called commercially viable routes and other services that are equally important to local people?

I do not necessarily want an answer now, but will the Government think in detail about commissioning research and even establishing a pilot project in north Staffordshire, as I have suggested? Such work could identify optimum structures and contractual arrangements, as it already has done in respect of quality partnership routes. I am mindful that the Select Committee commented that the bus companies are

"better skilled in trimming resources to match declining demand than in attracting new passengers and encouraging repeat trips".

I have met the chief executive of PMT, which says that it is willing to work in partnership as such an approach is in its interests. To do so, however, it must have the trust of people in north Staffordshire. Will my hon. Friend provide some guidance on how we can benefit from the urban bus subsidy, to give us some hope of finding a way forward?

I am most grateful for having had the opportunity to initiate this debate. We rely enormously on public transport, throughout urban and rural areas. I know that the Government care greatly about public transport, but, despite the new legislation, we have still not achieved a means of delivering the local bus services that people need and the new reliance and dependence on public transport that we so desperately want. I understand all the problems and I feel for people whose lives are seriously affected. However, so much is on offer that surely my hon. Friend can give hope on getting some of the bus services reinstated, not only in the short term, but in the medium and long term.

10.59 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) on securing the debate. I also thank her for her courtesy in giving me notice of her main anxieties. My hon. Friend has a long and distinguished record of involvement in transport matters. I listened with interest to her knowledgeable speech, and I shall consider her comments and suggestions most carefully. I shall respond shortly to as many of the specific points as possible. However, given the broad scope of the debate, it is important that I set out the context by making some general remarks about our policies for improving local bus services in both urban and rural areas throughout the country.

In developing and implementing a modern, integrated transport policy, we have recognised from the outset that bus services have a key role to play. Improvements to bus services have therefore been central to the policies in the transport White Paper in 1998, the Transport Act 2000 and the 10-year strategic plan for transport.

We have introduced major changes in the legislative arrangements for bus services. The Transport Act 2000 received Royal Assent last November and much of it will be effected in two days' time. The Act gives local authorities a range of new powers and duties to help ensure proper provision of public transport services and facilities. It provides for statutory local transport plans and bus strategies, which give authorities a clear strategic role in local transport planning, in conjunction with the private sector bus operators.

The Act gives local authorities new powers to establish enforceable quality partnership schemes, allowing them to determine the quality of bus services in exchange for providing facilities such as bus lanes, other priority measures and high-quality stops and shelters.

Authorities also have a new duty to ensure that local bus information is properly provided in their area—if necessary, by arranging it themselves and recovering reasonable costs from bus operators. There are new powers to promote joint bus ticketing, including through-tickets and reciprocal arrangements between bus operators, and to work with train operating companies on bus-rail ticketing.

We are guaranteeing a minimum half-fare reduction for elderly and disabled people on buses, with authorities retaining the freedom to offer more generous concessions. An estimated 7 million people stand to benefit from that change.

When a case can be made, subject to ministerial approval, the Act provides for quality contract schemes: the comprehensive tendering of bus services and networks to a local authority specification—an issue which my hon. Friend raised. Quality contracts are likely to be applicable only in cases of clear market failure. Such contracts will effectively confer local

[Mr. Keith Hill]

monopolies, and the Secretary of State has therefore set a high threshold for their introduction. My hon. Friend will understand those important conditions on introducing quality contracts.

The 10-year plan provides new investment in services through increased funding for rural transport and the new urban bus challenge—about which I shall certainly say more shortly—and, of course, additional funding for investment by local authorities in schemes to help bus services. On the latter, we have substantially increased capital funding through the local transport plan settlement announced last December, which is worth a total of £1.3 billion to local authorities in the next financial year. That is set to rise to £1.7 billion in 2003-04. Public transport improvements feature heavily in local authorities' forward plans. They include quality bus corridors, bus lanes and other traffic priority measures to assist buses.

My hon. Friend will have noted that, as a result of the recent settlement, Stoke-on-Trent's block allocation for implementing its local transport plan was nearly doubled. That is an excellent outcome, which my hon. Friend has warmly welcomed. It provides the basis for a major improvement in local transport provision in Stoke-on-Trent in the next few years. I emphasise that it is up to local authorities such as Stoke-on-Trent to find local solutions to local transport problems in the context of generous financial support from central Government.

The local transport plan settlement deals only with capital. However, the position on local authority revenue spending is also relevant to my hon. Friend's anxieties. That local authority revenue spending includes support for subsidised bus services and concessionary bus fares. In the recent distribution of revenue support, the standard spending assessment for transport has been increased above inflation. We took account of the pressures resulting from increases in the prices of contracts for subsidised bus services that are being experienced in many areas. An extra £54 million a year has been injected into revenue support to fund the mandatory improvements in concessionary fares.

The overall revenue support settlement was undoubtedly good. It constituted a substantial growth in funding for the third year running, and a national average increase of 4.4 per cent. in general grant for the coming year. That is in addition to the extra funding through the 10-year plan for rural bus schemes and the urban bus challenge.

When considering financial support for buses, it is also relevant to note that the Government are providing substantial sums—£300 million this year in England—through the fuel duty rebate for local bus services. We made an early decision to remove the previous Government's freeze on the level of rebate. Since we took office, fuel duty increases have been matched by increases in the rebate thus ensuring that they were not a burden on bus operation. We have asked the Commission for Integrated Transport to examine financial support for bus services and I await with interest the commission's interim conclusions on the scope and level of fuel duty rebate. I expect to receive them shortly.

Let me deal more specifically with my hon. Friend's anxieties. I know how keenly transport issues are followed in Stoke. Indeed, I was recently interviewed about local bus services on Radio Stoke, by my old friend Sam Plank. First, I want to speak about the urban bus challenge. I was able to assure my hon. Friend when answering a question from her a fortnight ago at DETR questions—I am happy to do so again today—that I believe that the new scheme will offer opportunities for Stoke-on-Trent. As I said, we will support the best projects for which bids are made, and we intend to start the first round later this year. We have allocated £40 million for funding successful bids over the next three years.

The aim of the new scheme is to contribute to the regeneration of deprived urban areas by improving transport provision. Combating social exclusion is therefore a key aspect of the urban bus challenge. We are now finalising proposals on criteria and bidding requirements. Consultation will shortly take place with relevant bodies on those proposals. I am sure that hon. Members will appreciate that, before consultation, I cannot announce final decisions on the guidance today.

Ms Walley: Will my hon. Friend reassure me that he will try to ensure that areas where services have been withdrawn in the way that I described will not be ineligible for money simply because it will be used to replace an existing service, as is the case with the rural transport subsidy? Will my hon. Friend take into account that our bus services are seriously depleted, irrespective of the quality bus partnerships, about which I have no complaint? If services are withdrawn, and the rate of withdrawal is such that even more services are withdrawn nationally by the time the criteria are set, it is essential to consider providing a minimum standard of local services.

Mr. Hill: I hope to offer my hon. Friend assurances about new arrangements for the rural bus subsidy grant and the rural bus challenge. I hope that we will be able to take those provisions into account when we finalise our arrangements for the urban bus challenge. I fully understand my hon. Friend's point.

I want to give hon. Members some broad indications of our thinking on these matters. First, we envisage a wide range of projects that offer innovative and imaginative solutions to transport problems in deprived urban areas. Secondly, we will not be over-prescriptive in defining deprivation for the purposes of the scheme or the types of area to be served. However, we will expect bidders to describe in their proposals the characteristics of the area to be served and how the bid will contribute to tackling deprivation in that area.

Thirdly, we are considering providing that bids can be made under the scheme for any area that is not classified as rural for the purposes of the rural bus grant. We will also draw no distinction in eligibility between outlying urban areas and inner-city areas. That satisfactorily covers the anxiety that an area might fall between the urban and rural schemes. I am glad to see that my hon. Friend indicates her assent from a sedentary position. I hope that she, and Stoke-on-Trent, will examine carefully the potential of the urban bus challenge in the context of local needs.

My hon. Friend voiced her anxiety about recent bus service cuts in north Staffordshire. She linked that with the development of the quality partnership for the area. I welcome much of the progress that has been made to implement the partnership. It offers substantial improvements—better-quality vehicles and investment in new bus service infrastructure—on several important routes. Having said that, I note the concern about recent cutbacks, which I know my hon. Friend has discussed in detail with the city council and the operator, PMT. I understand that PMT felt it necessary to withdraw the services in question because they were performing poorly and because problems in recruiting drivers were adding to operating difficulties.

Local authorities have an important role in subsidising services when such services are not provided by an operator on a commercial basis. I understand that, in this case, the city council has been able to find resources from its budget to restore at least some of the service withdrawals, though not necessarily to provide the same frequency of service as before.

My hon. Friend referred in particular to service 92. I am informed that that service is to be retained in a slightly modified form, though re-numbered as service 98. My hon. Friend also referred to service 69A. I understand that that service is to be partially restored at a reduced frequency, although, unfortunately, it will no longer serve some 50 homes in the Brown Edge area. I recall corresponding with my hon. Friend last autumn about the eligibility of Brown Edge with respect to rural bus support, and I would again suggest that the possibility be explored of a joint approach with the county council, bearing in mind the fact that the resources for such support are now to be substantially increased.

Ms Walley: I should like to inform my hon. Friend that that has already been done. As a result of that co-operation, we now have four bus trips a week instead of two. However, the real issue is that there is no way of reinstating regular bus services. I pay tribute to the way in which Stoke-on-Trent city council and, in particular, its transport officer, have done their best to make good the deficit, but they cannot make good the whole deficit. The problem is that this is a revenue matter.

Mr. Hill: I am pleased to hear that that initiative has been taken, and that it has led to at least some improvement in bus services.

In a broader context, let me say two things. First, it is sad but true that in public finances, resources are scarce. However, we have doubled the funding available to local authorities by means of support for local transport plans from this year to next, and that sum will increase. That is a significant commitment on the part of central Government.

Secondly, as I have mentioned, we have also made provision for increased revenue support for bus services, which has been warmly welcomed by local authorities. However, in addition to such initiatives and support from central Government, there is also a role for hard-nosed negotiation at a local level. I offer that advice to my hon. Friend and to local authorities in Stoke-on-Trent and elsewhere, although I do not for a moment wish to imply that Stoke-on-Trent has been anything other than extremely rigorous in its approach to negotiations with the local operators.

I turn to the more general issue of the rural bus subsidy grant. As announced in the recent rural White Paper, not only are we increasing the funding for this grant by some 45 per cent. over the next three years, as compared with the past three years, but we are broadening its scope to take in services in and around towns of up to 25,000 people—as compared with the previous figure of 10,000. The grant has already been a success, with some 1,800 services being supported and patronage being increased: some 16 million journeys were made on such services in 1999-2000.

The criticism has been made that the grant cannot be used to support existing services. I know that my hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that we have already listened to that criticism. I was pleased to announce on 16 January that we have decided in principle that up to 20 per cent. of the grant may be used to support existing services. We are now discussing the details with local government, and new arrangements will be in place for the next financial year. I am sure that the House, and local authorities, will welcome the additional flexibility that that measure will provide.

I again emphasise our commitment to the improvement of bus services and to carrying forward the measures I have outlined today. I do not underestimate the difficulties, and I take seriously the problems and concerns that my hon. Friend. has raised. However, there are already encouraging signs that the long-term trend of decline in bus use has been halted. Bus use in England rose by 0.5 per cent. last year—an encouraging increase when viewed against the background of decline in patronage over the past half-century.

There are also many examples of local growth prompted by the schemes that the Transport Act 2000 and 10-year-plan funding are encouraging. We shall continue to work closely with the industry and local authorities to bring about the continuing improvements that are necessary if buses are to play their full part in a modern transport system.

11.15 am

Sitting suspended.

Medical Research

11.30 am

On resuming—

Dr. Michael Clark (in the Chair): Unfortunately, the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) is not present. Oh, the hon. Gentleman has just arrived. I think I shall turn a blind eye to his lateness and, if he will take his place quickly, I shall allow the sitting to continue—although this is rather irregular.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Thank you, Dr. Clark. I apologise for my slightly late arrival.

I am very pleased to have secured the debate, which was preceded last night by a useful exchange of views on how we can control what is a significant threat to people pursuing legitimate business interests and carrying out legitimate lines of scientific research.

We need to be clear from the outset that what we are talking about is legitimate research—research that is necessary not just to the discovery of insights into human diseases, but to the development of insights into cures for those diseases. Moreover, much of the work done at the institutions we are talking about, and by some of the researchers we are talking about, is required by Government regulations. A particular responsibility is therefore placed on the Government to ensure that the individuals and businesses involved are protected from extreme actions taken against such people by those who resort to direct action.

I shall deal shortly with some of the concerns expressed by the scientific community about the Government's approach. First, however, let me say that direct action should be seen in the light of the fact that this country is a parliamentary democracy. Many of the comparisons that activists make between their actions, involving intimidation and harassment, and the actions taken by "liberation movements" throughout the world are invidious.

There is a parliamentary system. If people feel, as many genuinely do, that there is a basic reason why animals should not be used in this way, whatever the benefits, they have at their disposal methods by which to put their views to parliamentarians. That is why I think it legitimate for a parliamentary democracy not only to express concern about the methods used by activists, but to seek to ensure that, within the law, individuals and businesses carrying on work that is legal are protected from such actions. If necessary, it should be able to do that by improving the law, creating new laws and ensuring that sentences are appropriate, while also ensuring that the forces of law and order are given the facilities, resources and know-how that they need to tackle the problems.

Another curious aspect of the situation, however, is that the very forces of democracy that people can use to seek changes in the law are subverted by the fears of many parliamentarians for not just their own safety but that of their families and staff, because of threats—or perceived threats—from extremists and, indeed, people who are nothing short of terrorists. Several hon. Members, some of whom may be present, have had to take additional precautions because they wish to speak out. I myself have had to take advice, in the light of today's debate, to protect myself, those close to me and my staff from the threat of incendiary and other devices sent through the post. In the light of the possible effect on the ability or perceived ability of representatives of local people to put the case for their constituents, both individuals and businesses, the debate is even more important.

I hope that the Minister is aware that the concerns that reach him may amount to no more than the surface of what would reach him publicly if people did not feel so worried about their safety. The easiest option is often not to put one's head above the parapet. That is certainly the view taken by many scientists who are determined to get their work done, and not to put their colleagues and families at risk by drawing attention to themselves.

It is important to recognise that there are legitimate concerns about the use of animals. Some hold the philosophical view that animals should not be used, whatever the benefit to either animal or human health. I do not share that view, but we can accept that it exists. While I do not believe that it is the majority view in the country or that it is shared by many in the rest of the world, we must recognise that there are those who feel that way, for academic, philosophical or ethical reasons, or simply because of a gut feeling.

What is worrying is the fact that those arguments are supplemented by propaganda that, as well as being factually wrong, subverts our education system. Some people grow up with more sympathy than they would otherwise have had for those who oppose the use of animals, because of misinformation that they have been fed about the scientific merits of the work and the results obtained. Other hon. Members may wish to say more about that.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that newspapers have a role to play? Was he as horrified as I was when the *Daily Mail* devoted two pages to allegations about a breeding organisation, and when, although the allegations were found to be completely bogus and invented, it published not a word retracting them?

Dr. Harris: The hon. Gentleman, who has taken a deep and commendable interest in the issue, is absolutely right. "No Scandal at Scientific Establishment" is not a headline that will sell many papers; the opposite claim, whether true or false, will sell papers.

We face the problem of the media's potential irresponsibility. The media may name people involved in this work when the allegations are unproven, or even make an error of judgment when they are discovered to be well founded, because of the threat of retaliation. The media may also picture people in television footage, which will alarm those people, their immediate families and their employers. There are ways in which the regulatory authorities, which are very strong in this country, can investigate allegations of wrongdoing; we should ensure that that is done, subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

The intimidation is now so widespread, the harassment so frequent and the threats so clear and vivid that it is right for the Government to act. I have

here a cutting from the Stop Huntingdon Animal Centre newsletter, which was on the web. It is an article entitled "Zero Tolerance", a report from the Kent group. I think it right to put the article on the record so that people know about the actions with which we are dealing—actions which, while falling short of violence, demonstrate a lack of respect for decency and for law and order. It says:

"In Kent, we have a successful zero tolerance policy and great teamwork. All new shareholders have a polite letter sent to them with a factsheet. We obviously do not write our own name and address on the letter but instead give the name and address of another shareholder, so any backlash from our letter is aimed at them and not at us. Meanwhile, we make the first phone call, which is the most important for getting information. They may have both christian names on their answerphone message, or if a child answers and says mum/dad is at work we ask for the work phone number and mobile, etc. This is invaluable for later phone blockades. And initially they are off guard. When we do speak to them, they are either shocked to learn what HLS is all about, or they are obnoxious and tell us they are adamant they will not sell. But they always do in the end. From the list Kent is divided up into three sections, and people are allocated their set of shareholders to flypost. Meanwhile, the girlfriend of an estate agent is busy writing to the ten neighbours of each shareholder from a special computer program. The names, addresses and phone numbers are then circulated to all the active people from our group. The stubborn shareholders have home visits and we set up phone blockades. We also ask other groups to publish their phone numbers in their newsletters. And that is where our zero tolerance policy works, because they are not left alone until they sell their shares. Most of us do our phoning, writing and fly-posting in the evening; while most of us are fast asleep at night, one insomniac amongst us spends the early hours convincing shareholders it would be a good idea to sell. These people are allowed no peace, after all their money keeps HLS in business. We also use the methods suggested by SHAC of parcels . . .

That excerpt is just one example from one part of the country, showing the extent of the problem. It is important that the Government take a considered but strong view on those matters.

Yesterday, I was very pleased to hear the Home Secretary confirm the statement that he made in a press release last week—that the Government are minded not only to change section 14 of the Public Order Act 1986, but to apply an objective rather than subjective test to the offence of malicious communication.

Other issues have to be considered, and some hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), have spoken very eloquently about them. The first question that needs to be answered is whether there will be an opportunity for full parliamentary scrutiny of relevant legislation, to ensure not only that the right balance is struck between the restriction of civil liberties and protection of individuals and the right to free speech, but that all options are considered and there is a full discussion of policing regardless of current legal provision.

The fear is that hon. Members who are not serving in Committee on the Criminal Justice and Police Bill will not have an opportunity on Report to debate those issues on the Floor of the House. Concern about the issues spans all parties and is felt on both sides of the House. I should therefore be grateful if the Minister could clarify the Government's intention on those issues, which various hon. Members raised in yesterday's debate on the Bill.

It is important also that we are told the Government's thoughts on dealing with the international aspects of campaigns of intimidation and harassment. We know that activists plan to start using methods and techniques with such a dimension.

Ministers will also have to deal with some wider points, although I shall understand it if the Minister cannot specifically deal with them today. However, in the months leading up to recent events in Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire, concerns were expressed to me that Ministers, particularly in the Department of Health, were very slow to defend the work being done both in breeding institutions and in laboratories, whereas the bulk of that work was being done to Department of Health specifications. Recently, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, Lord Hunt, has been very clear about the value of that work, and many people want the Government's assurances that Health Ministers' public support will continue regardless of the political climate and public mood.

The Department of Trade and Industry and Lord Sainsbury have been superb in their recent efforts to intervene and help Huntingdon Life Sciences. I am more than happy to commend the efforts of Lord Sainsbury and his staff; the Minister for Science is a true supporter of science.

I ask the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department at least to consider raising with his ministerial colleagues the issue of what message is sent to shareholders, workers and others engaged in fighting and resisting intimidation and harassment when, at the first sign of a request from the extremists, the Labour party superannuation fund sells its shares in Huntingdon Life Sciences—as it did last year, citing ethical reasons for doing so. That somewhat undermines the thrust of recent Government clarifications on the issue.

I also ask the Minister whether there is any chance of the Government establishing—of their own volition, rather than as a response to requests from extremists—a royal commission to examine the issue. The House of Lords has helpfully established an ad hoc Committee to examine the issue. However, the Liberal Democrat party's view—like that of the Labour party, I thought—is that it is important to create a royal commission to demonstrate that the matter is clearly under review.

I believe that a royal commission would back science, not anti-science propaganda. I also believe that a commission and the associated consultation would provide an opportunity to reassure the public, including people in our schools, that that research work is legitimate, benefits health and science, minimises animal suffering, maintains the world's highest animal welfare standards and is worth continuing. A commission may also discover that, with considerations such as those, unnecessary bureaucracy should not be allowed to impede that work. However, those two issues are separate.

I do not believe that the scientific community has anything to fear from a royal commission. If the Government fulfil their commitment before the general election to establish a royal commission, the debate will be advanced. It is important that the public see that there is such a debate.

[Dr. Harris]

I draw the Minister's attention to the fact that there have been problems not only in Cambridgeshire, but in Oxfordshire. Well before Huntingdon Life Sciences was targeted by the extremists, Hillgrove Farm, a cat-breeding establishment in Oxfordshire, was also targeted. Although it conducted no experimentation work on the premises, had very high animal welfare standards, was inspected by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and met the RSPCA's standards for such an establishment, the business man concerned and local police were unable to prevent continued harassment and intimidation. Consequently, the institute closed, with job losses and a loss of breeding work for the United Kingdom's science base. Another consequence is that more animals may be imported for that work from abroad, where standards are lower.

I should also be grateful if Ministers recognised the fact that Oxfordshire police spent millions of pounds in their attempt to protect that businessman and the people who worked in his establishment, but that they have not had a penny in compensation. Although the £1 million for Cambridgeshire is welcome—I make no Oxford-Cambridge link—Thames Valley police are greatly concerned that they have had to bear the full cost of that operation with no compensation. The operation has had a significant effect on their ability to perform their general work and to protect scientists in my constituency and in surrounding constituencies who are still working on animals and are prepared to be open about the need to do that work.

It is a big subject and I know that many other hon. Members wish to speak. I thank the Government for their efforts in recent days to assure us that carefully considered legislation is on the way. Although my Liberal Democrat colleagues and I want to see the legislation's detail before writing a blank cheque in support of it, I hope that the Government will be taking a cross-departmental view on it. Some issues—such as the protection of shareholder information and the rights of shareholders and directors—are not subjects for debate with a Home Office Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I speak for the Government, and not only for the Home Office, so I should be able to address some of the issues on shareholding that he has raised.

Dr. Harris: My time is up. Will the Minister therefore also address the issue of how we can ensure that company directors do not have to disclose their names and addresses in a manner enabling extremists to target them, particularly as little protection is provided to them? Shareholders in the constituencies of many hon. Members are similarly concerned about that issue, as they are about secondary targeting.

The article that I quoted above was from just one campaign in one part of the country, but it demonstrates the depth of organisation among the extremists. Methods must be established—a national police bureau, perhaps—to provide not only intelligence on the extremism, but operational advice to forces on how best to tackle a national but increasingly international problem.

11.49 am

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) on securing this much-needed debate. When he selected the subject, he was not to know that we would be debating the Criminal Justice and Police Bill yesterday, when we were able to discuss some of the relevant issues. Even so, today's debate allows us to expand on some of them.

I agree that the Government's recent performance on this matter has been good. They moved decisively to protect Huntingdon Life Sciences, and have made some encouraging announcements about their intentions in respect of the overall law to protect scientists. However, I do have some criticism of the Government: their action has come late in the day. More than 12 months ago, I received a letter from my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. He said that he was looking at the law in this area and that he was aware of the problems, but the proposed changes to the Criminal Justice and Police Bill still do not appear in the Bill. They will have to be introduced as amendments, and it is fair to criticise the Government for that.

A further criticism applies to the Labour party, and, as a member of that party, I accept a share of responsibility. I agree with the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon that the sale by the Labour party pension fund of its shareholding in Huntingdon Life Sciences was inappropriate, unhelpful and ill judged. However, I shall not accept too many lectures from Liberal Democrat Members, as we have no idea where their party's pension fund has shareholdings. If the fund ever held any such holdings, we do not know whether it sold them off before anyone found out about them.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): The Liberal Democrats have no money.

Dr. Ladyman: That may be true.

Labour party members must hold up their hands and accept that the sell-off was a mistake. The action being taken by the Government now may have saved Huntingdon Life Sciences but it is too late for many other small organisations, such as Shamrock Farms. It also comes too late for the many scientists who have left the business because of pressure from evil people—I maintain that they are evil, even though they may think that their motives are good.

I believe that animal experiments are vital and necessary. Unlike other speakers on this subject, I do not hide behind the legal requirement that many animal experiments must be carried out to develop medicines and to get permission to market them. Even if the law did not require such experiments to be carried out, many medical advances could not be made without the animal experiments needed to underpin the knowledge base on which they are made. The necessity of such experiments is completely independent of any legal requirement that they be carried out.

It is claimed that animals are a poor model for what happens in human beings. However, they are one model for that, and represent an important contribution to determining how a new treatment, therapy or drug affects human beings. Animal experiments offer part of the picture that scientists need to build up. They are not

the whole picture—for that, experiments also have to be carried out on human beings—but they are a vital component. Without them, there would be no new medicines or therapies.

Over recent weeks, some people have tried to defend animal rights activists from a position of ignorance. One annoyed me so much when I heard him on the radio the other day that I feel entitled to name him and annoy him back. Michael Mansfield QC said, "We don't need animal experiments. Hammersmith hospital has just announced a new cure for leukaemia. It is entirely cell-based and does not require animals to be used in the development of a drug."

The cure is not a drug-based therapy and so might not require animals in the development of a drug, but every bit of research on which it is based was conducted on animals, mostly mice. Mr. Mansfield speaks as a respected member of society. He is considered to be learned and intelligent. When people hear him on a popular radio programme, they think that he must have some information that is worth knowing. Yet he speaks from a position of absolute and total ignorance.

When idiots such as Mr. Mansfield say such stupid things, they promote in society a body of opinion to the effect that animal experiments can be done without. The truth is that they cannot. The bioscience and pharmaceutical industries would do without animal experiments tomorrow if they could, as they are very expensive. Those industries spend a fortune trying to find alternatives, but so far with no success. Until alternatives are available, animal experiments will be needed.

We need to protect people who carry out animal experiments, as they do important work on behalf of the economy and our health. In my constituency alone, £1 billion has been invested in the pharmaceutical industry. That investment comes not from the UK but from the United States of America, and 5,000 people are employed in the industry in my area as a result. That investment will come to an end tomorrow if we cannot convince people that we mean business and intend to protect scientists.

We need to protect scientists in all sorts of ways. The criminal justice legislation needs to be improved, as the House discussed last night. In addition, I suggest to my hon. Friend the Minister, who I know is very concerned about these matters, that the Home Office needs to look at some of the measures that could be taken.

For example, bogus allegations were recently made against an animal breeding organisation. The Home Office spent £36,000—and 1,000 hours of officers' time—investigating the allegations, only to find that they were completely false. Moreover, the inspectors found only one person who might have committed a crime during the events included in the allegations, and that turned out to be the undercover operative who made the allegations in the first place.

However, the Home Office was unable to try and recover the costs involved from those who made the allegations, or to prosecute anyone for making false allegations. As far as I know, the undercover operative was not charged with the crime that may have been committed at the time. Only when legal action is taken against them will those involved in obstructing science realise that they must abide by the rules.

I shall not repeat too much of the detail of what I said in the debate last night about the need for other and more extensive protection. We need to look at how campaigns are organised so that we can ensure that their leaders are responsible for the actions of the people who take part. We need to look at the legislation on harassment, and to define the limits of peaceful protest.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon spoke of the security measures that he is having to introduce for his staff. I can tell him that I have a personal security alarm that was issued by my local police force. I might be prepared to risk going without it, as I am responsible for my words and actions, but members of my staff also have to have personal security alarms. Whether they are the result of over enthusiasm or deliberate intent, threats against MPs and their officers, and against scientists and others working in the industry, cannot be right. We need to define clearly what is meant by the term "peaceful protest".

In addition, we must make sure that people are protected from secondary targeting. Consideration must be given to what should be done with regard to the addresses of shareholders and company directors, and with regard to malicious communications and protests outside people's homes. We should review the available legislation across the board, and we should do so very soon.

Finally, I agree with the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon in that I still believe that there is merit in the possibility of a royal commission to look into animal experiments. However, the terms of reference would have to include the possibility that any such commission could find that the status quo was appropriate. In other words, a royal commission would have to be able to agree with me that the present legislation in this country is the best and tightest in the world, and that it does not need to be changed.

A royal commission's terms of reference should also allow it to conclude that the current regulations are too tight, and that their administration is too onerous for scientists trying to carry out experiments. It would be bogus and inappropriate for the terms of reference to state that the only possible conclusion for a royal commission was that the regulations had to be tightened.

Science has nothing to fear from explaining what it is doing. So long as it is given a fair opportunity to do so, I believe that it will be able to make its case. It is up to the Government to protect the scientists who do this vital work.

Dr. Michael Clark (in the Chair): Order. There are only two other speakers before the Minister. I hope that whoever I call next will bear that in mind and keep their contribution appropriate so that the other speaker may be able to get in.

12 noon

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I thank you for allowing the debate to go on, Dr. Clark. That was very courteous of you.

I represent Harrogate and Knaresborough, where there is a major laboratory, Covance. I wish to thank the Government for taking the issue seriously. I agree with the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) that

[Mr. Phil Willis]

it is rather late in the day in many respects. We had been promised that there would be action much earlier, but we welcome it even at this late stage.

Many people with genuine concerns about animal welfare have a right to be involved in the debate. It is a debate for the whole country, not simply for scientists. We should take seriously issues of animal welfare brought up by organisations with a genuine commitment to see as little suffering to animals and as little experimentation on them as possible.

There could be greater control over some experiments, particularly repetitive ones, often on the same drug for different companies. I believe that we could cut down considerably on experiments for 20 different types of aspirin, for example, or other products.

Much of the debate so far, and much of yesterday's debate, seemed to centre around Huntingdon Life Sciences laboratories and the tremendous level of activity there. I know the chief executive—Brian Cass—well because he was the chief executive of Covance laboratories in Harrogate before going to Huntingdon Life Sciences. Although there is a lot of interest in Cambridgeshire, many laboratories throughout the country also need the sort of support given to Huntingdon Life Sciences.

Covance in Harrogate is a major laboratory—in fact, it is the major private sector employer in my constituency. We were particularly disappointed that the Minister could not find time to visit Covance and meet the staff who were suffering enormous harassment earlier in the year and are continuing to do so. It is unacceptable that my constituents, particularly relatives of people working at the laboratories, should be subjected to continuous harassment. They receive threatening letters and threatening telephone calls in the middle of the night; their children are followed to school and excrement is put through their letter boxes. Such behaviour occurs not just in Huntingdon but throughout the country, and particularly in my constituency.

I am enormously worried that not only are the scientists at Covance harassed but so are the cleaners, the secretaries and the people who deliver the sandwiches. We have to look beyond the scientific community and consider the community as a whole.

The assurances from the Home Secretary yesterday, when introducing the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, went some way towards allaying our fears. No doubt tightening up the Public Order Act 1986 and the Malicious Communications Act 1988 will have an impact. However, the existing legislation could have been applied more vigorously. There are sufficient powers under both Acts to have dealt with many of the worst effects of the present protests. I suggest that one reason why that has not happened is because police forces such as ours in North Yorkshire do not have the resources to deal with the level of protest that occurs from time to time. The £1 million given to Cambridgeshire police is very welcome, but will the Minister accept that forces such as that in North Yorkshire also need resources to police the Covance laboratories in Harrogate and offer the necessary protection to individuals and their families?

On some occasions, when police have been called to support a family, virtually the whole force for Harrogate has been involved in the incident, leaving the rest of the patch unpoliced. That is unacceptable. The Minister knows that the deputy chief constable of North Yorkshire is heading the taskforce and bringing the information together, yet North Yorkshire has to pay for that work. That matter needs to be addressed.

There is a basic right in this country that people's homes and families should be protected by the law. I do not know what arrangements are being made under the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, but could we have an early look at the amendments that are being proposed so that if, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) said, they cannot be debated on Report, at least we can have fair wind of them so that we can make representations to the Home Secretary?

It is my understanding that, as well as going international, as my hon. Friend says, the organisations are going on the internet in a big way. Given that there will be a massive rolling out of the internet in the next couple of years, that could be a major problem. Perhaps the Minister will respond to that point.

Finally, one concern on the other side of the argument is that we should provide people with greater certainty about animal welfare in terms of inspections and, in particular, the RSPCA's access to animal laboratories. It is a respected organisation, and giving it greater access would be a help.

Ultimately, this is a legitimate business, and, as such, I will support my constituents. I hope that the Home Secretary and his Department will do so too.

12.7 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) on securing the debate and raising the subject.

On Sunday lunchtime, I debated for two hours with Stop Huntingdon Animal Centre on local BBC television. Surprisingly, I found it quite mild and entertaining; I had been expecting the talk to be violent. SHAC members condemned the violence—a fact which I welcomed. I also welcomed the contribution of Brian Cass from the Huntingdon Life Sciences laboratories. He said that the Government had reacted positively and well.

It was also very interesting to hear Roger Spiller, the local regional officer of the Manufacturing Science and Finance Union, which represents most of the workers in Huntingdon and also those in Occold near Eye in Suffolk, who are suffering the same kind of intimidation and threats. The movement has gone from Huntingdon to intimidate the workers at Occold, and I am very pleased that the unions have taken up an issue that traditionally one might not have associated them with. The issue has the full official support of the union, and such support will gradually, I hope, move across the whole trade union movement.

I should like to say a few things about the need to use animals in biomedical research. I am grateful to friends such as Professor Nancy Rothwell of Manchester university, who is an outstanding scientist, and other members of the scientific community with whom I have

debated these issues over the years. They have made it clear that advances in the prevention and treatment of disease over the past 50 years have led to dramatic improvements in the quality and quantity of all our lives, yet major diseases still remain to be conquered—heart disease, strokes, Alzheimer's and cancer. There is no cure and no useful treatment; much remains to be done on infectious diseases and drug-resistant micro-organisms.

A great deal of research is needed. We need to understand the normal biological processes of cells. Despite the magnificence of our molecular, cellular and human studies, the use of experimental animals will have to continue for the foreseeable future. That is agreed by organisations such as FRAME, or the Fund for the Replacement of Animals in Medical Experiments—there is no substitute for some degree of animal experimentation.

I realise that the issue is sensitive and complex and that public opinion is divided, but 80 per cent. of the population support the use of animals for the possible treatment of human diseases. Recently, during debates in both Houses on stem cell research, many members did not understand the issues and were confused but were able to make up their minds based on an open, proper, educated and intelligent discussion.

It is often forgotten that well over 96 per cent. of experimental animals are non-human primates. We use such animals to investigate medicines, biological functions and so on. I offer an example of an animal experiment that led us on to a new path of treatment. I am sure that it will interest you, Mr. Winterton, as it led to a cure for prostate cancer.

A major company developed a drug that acts like a natural hormone and was expected to stimulate the ovaries, testes and sex organs. However, during long-term animal studies it was unexpectedly found that the drug caused the sex organs to shrink. That paradoxical discovery would not have been made in the planned clinical use in infertility treatment and it might simply have been concluded that the drug had failed. In fact, the scientific understanding that it brought led directly to its use as a highly successful, reversible treatment for prostate and, indeed, breast cancer. As calculated by Professor Rothwell, it has already offered more than 3 million patient years of valuable treatment.

Professor Rothwell has also carried out research on interleukins. Animal experiments gave an extremely interesting result that has allowed us to develop new cures for strokes and brain injuries. There are other examples that do not tell such an exciting tale, but we have to use those approaches as well as considering alternative methods.

Scientists constantly try to replace, refine and reduce the number of animals used. The Government made a majestic strike on animal experiments when they took on the cosmetics industry. Many of us thought that useless experiments were being carried out merely to make us all look prettier. The Government took a huge step forward; almost from day 1, they took on that silly use of animal experimentation.

Despite strong regulation and much discussion, it is true that, now and again, some apparently inappropriate experiments are approved. However, that is being cut down as more debate takes place. Laws are in place; projects are considered; and there are Home Office visits. Indeed, if one starts to conduct an experiment in a university laboratory as much as one minute before the time specified on the Home Office certificate, the lab can be closed down by the Home Office. I was the boss of such a department and had to monitor these matters. Although I was angry when I had to stop people conducting experiments, I made it clear that the rules were firm and that they had to be obeyed.

The public need information, and explanation of these issues. Many scientists spend much of their time talking to various groups. For example, the Women's Institute has strong views about animal experiments and is often visited by scientists. Major funding bodies, such as the Medical Research Council, devote copious sums of money to the investigation and justification of alternatives to replace the use of animals in experiments.

Animal experiments will have to continue for the foreseeable future for one major reason: the human genome project will necessitate an understanding through the use of transgenic mice of the genes that cause cystic fibrosis and many of the problems that afflict humanity. There may be a small increase in the use of mice for the best medical reasons—to develop new cures. There is interaction between Government, industry and the scientists who are absolutely committed to that work. The loyalty of those scientists under pressure demands full Government support.

12.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I join hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) on securing the debate; the way in which he made his case does him great credit.

The use of animals for medical research will always give rise to strong feelings. I am grateful to hon. Members who spoke in the debate for their reasoned contributions on what can sometimes be a difficult and emotive subject.

I condemn without reservation the violent and intimidatory behaviour of so-called animal rights campaigners. They do no good to the cause of animal welfare, whereas more reputable organisations such as the RSPCA have achieved change through argument and debate. On the other hand, by the use of violence, the extremists have prevented change that might have taken place—for example, on freedom of information. When there is a clear threat of violence, it is difficult to agree to greater freedom of information if it might result in intimidation of and violence towards individuals who work in animal research.

The extremists have damaged their own cause, whereas those who try, by argument through the proper democratic process, to set out how change can be achieved have brought about some progress—as I shall explain. The Government are determined that extremist organisations will be opposed. We are equally determined that organisations undertaking legitimate and valuable work and the individuals who work for them should be protected. That is why we have allocated additional funds of £1 million to the Cambridgeshire police, as extra resources to police the protests against Huntingdon Life Sciences.

[Mr. Mike O'Brien]

We are conscious of public concern about the use of animals in experiments and in other scientific procedures. We are aware that many people want to stop all such work. Unfortunately, that cannot yet be done without halting important medical and scientific research and without compromising public safety. We need to get that message across to the public loud and clear.

We often see newspaper advertisements with a picture of a monkey with electrodes on its head. That is an extremely emotive image and causes people to wonder whether such experiments are necessary. However, if a photograph of a child suffering from a serious and painful cancer was placed alongside that image, thus confronting us with the question of whether animal experiments are necessary to cure that child, the public would have to consider the serious—yes, emotional—but deep philosophical issues involved.

People feel uncomfortable about the issue. I especially noted the comments made in yesterday's debate on the Criminal Justice and Police Bill by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) who has also spoken today. He said that when he began to conduct experiments on animals, he felt uncomfortable about doing so. As a Minister dealing with such matters, I, too, feel uncomfortable. I feel uncomfortable that animals may be hurt during some experiments, but I should feel much more uncomfortable if I stopped necessary research and people died or suffered as a result. There is thus a clear moral issue for everyone in the country. As the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) suggested, a wider debate is needed so that people confront the serious issues involved.

We intend to ensure that animals are used only where fully justified, where no alternative exists and where the benefits outweigh the costs to the animals involved. A total of 2.57 million animals were used in scientific procedures in 1999. With the exception of 1997, that is the lowest figure since 1955. As my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) said, the Government have taken steps since 1997 to ensure that we respond to people's discomfort about animal experiments.

We have announced our intention never to allow the use of great apes. We have secured an end to the testing of cosmetics on animals. We have announced our intention never to allow the testing of alcohol and tobacco products on animals for the use or promotion of those products. We have ended the licensing of the lethal-dose 50 test and tests for skin corrosivity and phototoxic potential. We have started phasing out the use of animals in monoclonal antibody production. We have promoted the principle of data sharing to reduce the duplication of testing on animals. All that shows that we have done everything that we reasonably can to ensure that animals are used only where absolutely necessary, and that where animal testing takes place, it is carefully monitored and controlled.

The Government have brought about those changes as a result of discussions with the scientific community and several animal welfare groups. We have considered the issues very carefully. Those discussions have produced changes, but no change in our legislation or procedures has resulted from intimidation or violence. I give a commitment that we will not allow those who promote violence and intimidation to change our laws or procedures.

The research needs to be carefully monitored. The system has operated for several years and imposes strict regulations on animal welfare during research. However, it is essential that that research is carried out. Medical research saves lives. It improves incomparably the quality of life and life expectancy of people who have debilitating diseases, but it is also important because it enables veterinary science to improve. However, some animal welfare organisations ignore the fact that some of the research benefits animals in the long term.

Medicine has made enormous strides during the past century, but that progress can be maintained only if we have strong, active pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries. We all want breakthroughs to be made in the treatment of diseases, such as Alzheimer's, leukaemia, arthritis and multiple sclerosis—the list goes on—but the animal rights extremists threaten those breakthroughs. They want to destroy an industry that saves lives.

As we have heard this morning, animal rights protesters are not warm, sentimental people who love animals; they are not prepared to use democratic processes and peaceful protests to present their opinions. They are aggressive terrorists who are happy to use violence against anyone with whom they disagree. They pursue ugly campaigns of intimidation and harassment. They are indiscriminate about harming the innocent friends and families of those whom they target.

I understand that people are concerned about animal research, and the Government are actively engaged with the groups that are prepared to use peaceful means to present their views, such as the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection, the National Antivivisection Society and the RSPCA. It is harder for them to press the points that they want to make when they have to dissociate themselves from the illegal and extreme behaviour of other groups. Those actions have only hardened the resolve of the Government, the pharmaceutical industry and the medical research organisations to resist the pressure from extremists.

The Government welcome the fact that Huntingdon Life Sciences has successfully found new long-term financial backing. If, as the result of animal rights extremists' actions, such industries were driven out of this country, we would all be the losers—patients, the national health service, employees and the United Kingdom economy—but the irony is that the animals would be worse off. In this country, the use of animals in experiments and other scientific procedures is strictly regulated under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986—the most rigorous legislation of its kind anywhere in the world. Nowhere else is animal welfare so carefully controlled.

The 1986 Act operates on the principle of the three Rs—replacement, reduction and refinement. The principle involves the replacement of animals by non-animal methods wherever possible; the reduction of numbers to the minimum necessary to obtain valid results where replacement is not possible; and the refinement of all procedures to minimise suffering and

harmful effects. A series of special licences must be obtained before a researcher can use an animal. Researchers must have the necessary skills, training and experience. The establishments must have facilities to care for the animals properly and are subject to regular inspection, often without notice, by a team of Home Office inspectors. I cannot guarantee that a mistake will never be made in any research establishment, but their regulation is as rigorous as possible to minimise the problems that may arise.

We are considering how to give more protection to those who have been targeted by extremists. Tough laws already exist to protect individuals and businesses from violence and threatening or intimidatory behaviour, but we are keen to find out whether more can be done. We are urgently considering the scope for strengthening the law to prevent extremists from intimidating people by protesting outside their homes or sending them threatening letters. As the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough has said, the extremists sometimes target their victims by looking up the names and addresses of company directors and shareholders. We shall examine what can be done in company law to protect directors and shareholders.

At present, directors' names and home addresses must be filed at Companies House, and shareholders must also provide a contact address, although it may be a nominee account. That requirement is being reviewed as part of the independent review of company law, which will report to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in May this year. I hope that it will provide a means by which we can safeguard not only the proper requirements of company law, but the personal protection of those who work in such companies. The Government therefore share the hon. Gentleman's aims, and we shall consider how to deliver them.

It is particularly unsettling for people to be intimidated by protesters outside their homes, and we are understandably concerned about the safety of their families. We are considering the possibility of creating an offence of demonstrating outside a residence in a way that is likely to cause intimidation or distress. Another favourite ploy of the extremists is to bombard their victims with hate mail. We are considering whether such can be addressed under the Malicious Communications Act 1988.

I have not been able to deal with all the issues raised during the debate. However, we have had several meetings with the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the various other organisations that seek to control the extremists. They are developing not only guidance on how those who may be victims can register their shares and protect themselves, but a much more proactive approach to targeting extremists and ensuring that they are discredited, and we shall prosecute them where possible.

I hope that the concerns expressed today are recognised by the police, but I assure hon. Members that the Government are absolutely determined not to let the extremists succeed. We will not hesitate to do whatever needs to be done to protect the public and support the freedom of a legitimate and important industry to pursue its business. It is right and proper that people express their opinions, but they should do so peacefully under this country's democratic parliamentary system.

Chapel Hill School, Braintree

12.29 pm

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am very pleased to have the opportunity to bring to Members' attention matters concerning Chapel Hill school in Braintree. Two weeks ago, the parents of the children at the school received a letter from Essex county council's education department and they were stunned to read that it was proposed to close the school. That would mean that the children, who, in the main, live nearby, would be scattered to other schools throughout the town and possibly throughout the wider district. The proposal followed from what would be regarded as a less than satisfactory Ofsted report in the spring of last year.

Chapel Hill school was in a different position when it opened in 1929. It was built by a Chelmsford firm of builders and was part of the progressive expansion of Braintree. It was built to serve a developing council house estate that was based on Bartrams avenue and was being built by the then Braintree urban district council. At that time, Braintree was a market and small industrial town. It had a number of large mills and works. Indeed, well-known names such as Courtaulds, Crittall Windows and perhaps the lesser-known Lake and Elliot's had their factories and works there. It was a thriving town that you, Mr. Winterton, might associate more with the north of England, but markets towns are found in the south and East Anglia, too. At that time, people went to school, worked and lived in the same town. It was a closely bonded community.

The school's degree of permanence is shown by the fact that its first headmistress, Miss Austin, was there for 34 years. She started at the school in 1929 and left it in the mid-1960s. She saw enormous changes not only to the school, but to the town in that period. Indeed, the school welcomed wartime evacuees from London. They moved out from the capital because they believed that it would be much safer to live in small towns surrounded by countryside. Generally speaking, that was true. Braintree did not suffer extensive war damage, but some damage occurred close to where the school is situated.

One frequently meets older citizens who not only went to the school themselves, but have children and grandchildren who have been to it. In the main, most of us have fond memories of our school days; we try to blank out those that are not quite so fond. However, the people to whom I have spoken all have memories of a warm, hard-working, community-based school.

I presided at the annual general meeting of the Silver End friendship club last Friday. Silver End is a village near Braintree and, at the meeting, I met a lady who told me that her first day at school was the day that Chapel Hill school opened. She said, "Now I've said that, Mr. Hurst, you'll know how old I am." Even an arithmetic ignoramus such as I could just about calculate that adding five to the number of years from 1929 to now would enable me to work out her age. She spoke very well of the school and was sorry to hear of its proposed closure.

The school has had its ups and downs. At one time, the school had 500 pupils accommodated in demountables or temporary classrooms in its grounds. The school was bursting at the seams. That is not the position now. It has room for 240 pupils—it is like the

[Mr. Alan Hurst]

turn of time—and they are accommodated in good, old-fashioned self-contained classrooms with a door, walls and windows. Such classrooms were terribly out of fashion in the 1970s; it was almost an abomination to have such things.

I recollect that my wife taught at a progressive school in that period, and she was told that one could not possibly have a blackboard and easel. If one used a blackboard, one had to prop it up, because using an easel would make it too formal. The world moves on and, just as one can now use the modern version of blackboards—they are probably called overheads—one can have proper classrooms. It is significant that the newest school in Braintree, at Notley Green, has been built with defined classrooms. The design of Chapel Hill school has come back into fashion and modern usage.

In the company of the vice-chairman of the governors, the Rev. Steven Lloyd, I visited the school last Friday afternoon. I had been to the school in the summer, but this visit had not been pre-planned; I went almost without notice. No one had painted the walls bright green, because of my visit, so I hope that I saw the school as it really was.

The first class that Rev. Lloyd took me into was a reading class. A wide selection of books of all kinds—from modern books to classical novels—was available. I spoke to every child in the class and they were able to tell me what the books were about and what their favourite reading was. They had an enthusiasm for reading and for the feel of books. However great advanced technology may be, there is nothing like the feel and smell of a book to encourage the sense of learning, the wish to learn and the excitement about what lies in its pages.

I was particularly impressed by a young girl in that class. She had a book of poetry, which had not been given to her just because a dignitary was coming. She showed me her favourite poems and they were appropriate to a girl of her age. There is place for poetry in the world in which we live and I was pleased that Chapel Hill encourages that as well as other subjects.

The next classroom provided a contrast; it was the computer class. Virtually every child in the school has access to a computer. I am not able to judge whether the children were doing well, but they were at the computer and showing enthusiasm. Each child has had the opportunity to use a computer from a very young age.

Some things in schools do not change very much. As I went along the corridors, I saw the wall displays. Sometimes one thinks that history does not always find its proper place in teaching in schools these days and one can argue that history is an essential subject. If we do not know where we come from, we shall not have the faintest idea of where we may be going. However, I was pleased that the wall displays showed Braintree in history. To link one's town with the course of history is more pertinent than the obscure descriptions of events in classical times. Those events are fascinating for what they teach us, but they are not as relevant to young children as what they see around them.

The displays also showed events from the 20th century. It makes you feel older than you think when you realise that the everyday events of your boyhood are now part of historical exhibits. Again, it is important that the children know their parents' and grandparents' background and how they lived in former times.

My close friend Elwyn Bishop is a county councillor and he is taking an active part in the campaign to save the school. It is being well supported by the local newspaper, the *Braintree & Witham Times*, and a whole range of parents, teachers and governors. The town is becoming unified in its opposition to the closure, and a great well of affection and emotion is coming from people who want to preserve the school that they went to or have known of and have loved.

Elwyn Bishop faces a particular difficulty in the campaign to save the school. It is shortly to play a football match against the school at which he was headmaster. He faces a great dilemma as to which side to support during the match. I advised him to support one school in the first half and the other in the second half, but that might have been too political an answer.

Chapel Hill school has a playing field. When one considers that the school was built in the 1920s in the middle of a then industrial area, the fact that it has a field at its rear and a further one beyond that makes it a fairly unusual school in an urban environment. The playing field at the rear of the school is surplus to its requirements. It might be possible to exchange it for value, as it were. That might lead to further improvements to the school. A nursery school is also on the playing field.

I do not want to suggest that the area is deprived; that would be the wrong word. However, it has been through difficult times and the great factories and works that I described earlier disappeared 10, 15 or 20 years ago. Crittall Windows remains, but it is very much a scaled-down version of what it once was. The life went out of that part of the town, but, as a result of regeneration schemes, between 250 and 500 new properties are planned to be built within the school's catchment area. Although the number of people in the catchment area has decreased, the arc of projection is rising, and more children will be around to attend the school.

The nursery school was not established by chance. The county council's policy was that those areas that were not as advantaged as others should take priority when such schools were established. It is a natural feeder for the main school. More than half the youngsters who attend live locally; the remainder live further afield, within the town itself. The school also provides an opportunity for other people within Braintree. For example, students at Braintree college are gaining valuable experience by acting as nursery assistants.

There is consistent support for the school. When I was there on Friday, I met Mrs. Joy Mills, a teaching assistant. She is an ex-pupil, as are her two children, one of whom is a chartered physiotherapist; the other is studying medicine at Imperial college. I also spoke to Mrs. Abbott, who lives close to the school. She and her children attended it. Generation after generation have gone there, loved it and are united in trying to save it. The community spirit carries on after school with football, netball and choir practice. The area needs that facility as it comes out of the bad times.

The Ofsted visit in April 2000 was a great blow. The school was labouring under a number of disadvantages. The deputy head had been suspended following an

allegation that was subsequently proven to be groundless, so she was not present during the visit. A senior member of staff was ill and away from the school for some time. The gaps were being filled by temporary and supply teachers, one of whom had been there for only three days when the inspection took place.

During one day of the Ofsted visit, the school was supposed to be going on a trip to the millennium dome—I hope that my hon. Friend will look favourably on that. Therefore, the inspection was squeezed into three days instead of four. The school applied for a deferment, but that was refused and the visit took place. Problems were found within the school, and those have been accepted. As a consequence of the report, the headmaster became ill and resigned. The effect of Ofsted inspections on school staff, teachers, pupils and governors could be the subject of another debate. The stress, illness, resignations and public humiliation that arise from them are pertinent matters.

The headmaster was therefore absent after the report's declarations in May, and the school has been rudderless since then. I do not criticise the people who stepped in on a short-term basis. The deputy was in charge for a little while; a acting head took over for six weeks; and there is another acting head now. However, they could not achieve what the county council could have achieved had it gone all out to find a new head for the school at an early date.

I recently met the school governors. Mr. Dave Rogers, the chairman, the Rev. Lloyd and Mr. Alan Howard said that they wanted to advertise the post of headmaster last September, but were told that it would be better to hold off until this term. During that time, the school drifted.

The inspectors returned in November and found that the school had not improved, but that cannot have been a surprise. It could not have succeeded without a dynamic commitment to make it work. It is almost as if the closure process is being willed, because that is what will happen without dynamic intervention. No one has been in permanent charge of it since May and it does not have the prospect of salvation that would have existed had another course of action been taken. The school has not been given a second chance.

The public reaction to the decision has been overwhelming. The matter has not been before the county council as part of the democratic process, so there has been no democratic input, but it is not a party political issue. Essex county council is finely balanced between the parties and it is hoped that men and women of good will will ensure that the school is turned around. I do not want to use specific phrases, but we want the school to have a new beginning that is based on united hope and confidence. We are imploring the county council to reconsider the matter and are asking for kind words and inspiration from my right hon. Friend.

12.46 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) on raising this issue. Although the Government will have little to do with the final outcome, I accept that for his community—and certainly in terms of the Government's priorities for raising standards in every school—it is central to the work of the Department for Education and Employment. We have a good opportunity to reflect on national policy and how it works at a local level.

Many people have spent a working lifetime in the school. My hon. Friend painted the picture of a school that started in the 1920s and reached this century with a proud history. It is almost a truism, but, if a school is good, the memory of it stays with former pupils for life. When they consider their life chances, they put down their successes to the fact that they had a good education. It is only as we reach adulthood that we realise the importance of a good education. The school has, without doubt, had that effect on his constituents and others for many decades.

I also want to acknowledge that schools are part of communities. They provide more than teaching; they are focal points and often provide facilities that cannot be found anywhere else. They are crucial to the areas in which they are located. However, in the gentlest of terms—I know that my hon. Friend will appreciate my tone—I must emphasise that no one can live in the past. Although the school may have a proud record and have served many generations well, we need to consider how it is performing for current students and what its prospects are for improving its performance in the next few years.

My hon. Friend rooted the issue and the decisions that will soon face the community in the Ofsted inspection of April last year and the six-monthly inspection by Her Majesty's inspectorate of schools in November. He said that he was not surprised that, six months, after the first inspection, progress had not been made because the right mechanisms for improvement had not been provided, but six months is a heck of time in the life chances of a small child. If children have spent half a year in a school that is not providing good quality education, those who have a responsibility for making sure that education services are well run must act as quickly as they can.

I accept my hon. Friend's point that the school is not performing as well as he hoped that it would. Although I have not visited the school, obviously in preparing for the debate I have sought information on it, and it seems that my hon. Friend was right to use the term "drift". There has been a lack of continuity of leadership, and we know that leadership is the key. I fervently believe that if a school gets a poor Ofsted report, it must act immediately; otherwise, drift will get worse.

This is a strange case in that it is unlikely that the Government will have any direct involvement in the school's future, and I shall explain why. We want schools that go into special measures to come out again within two years, or we will take measures to shut them. That is right because two years is a long time for a child to spend in a school where the quality of education is not satisfactory. Often what happens in those two years—although I am not saying that it is happening at Chapel Hill school—is that parents vote with their feet and move their children out of a school that Ofsted deems to be weak. Nobody wants schools in special measures to wither on the vine because they are not seen to improve straight away.

Our first involvement, therefore, would be to say to the local authority, "Get your act together and get the school out of special measures within two years. We

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have powers to intervene if you do not." Clearly, we do not want to intervene. Two years is a long time, and the problems are essentially those that must be solved locally.

Our second involvement, therefore, would be to work with the local education authority in monitoring the school's performance. One of the education advisers from our standards and effectiveness unit will have attended a routine meeting with Essex county council to discuss all the schools in the county which are in special measures and have serious weaknesses. "All" sounds bad—there are not many. As we have said many times, if any school in the country is in special measures and is not providing the quality of education that is needed, we want to know why, and we want that school to be carefully monitored. Our second involvement will come about when the school comes up in monitoring conversations with our officials, our advisers and the council.

I suspect that the HMI visit in November, when it was decided that no progress had been made, may have been a factor that persuaded the council to consult on closure. Closure is not usually the end result for schools that go into special measures. Usually, there is new leadership or measures are taken to raise standards, and schools come out of special measures well within two years. To place that in a national context, the good news is that there are now far fewer schools going into special measures than there were two years ago. There are now 373 such schools, compared with about 515 two years ago, and that is good because once a school goes into special measures that is a problem. The challenge is to get schools to a standard at which they do not have to go into special measures.

Schools are turning themselves round more quickly. Three years ago, it was taking 25 months to come out of special measures; now, it is taking 18 months. In the vast majority of cases, the policy of pressure and support, or rapid action, of setting a target and of working with schools and the local authority is successful. Closure is a preferred option for only very few schools. Sometimes closure is not possible because there are not enough places elsewhere in the locality. Sometimes it is an obvious course because there are many surplus places. It will be for Essex to decide, according to the criteria, whether closure is right for this school.

It will be useful if I set out what will happen now, because that is what parents want to know. One of the difficulties for the local authority is that the minute it begins to consult on closing a school, it is assumed that the school will be closed. I want to assure parents, through my hon. Friend, that there is a process in which they, more than anybody, have a right, indeed almost an obligation, to state their views. My hon. Friend is right to point out that the subject has not yet passed through the council's democratic process.

Consultation is being conducted now. There will be a parents' meeting at the school on, I think, 5 February. That will be reported to the county council's education panel on 26 March, and the panel will make a recommendation to the executive board meeting on 10 April. If the proposals are agreed, it is only at that point that the council will publish a statutory notice. It will then invite comments from anybody in the community. That consultation period will be four weeks, which is shorter than normal, because the school is in special measures. If there are any objections, and I suspect from what my hon. Friend said that there will be, the proposals will have to be referred to the school organisation committee. If the committee cannot agree, the decision will go to the adjudicator.

I know from my hon. Friend's speech that the issue is important locally. It concerns the life chances of his constituents' children and the future of the learning community in the area. It is therefore right that the decisions should be made locally, and I am delighted that there is now a system that makes that possible.

There are counterbalances within that system. If, after the consultation process, there is no agreement, the adjudicator can consider the final decision before it is confirmed. My hon. Friend may know of the list of criteria that the adjudicator will have to take into account when making his decision. If he does not have that list, I will be delighted to send it to him.

The adjudicator will not make his decision on a whim or because he is instructed by the council. He will take into account exactly the factors to which my hon. Friend has referred. Where would the children go? Would the journey be too long? Could they be guaranteed a better standard of education? What would be the effect of the school's closure on neighbouring communities? Would the council have insufficient places? The factor that will drive the decision-making process above all is the standard of education, which is, I know, what motivates parents, the local authority, my hon. Friend, the Government and myself.

The decisions will be painful and will raise questions in people's minds and provoke high emotions. It is right, however, that they face up to the fact that a school with a long tradition of service to the community is not delivering the education that we want for our children. For their sake, the community must face up to those decisions and find a way forward. That should be done in a spirit of openness. However much people disagree, everybody has the same motivation.

I hope that, whatever decision is made, my hon. Friend can at least say that his constituents had every opportunity to express their view and that there was a full and frank exchange of information. I hope also that it will solve the problems facing education in Braintree at the moment. I wish him well, as I do his constituents, including parents and teachers at the school. I hope that all those adults make the right decision for the children of his constituency. We have had this debate because their education is so important and we want it to take place in the best possible circumstances in the best possible school.

Crime Rates (Staffordshire)

12.59 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone): I was due to be in Sweden today with the European Scrutiny Committee. That meeting is important, bearing in mind the fact that Sweden now holds the European Union presidency. However, I was successful in securing this debate on crime rates in Staffordshire. That issue is even more important than the meeting in Sweden, and I am delighted to be here. I am delighted also that the Minister of State, the hon Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), is attending the debate, perhaps in some recognition of the seriousness of the situation in Staffordshire.

Staffordshire crime rates are appalling. The spin and the misleading statistics put out by the Government cannot cover up their failure to provide a truly excellent police force in Staffordshire with the proper resources to carry out its job. My constituents are being put at serious risk, and I insist that the Minister not only explains his position and that of the Government, but tells us that the situation will be remedied, and how. Why should my constituents be subjected to such bad crime rates?

Yesterday, on the Floor of the House, the Home Secretary claimed that last October's British crime survey showed that crime had fallen since the general election by 10 per cent. between 1997 and 1999, and that that included a 4 per cent. reduction in violent crime. These figures will astonish my constituents in Staffordshire. However, the Home Secretary conceded that crime rates under the previous Conservative Government had fallen from 1993 to 1997.

I shall present some facts that have been taken from the Library research department, from my researches and from the Staffordshire police. First, the rise in recorded offences in Staffordshire since the general election, under the new method of calculation, is 13 per cent. Even under the old rules, the rise is 4 per cent. Given what the Home Secretary had to say only yesterday—that there had been a recent reduction of 4 per cent. in violent crime and of 10 per cent. in other crime—the Minister has some serious explaining to do. It is the Home Secretary's assertion that crime has fallen by 4 per cent. everywhere else in the country. The figures for the country as a whole bear no relationship to what is happening in Staffordshire.

Secondly, the Home Office's figures show that the largest increase in violent crime, a massive 43.6 per cent.—this is outrageous—is in Staffordshire. Given the figures, it would be little comfort to my constituents to hear that house burglaries this year have fallen by 13 per cent. and that car crime has come down by 11 per cent., welcome as these reductions are.

The Prime Minister's pledge that the Government would deal not only with crime but with the causes of crime has disintegrated in Staffordshire. The causes of crime cannot be dealt with unless the money is on the table, and it is not in Staffordshire. The Government have failed my constituents on crime rates, on the cause of crime, and on the money to solve the problem. The police, including the chief constable, do a great job but the Government have them in financial handcuffs.

I shall give some simple key figures that prove my point. They have been taken from the police authority and from other sources. Government support for the authority has fallen from 85.13 per cent. in 1995-96 to 75.52 per cent. for 1999-2000. That is a huge drop of 9.6 per cent. In 1997-98, the budgeted spend of £115.25 million was £4 million more than the Government grant plus standard spending assessment. By 2000-01, the budgeted spend had increased to £126.9 million, which was £10 million more than the Government grant plus SSA. The situation is becoming much worse under this Government and the gap has had to be filled by reserves.

That is important because other public services are involved. As for the police, reserves are now below the levels recommended by the Audit Commission. I understand that they may be nil. On the figures that I have been given, there will still be a shortfall even after the use of reserves. Therefore, the balance will have to be filled by council tax proceeds. The council tax payers of my constituency will need to know why their bills have increased. They have been described recently as the third highest demand on the police precept in the country. My constituents will also want to know why crime rates have increased by so much. They will be interested in the correlation between the vast increase in crime and crime rates, which is dramatic and contradicts what the Home Secretary said yesterday, and in the lack of resources made available by the Government.

The Government have betrayed my constituents. They have broken their promises and they have let down the police. They have exposed my constituents to grave risk from criminals and criminal behaviour. Even with the announcement yesterday of a Government grant plus SSA for Staffordshire of £121.7 million on last year's figure of a budgeted spend of £127 million—I trust that the Minister will take this in good part—pressures such as this debate and the prospect of a general election, which no doubt are concentrating the mind marvellously, a huge shortfall of about £5 million will still have to be met by council tax payers. Even assuming that the budgeted spend does not increase from last year—I regard that as highly improbable, and perhaps the Minister will comment on that—yesterday's announcement will still leave that shortfall.

Part of this bad situation stems from the Government's failure to give a fair deal to my constituents in relation to the standard spending assessment. I have campaigned vigorously about the matter over the years, but the Government have failed to meet the problem. As a result, my constituents suffer across the board. Education and other services are affected, and damage is done to the police service. Some of the problems come from pension costs, but the Government are not measuring up to the crisis. I have drawn attention to the issue in the local press and on local radio many times over recent years.

What does all this mean? Crime has increased above the national average in Staffordshire. The required money is not there, and police and police support numbers have been cut by as many as 245, including the mounted branch. The prediction—that is all it is at present—is that 85 new police officers will be recruited. I think that I am right in saying that the Home Secretary said yesterday—he has certainly said this on other occasions—that there will be an increase in police

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recruitment. That does not make any difference comparatively if we have disproportionate cuts in manpower as a result of the Government's failure to provide the necessary resources.

That applies to resources for what is happening on the ground and to those that are needed to deal with problems arising from the police pension. I understand that the amount of money that is currently required to deal with those problems will involve an increase of about 54 per cent. in current funding. We are talking about substantial sums of money and a matter that the Government are obliged to redress. It is not simply a matter of doing that for the sake and benefit of the statistics. We are not talking about statistics, but, as I said, about a 43.6 per cent. increase in violent crime, which is the highest increase in the country. There is a direct relationship between the increase in violent crime and crime generally and the lack of resources being made available by the Government.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Most statistical analyses would contest that assertion. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman could give me the academic sources from which he drew the correlation that he has just cited.

Mr. Cash: First, it is based on common sense. However, the figures that I gave are also based on those from the research department of the House of Commons Library and from the police authority itself. I will not impute to those sources the opinions that I am happy to express myself, but, for practical purposes, I believe that there is a relationship between money and crime rates; anybody who looked at the matter objectively would draw that conclusion. Indeed, in the past, members of the Labour party and those of their persuasion have often argued that there is a direct correlation between prosperity levels in inner cities and crime rates.

That was one of the things that the Prime Minister was clearly referring to when he said that the Government would deal not only with crime but with the causes of crime. If I may, I will call the Prime Minister in aid of my argument that there is a relationship between money, resources and crime rates. Perhaps the Minister would like to take that up with the Prime Minister. That direct relationship is also reflected in the manner in which the SSA is calculated. In my meetings with Ministers on matters relating to other public services, that has been acknowledged. Indeed, a Minister admitted at a fairly recent meeting that the Government had not done enough. However, she added that that was the fault not of her Department, but of the Treasury, which would not grapple with the SSA problem. The Minister will know perfectly well that the SSA is based on a relationship between need, resources and population. It is for that reason that I complain bitterly on behalf of my constituents about crime rates, which have damaged them severely.

Against that appalling background, the police, to whom I pay tribute throughout my constituency, are making serious efforts—no thanks to the Government—to open new village police stations. Five have been opened, including one which has been reopened in Eccleshall in my constituency. We need more of them, not remote-controlled, pass-you-on systems. We need more police visibility and accessibility. We need more permanent bobbies, and regular bobbies on the beat in every part of my constituency. I am glad that they have come back to Gnosall and Eccleshall, as they make a big difference. In Stone and Cheadle, which have significant populations, we need more permanent bobbies on the beat. There is vandalism in Walton and in Stone, and there are problems in Hixon, where there have been difficulties with juvenile groups. In sum, we need to address the question of resources and we need a greater police presence on the street and on the beat, not only in Stone and Cheadle, but in Madeley and elsewhere.

A police presence is a great deterrent to criminals; a juvenile offender does not dare tangle with a policeman. The Audit Commission has recently revealed that only 5 per cent. of police strength is displayed on the streets around the clock. That is not good enough; in fact, it is an unbelievably low proportion. Rural crime sometimes increases through the theft of garden equipment and so on when there are unsupervised car boot sales in the vicinity. At Staffordshire meetings convened by "Save the Rural Crime Unit", I have strongly urged the police to improve their performance in rural areas of my constituency, some parts of which are invaded by criminals who come down the motorways from Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham.

A new system of rural crime detection has been introduced by the police authority and the chief constable. However, the meagre reference to rural crime in the rural White Paper will not be sufficient. Neighbourhood watch, house watch and farm watch need money, and the Government are simply failing the police service on that. For example, from time to time, serious issues have been raised by my constituents in and around Cheadle concerning attacks on horses. That problem is of great concern to the rural community.

All in all, the Government stand condemned for their failure to provide adequate resources to solve the problems of crime in Staffordshire. Whatever the Minister says about the question of the causes of crime, the statistics speak for themselves and come from unimpeachable authorities. My constituents and I look to the Minister to say now that the Government will change their policy and provide the money that is needed to protect my constituents from crime.

1.17 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I am grateful for the opportunity to address these issues in debate. As the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) knows, I regularly meet with Staffordshire Members of Parliament on an all-party basis to discuss this kind of issue. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman has attended some of those meetings. I am slightly disappointed that the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) is not here today. He raises these matters with me, and I am a little surprised that he has not taken the opportunity to ventilate them fully here.

I want to address a couple of points at the outset. First, the hon. Member for Stone was right to raise the crime level in Staffordshire. The statistics that the Government published a few weeks ago on total

recorded crime made it clear that crime in Staffordshire, which had increased by 13.4 per cent., was the worst of any police authority area in the country. The only authority that had an increase in crime of more than 10 per cent. during the same period was Suffolk, which had a 10.8 per cent. increase. In fact, the majority of police forces saw reductions in crime.

The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the issue in Staffordshire, not only because he is a Staffordshire Member of Parliament, but because performance there was significantly worse than that in comparable police authorities. That was especially true of violent crime, for which the figures are as the hon. Gentleman set them out.

A number of important qualifications must, however, be made. The first relates to the connection that the hon. Gentleman made with resourcing. I am the last person to say that resources have no impact on the situation, but let us take, as a simple measure, the number of forces with a lower number than Staffordshire of constables per 1,000 of population. Table 3 of Home Office Statistical Bulletin 2/01 dealing with police service strength shows that 22 forces have a lower number. Staffordshire has 157.7 police constables per 1,000 of population, Avon and Somerset 152, Bedfordshire 139.3, Cambridgeshire 136.5 and so on. About half the forces in the country have a lower number of constables per 1,000 of population than Staffordshire.

I have used the constables per 1,000 measure because, in the regular interchanges that we have in the Chamber on these matters, the hon. Member for North–East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) always prefers it, but similar figures apply for officers per 1,000 of the population: 19 forces have a lower number of officers per head than Staffordshire. I cite those figures to demonstrate that the hon. Gentleman's point about the direct link between resources and crime levels is too simple. Important issues involving resources, including reassurance, also need to be addressed. The hon. Gentleman did refer to them, but the simple relationship that he postulated between resources and crime levels is not sustainable.

I shall spend a moment considering resources. The provisional funding settlement for Staffordshire was £121.7 million, as the hon. Gentleman said. The final figures were published yesterday and show an increase of 4.2 per cent. in real terms over this year. In addition to that money, the police authority will receive £1.943 million from the crime fighting fund to recruit extra police officers—a fact mentioned by the hon. Gentleman—and £275,000 from the rural policing fund.

That allocation was made following the submission of a large number of rural police authorities, including Staffordshire, which argued that, for the reasons outlined by the hon. Gentleman, particular costs are involved in rural policing, which the Government should meet. That is why we allocated £15 million in the current year and £30 million a year for each of the next three years. Staffordshire's share of that was, as I said, £275,000 in the current year.

Mr. Cash: I shall not repeat what I have already said, but the Minister would accept, I am sure, that, even with the announcement made yesterday, there will still be a substantial shortfall. Reserves in Staffordshire, if not nil, are certainly well below Audit Commission levels, and the burden will therefore fall on my council tax payers. The Government are doing nothing, as far as anyone can see, to sort out the standard spending assessment, which is so unfair to my constituents.

Mr. Clarke: I am not trying to evade the point, but, as the hon. Gentleman should know from his long experience of European and civil matters, the standard spending assessment is a matter not for me, but for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. The issues will be debated generally.

In total, Staffordshire has been awarded almost £3 million—£2.914 million—from the crime reduction fund for 16 projects, so there has been a significant resource increase in Staffordshire. It would be wrong if the hon. Gentleman did not have the courtesy to recognise that.

I acknowledge one point that the hon. Gentleman made in relation to resourcing, which I have acknowledged privately to him and his fellow Staffordshire Members of Parliament. The pensions issue has hit Staffordshire particularly hard. All forces are affected by the way in which pensions spending is allocated, and the problems may not be easily resolved, given the various interests involved and the way that pensions have been dealt with over many years.

Staffordshire does have a pensions issue, as I have acknowledged frankly since the first of my meetings with Staffordshire Members. All I can do today is reassert the commitments that I have previously given to the hon. Gentleman. We are considering what can be done to address the matter.

The chief constable has pointed out an additional factor, which I am sure he has also raised with the hon. Gentleman. In the chief constable's remarks to me, he states:

"The main priority in crime has been to make sure that we are properly recording crime reported to us."

That may seem a trivial point, but there have been significant problems in police recording procedures over the years, and chief constables—I pay tribute to Mr. Giffard for his commitment—as well as the police service as a whole and the Home Office are committed to ensuring that the recorded statistics are correct, so that we can establish the true situation.

The chief constable goes on to state:

"Changes in the counting rules and the way in which we have treated violent crime, particularly domestic violence, have led to an increase in the year to September 2000 of 13 per cent. in all recorded crime. In the case of domestic violence as a good example, 90 per cent. of domestic violence incidents produce a crime report."

I do not seek to minimise the issue, but I pay tribute to the chief constable and the force for the way in which they have dealt with domestic violence.

I have spoken to the chief constable about the matter, and his force has committed itself to legal action following reports of incidents of domestic violence, in order to banish the idea that crime in the home is marginal and acceptable, and to assert the idea that crime in the home—domestic violence—is entirely unacceptable.

The police are making every effort to root out this form of crime. That is why the chief constable is able to write to me that

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"90 per cent. of domestic violence incidents produce a crime report."

That is a high figure, for which he deserves credit. It has the knock-on effect—unfortunate, in presentational terms, some might say—of an apparent increase in violent crime, but it has the entirely desirable result of ensuring that people who commit domestic violence are brought to justice.

The chief constable also points out improvements in performance on house burglaries and car crime, which it is important to put in context, and he explains what he is doing in respect of rural police stations, to which the hon. Gentleman generously referred. The chief constable notes that the force has actively used the money from the Government's rural policing initiative, which I mentioned earlier, and has tried to increase visibility in villages. He tells me that there are encouraging signs of the effect that that has had. He reports that most of those officers are deployed on foot, but some on bicycles.

Violent crime is an issue, and the increase is not explained by what is happening with regard to domestic violence. There are real problems of street crime, to which the hon. Gentleman rightly referred. We are trying to address that, and some elements of the increase are down to a highly desirable increase in the reporting of violent crime. I congratulate the force on its efforts to increase reporting.

I conclude by referring to an important point in the relationship between crime levels in different police areas and parts of the country. We are publishing, for the first time, data on crime and disorder reduction partnerships, which compare partnerships that are broadly statistically similar. Table 5 of Home Office Statistical Bulletin 1/01 on crime levels breaks down two crime reduction partnerships, which are statistically comparable on the standard basis that has been established over a long period.

The table shows that East Staffordshire, which is part of a group of about 25 to 30 crime reduction partnership areas including Derbyshire, Kent and Nottinghamshire, has the highest number of crimes in the group, at 17.9 crimes per 1,000 of the population. That endorses the hon. Gentleman's general point that there is a serious issue in relation to violent crime.

Staffordshire Moorlands, another Staffordshire police district in the same police authority, is in the same family of broadly comparable areas. Violence against the person per 1,000 people in Staffordshire Moorlands is 9.8, compared to 17.9 per 1,000 in East Staffordshire. In other words, the figure is about half. I have no immediate explanation for that. We need to understand more about what is happening in particular communities and in particular forces if we are to understand why there are dramatic differences in performances.

I am sure that I can count on the hon. Gentleman's support, and that of his colleagues in Staffordshire, to ensure that when the Government seek to improve police performance and to put more resources into the police—as we are doing in order to drive crime down—no one will seek to make party political capital. I am sure that he will do what he can to help us drive crime levels down.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate, which has provided us with a good opportunity to consider some of the issues.

Council Tax Support Grant (Gateshead)

1.30 pm

Mr. John McWilliam (Blaydon): I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) and for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn) for joining me and for their support. Both of them have a significant interest in Gateshead and represent wards in the borough. I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge, who is a Whip, is not free to speak this morning. As a former distinguished leader of Gateshead council, he could have informed the debate greatly.

The Government have helped local authorities marvellously during their time in office, which amounts to almost four years, in which time there have been three settlements. They are building up local authorities that were seriously underfunded for many years. Indeed, the history of local government finance in the past 20 years is a sorry one.

A Conservative Government introduced the Local Government Finance Act 1982, which changed significantly the way in which local authorities received grants from central Government. As a matter of party-political policy, they shifted resources from the needy urban areas in north-east England and sent them to less needy areas in the south. They introduced a series of controls and evaluations of expenditure that were designed to have that effect.

The system in place today is essentially the same. It has been modified, but not very much and not by the current Government. I welcome the publication of the Green Paper on local government finance, but I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions does not think that it will solve the specific problems of Gateshead or similar authorities. It will not do so; it is merely another twist of the same old system.

The basic problem is that the evaluation of appropriate expenditure arises from historic expenditure back in 1982, when civil servants used a statistical technique called regression analysis to project future expenditure. Such a technique cannot, however, be used to predict the future; it can tell one only what happened in the past. I have recently questioned civil servants about the use of that technique in relation to the Green Paper and I have been assured that it will not be used in future.

Education expenditure is a particular problem with regard to the basis provided in 1982. You will recall, Mr. Winterton, from your long years in the House, that 1982 was not long after local government reorganisation. Prior to that reorganisation, my constituency was a part not of Gateshead, but of County Durham.

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): Hear, hear.

Mr. McWilliam: Before my right hon. Friend gets too carried away, let me point out that there was an historic low spend. Back in 1980, when I was a member of the departmental Select Committee on Education, Science and Arts, Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools reported that four local authorities, including Gateshead, were in danger of failing to provide. Gateshead has an historical spend that is based on serious underspending in the past, as well as on the difficulties of having to put two completely different educations systems together. For example, County Durham had grammar schools and Gateshead did not.

Over the years, the nonsense aspects of the Local Government Finance Act 1982 have accumulated. The Government have now increased provision above the initial level of £3 billion. There is now a 7.2 per cent. increase, which has been made through the welcome raise in neighbourhood renewal and, for some authorities, in the education grant. However, there is still a shortfall. Of course, I welcome the additional £750,000 for education, but the shortfall in education expenditure in Gateshead was £1.3 million, so more than £500,000 is still needed. In total, despite having to impose £3 million-worth of cuts to meet its targets, Gateshead will also have to raise its council house rents by 9.1 per cent.—a huge increase. Ring fencing and the need to support tenants will mean that an additional sum of only £800,000 is available for the general rate fund.

All those problems result from policies and acts for which my right hon. Friend the Minister is not responsible. Her predecessors in a different party and Government were responsible, so I do not blame her, but huge anomalies remain. Gateshead has a high proportion of elderly people and single parents. It also has a high proportion of council houses and areas of serious deprivation. In spite of those circumstances, the standard spending assessment change for Gateshead was only 2.8 per cent., give or take the additional funds for neighbourhood renewal and education, which mean that it will now be slightly more. That contrasts with increases elsewhere of more than 7 per cent.

The standard spending assessment settlement was poor for Gateshead and means that it has a huge cash problem. The SSA increase of 2.8 per cent.—as opposed to an average national increase of 4.3 per cent.—takes resources from deprived urban areas. The updated area cost adjustment has shifted resources to London and the south-east. The settlement will have a significant effect on the council's budget for 2001-02. As I said, the council is seeking to make cuts of £3 million.

The inconsistencies of the system are highlighted by the updating of the area cost adjustment, as council tax valuations have not been updated to reflect the significant increase in house prices that has occurred since 1991, especially in London and the south-east. In effect, those areas are getting the benefit twice. Rate banding is another problem, as the A band in Gateshead is too high. We could do with its being split in two, as it hits a significant proportion of households. On the other hand, the H band stops far too low. Only about 42 houses in the whole borough, most of which are homes for the elderly, fall into the H band. Such problems have a significant impact on resources.

We need a new system that is clear, transparent and fair and which seeks to equalise council tax throughout the country. It must ensure that areas with low resources and high needs are properly looked after and that areas with low needs and high resources can contribute towards their own costs. We have problems and it will not be easy. I look forward to seeing what my right hon. Friend the Minister does about the Green Paper on local government finance when the consultation is complete,

[Mr. McWilliam]

although it is obvious that she cannot tell us that now. I thank her for all the help that her Department has given. I should also mention her excellent departmental website, although I point out that her photograph is currently displayed as a negative image, rather than a positive one, which is a pity.

1.39 pm

Mr. Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr. McWilliam) for allowing me to take part in his debate. I want to mention an anomaly to which my hon. Friend alluded: the disadvantages of Gateshead and other northern authorities compared with those north of the border in Scotland. I refer especially to the Barnett formula, which is known in the northern region as the billion pound divide. If we had such a formula for the north of England, an area such as Tyne and Wear would have approximately an extra billion pounds to spend on local services. Councils such as Gateshead, South Tyneside, Sunderland, Newcastle and North Tyneside could tackle many existing problems and achieve many objectives with that extra money.

We cannot defend the indefensible. We can dress it up and we can claim that there are different systems north of the border. However, we live on the border, and we cannot defend what happens through the Barnett formula. We appreciate that local government receives additional grants and direct grants. The Minister has done a great job in getting those grants. However, the divide is so great that the Barnett system needs a complete overhaul. I do not want Scotland to be brought down to the same level as the north-east, but an equation for need should be included in the formula for the north-east to bring us up to Scottish levels.

The position is exacerbated by tuition fees, teachers' salaries and long-term care north of the border. The differences must be tackled. The system is a mess for those of us on the border. It may not affect people who live 300 miles away in the south of England, but we live next to Scotland and experience the effects of the difference, for example, when kids go to university. We cannot live with that. We are a laughing stock, and we must tackle that.

We need to tackle apathy about voting. Unless we deal with the nitty-gritty of the problem in the north-east, voter apathy will continue.

Mr. McWilliam: Does my hon. Friend agree that, within an hour and a half's drive of Gateshead, there are Scottish secondary schools, both grammar and comprehensive, which are a magnet for fully qualified teachers in our borough?

Mr. Hepburn: I hope that grammar schools are not a magnet because I do not believe in the grammar school system. I am a comprehensive school person. However, teachers' salaries and the way in which the education system is funded in Scotland mean that there are indefensible differences.

1.41 pm

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr. McWilliam) for giving us a chance to rehearse some of the arguments that we shall present in the Chamber tomorrow on the local government settlement. Clearly, as another north-east Member of Parliament, I want the region not only to get its fair share but to use the money effectively to solve some of the current problems. Many northern authorities' problems with this year's settlement arise because of declining population and school numbers. It is in our interests to ensure that local government and the regional agencies can play their part in turning the region round. We can thus provide more economic stability to families who live in the area and encourage them to stay and to envisage their future there.

The local government finance settlement is currently of great interest to all local authorities. Yesterday, we laid before the House the local government finance report for 2001-02 and special grant No. 72. They set out the total revenue support grant and the basis on which that money will be distributed. Hon. Members will, of course, have the opportunity to discuss those reports tomorrow, but today's debate provides an useful opportunity to consider the issues and the consequences for Gateshead.

The spending review for 2000 provided more increases for local authorities. The first year of the review established the baseline for the approaching financial year and has enabled us to provide an increase in Government grant of £3 billion. In the four settlements since we took office, we have been able to increase the Government grant to local authorities by £8 billion. That is an increase of 14 per cent. in real terms and compares with a 7 per cent. cut in the previous four years before 1997-98.

Of course, we have given priority to education and social services. Provision for spending on education will increase next year by £1.9 billion. An increase of 8.1 per cent. for social services means that they will receive an extra £576 million. We have therefore provided an extra £6.4 billion for education and £2 billion for social services since we took office.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon is especially worried about Gateshead, which will receive approximately £151 million in general grant next year. That is an increase of 3.2 per cent. or £4.7 million. The standard spending assessment figures that my hon. Friend gave conflict with mine. We need to discuss that later.

Mr. McWilliam: There is a simple explanation for that. I did not include the additional figures for education that were announced yesterday. I deliberately did not include the additional renewal fund figures because I do not believe that they are pertinent to the debate. We are considering the base level.

Ms Armstrong: The figures that my hon. Friend mentioned are not covered by the SSAs, which I was considering. The SSA increase for Gateshead was 3.6 per cent. I acknowledge that all authorities would like more. The Government want to build up investment and to ensure, through local government reform, that

the money is spent in the most effective way. I acknowledge that Gateshead's settlement increase was below the average for metropolitan districts of 3.5 per cent. There are three main reasons for that.

The latest population statistics that we use show that 800 fewer people live in the area compared with last year. There are also almost 290 fewer pupils. As my hon. Friend acknowledged, the impact of increasing wage pressures in London and the south-east is reflected in the area cost adjustment. That also contributes to the reason for the below-average grant increase in Gateshead.

I sometimes believe that my hon. Friends want all the country's financial problems to be sorted out through the local government settlement. We cannot do that. None the less, we are considering more radical, long-term reforms. Our recent Green Paper makes it clear that we understand that an authority's costs do not always fall immediately and proportionately after a decline in population. However, a declining population must, over time, lead to lower costs.

Mr. McWilliam: As the figures that my right hon. Friend cited show, an authority such as Gateshead has a declining population because economically active people and their families are moving out. Those who are not economically active are left. That proportionally increases costs.

Ms Armstrong: We could have a long debate about that. Those circumstances do not necessarily increase the cost of basic services. However, incredible pressure exists in deprived areas. The Government have introduced the neighbourhood renewal fund so that we can tackle basic services more effectively in the most deprived neighbourhoods and thus improve the economic potential of people who live there and perhaps create a virtuous circle.

The SSAs take account of need, but I do not know of a single authority that believes that the distribution formula properly reflects its absolute level of need. I have come to believe that a formula that everyone feels to be just to their area and about which all agree is a holy grail that cannot be attained. The Government are trying to ensure that we identify deprived areas and grant additional money specifically to tackle deprivation there.

It is also true, as I am sure my hon. Friend would accept, that rapidly expanding authorities also face significant cost pressures. The issue is, therefore, one of striking the right balance between the competing and largely contrasting demands between declining and increasing populations. We introduced the floor and ceiling proposal to take such factors into account. That was because we realised, as soon as we started to consider this year's settlement, that using a purely data-driven formula would have given rise to wild swings in grant increases from this year to next. The updating of the area cost adjustment data contributed to these swings.

We consulted on those issues, but—surprise, surprise—there was no clear consensus from local government about how to proceed. Therefore, bearing in mind our commitment in the 1998 White Paper to continue to update the data on which standard spending assessments were based, we concluded that it was right to update the area cost adjustment. However, to provide stability we decided to introduce a floor of 3.2 per cent. and a ceiling of 6.5 per cent. I am aware that Gateshead wanted extra money to be added to the settlement to pay for the floor provision.

My aim is to put as much money as possible into the settlement every year, rather than to leave a pot of money on one side. This year, we concluded that it was right for the measure to be met within the overall totals. However, we have listened to the concerns of authorities during consultation. We are aware of the pressures facing authorities, and I am sure that Gateshead will have been delighted to learn, in the past day or so, of the action that we have taken in three specific areas.

We were concerned at the funding position of authorities in areas with the most serious deprivation problems, partly because they are the areas that are tending to lose rather than gain population. We therefore doubled the provision for the neighbourhood renewal fund in 2001-02 from £100 million to £200 million. Those additional resources will help local authorities to improve mainstream services in the most deprived neighbourhoods, and, consequently, to improve the outcomes achieved in those areas.

One of the specific issues that we want to tackle in the most deprived areas is educational attainment, and I am sure that Gateshead will want to use some of its money to raise standards of educational attainment in such areas. That should also help its education budget. We were able to announce last week that Gateshead will receive an extra £1.161 million from the neighbourhood renewal fund, taking its total next year to £2.322 million.

We were also concerned about the impact of serious floods this year. We therefore announced on Friday that we would provide an extra £11.6 million to pay for the Environment Agency's emergency response and repair costs. That money will mean that the agency will not need to add those costs to its levies on local authorities next year. I know that Gateshead was concerned about the levy when it made its representations on the settlement to the Department. The amount provided to the agency in Northumbria is £450,000, which will allow it to reduce significantly the proposed increase in the levy.

We also announced yesterday a new £52 million grant to help meet education spending pressures in those education authorities with the lowest increases in education funding from other sources. Gateshead was concerned about its low education SSA increase. It was also concerned about the basis on which we transferred money from the settlement to reflect the change in responsibility for adult education from local authorities to the learning and skills councils.

It was right to use the same methodology for making that transfer as for all other changes in which we have transferred provision out of the settlement. However, we recognise the pressures on authorities such as Gateshead and others in the north-east. The extra money will be provided in recognition of those pressures, and Gateshead will receive £750,000 from the grant next year. That is in line with the representations that it made to us on its education spending.

Mr. McWilliam: On education, I welcome the extra £750,000, because we need it. However, my right hon.

[Mr. McWilliam]

Friend might have gained the wrong impression from what I have said. Although Gateshead was one of the authorities that were in danger of failing to provide in 1982, it now has some very fine schools attaining high achievements in places with particularly difficult catchment areas. I am very proud of the education authority there.

Ms Armstrong: I endorse that entirely. Indeed, a number of my constituents attend schools in Gateshead, and I receive regular reports on that matter.

Gateshead has also benefited from increases in a number of ring-fenced grants, most of which have now been announced. Gateshead's overall increase in grant—including revenue support grant, the other general grants and ring-fenced grants—is more than £9 million. That is an increase of 5.8 per cent.

My hon. Friend also mentioned rents, and I understand his concern. Decisions on setting rent levels are a matter for local housing authorities. However, for subsidy purposes, we have increased allowances by 7.4 per cent. in cash terms since 1997-98. There have also been significant increases in the capital resources that have been made available to Gateshead in the same period. The allocation for 2001-02 will be £17.433 million—a threefold increase in resources in four years, and a 24 per cent. increase over the current financial year.

My hon. Friend raised several issues that are being discussed as part of the consideration of the local government finance Green Paper. That consultation has now finished, and we are drawing together its findings at the moment. I have held my first meeting with the Local Government Association to consider how to take the ideas in those findings forward. The Government hope to introduce proposals in the summer in a White Paper.

I assure my hon. Friend that I understand fully the points he has raised today. We have, as he said, provided an excellent settlement overall, but that does not mean that it does not contain real challenges for some authorities. Having said that, the settlement for Gateshead is still a good one. We have also recently introduced measures to assist Gateshead. Those measures, in addition to the settlement and the increases for local government spending announced in the spending review, will mean that local authorities can be confident that they have a good base for investment over the next three years. I hope that they will continue to work with us to obtain changes in the grant distribution system that will enable them to be confident about their future.

I cannot promise that every authority will like every change, because, inevitably, change means that some gain and some do not. However, we are determined to achieve as fair a local government system as possible, and I share my hon. Friend's ambition that such settlements should be open and transparent so that the public will be better able to understand what is going on. I congratulate Gateshead council on the work that it has done to increase turnout through piloting postal voting. Together, we shall ensure that Gateshead and the north-east are confident in moving forward, enabling the authority to build for the future for the citizens of Gateshead.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 31 January 2001

[MRS. SYLVIA HEAL *in the Chair*]

Bed Blocking (Wiltshire)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mrs. McGuire.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes): I am grateful for the chance to raise the subject of the deeply worrying bed blocking crisis in Wiltshire. As a phrase, bed blocking sounds dull, but its impact is anything but dull. Every bed blocked in a hospital means an operation postponed or a treatment delayed, and that is often multiplied many times during the period for which the bed is blocked. In human terms, bed blocking is a cause of fear, apprehension and often suffering. For the individuals affected, it makes nonsense of the Government's aspirations to cut hospital waiting lists. It would be a blot on the Government's record of health provision in Wiltshire even if it were unavoidable. The fact that it is avoidable means that there must be strong criticism and demands for urgent action to rectify it.

It is difficult to be certain of the total number of beds genuinely blocked in Wiltshire hospitals. Bed blocking can occur for various reasons, some easier to ascertain than others. Currently, 68 hospital beds are blocked in Wiltshire for lack of Wiltshire county council funding for residential or nursing home placements. That is a lot of beds, and the knock-on effect of 68 beds being blocked is exponentially serious.

Bed blocking is not a logistical or supply problem about beds; it is about people who cannot get into hospital when they need to, and people who are held in hospital when they do not need to be because there is nowhere else for them to go. Bed blocking is a major human problem. However, it comes at the end and as a consequence of a long row of other problems. If solutions are to be found, they have to be found right along that row.

The figure of 68 beds blocked follows hard on the heels of the county council's purchase of 54 additional residential placements with special funding made available by the Government through the Wiltshire health authority. Such is the nature of the problem that the much-needed assistance has proved a temporary sticking plaster rather than a cure.

The problem is not in the hospitals themselves, but in the Wiltshire county council social services budget. Its cause is simply that, in terms of Government financial support, Wiltshire is being underfunded and unfairly treated. The purpose of this debate is to seek from the Government short-term measures to meet the current crisis and long-term measures to prevent it from recurring.

All that my colleagues and I ask for is fairness, fair shares and an even playing field. The reason for raising the matter today is that the current situation in Wiltshire is totally unacceptable and is getting worse. Bed blocking in Wiltshire is a problem that need not occur, and it can be resolved if the Government funding provision to the county is fair and if the balance of funding between health and social services is right.

At the moment the funding is not fair, as I will seek to show, and the result is socially unacceptable, economically nonsensical and politically offensive. It is politically offensive because people in Wiltshire see Government resources apparently being skewed away from rural areas to more Government-friendly urban authorities. It is socially unacceptable because of the stress and pressure that it creates for people whose families are involved on both sides of the blocked bed—those awaiting hospital treatment and those awaiting placement elsewhere. It is economically nonsensical because the cost of blocked hospital beds is far greater than the cost of the placement beds that currently cannot be funded.

I shall give some examples. The cost of a hospital bed is about £1,100 a week, which contrasts with the net cost to the county council of less than £250 a week per nursing home bed and less than £150 a week for a residential care home bed. Delayed hospital discharges are therefore nonsensical economics. As well as being bad for disabled and older people, that is bad for the health service in meeting its Government targets and serving the local population.

The cost of placing 68 mainly older people in residential or nursing placements is £719,785 a year. The cost of 68 hospital beds for the same people at £1,100 a week is, by my calculation, almost £4 million. The chain of causation is relatively simple. Beds are blocked because the county cannot afford to fund placements for those currently occupying the beds. They cannot fund placements because the funds are not there, and the funds are not there because Wiltshire is underfunded by the Government. The solution is to get the funding right to meet the particular needs of Wiltshire, which exacerbate the problem. I shall set out in reasonably simple terms what is wrong, and then suggest what could be done to rectify the situation.

Wiltshire county council currently spends 18 per cent. more on social services than the Government, through their standard spending assessment calculations, think necessary. At the same time, the SSA allocated to Wiltshire for social services is the ninth lowest of all social services SSAs in England. Next year, Wiltshire social services SSA per head of population is only £128 compared with the shire counties average of £148, which is £20 more, and the national average of £178, which is £50 more. If Wiltshire had the same SSA as the shire counties average, it would have £8.4 million more for social services. On the figures that I have given, it is not difficult to see that that money would go a long way towards resolving the problem.

Wiltshire social services SSA for next year increased by only 2.4 per cent. With Wiltshire social services overspending by £1.5 million this year—that is 2.3 per cent.—and that overspend being rolled forward into next year, even with an increase of £1.5 million in social services specific grants for Wiltshire social services next year, the SSA specific grant total will only balance this year's overspend. That does not allow for inflation or for the increasing number of elderly and disabled people who will need its services next year. Rationing of services and delayed hospital discharges will increase next year under the current provision.

[Mr. Michael Ancram]

A major difficulty for the county is that the Government take little or no account of the three cost factors that impinge on social services in Wiltshire. Those cost factors may have a separate impact on some other authorities, but in Wiltshire they cluster, so they to have a major and unique impact. First, Wiltshire is an area of high employment with high employment costs, which reflects its location along the high-tech M4 corridor and the outer London commuter employment belt. Neighbouring authorities, such as Hampshire and Oxfordshire, receive an area cost adjustment weighting of 6 per cent., which is denied to Wiltshire county council. Allocating more to other authorities through the area cost adjustment next year has cost Wiltshire social services £0.3 million against the SSA increase that it would otherwise have received. That adds insult to injury.

The Government are inconsistent in their stance on the area cost adjustment, as health services in Wiltshire are being allocated additional finance to take account of higher employment costs in Wiltshire. Perhaps the Minister will explain that inconsistency.

Secondly, Wiltshire serves a large, rural and sparsely populated area. The higher costs of providing services in large rural areas are not adequately recognised by the Government. For example, detailed calculations undertaken in the county council in 1997 showed that a team of social workers and occupational therapists assisting disabled and older people had higher costs than a team covering an urban area with the same population.

In sparsely populated rural areas, smaller service units must be established to ensure that services remain locally accessible to the local rural population, but smaller service units usually have higher costs. For example, the 31 beds in a residential care home in a village in a largely rural area had a cost per bed per week of £333 in 1999. A residential care home with 57 beds in a large town had a weekly bed cost of £232, which is more than £100 less per week. That pattern of differential unit costs was found to be consistent across 19 residential care homes of between 30 and 57 beds within the county council area. However, the higher costs of providing social services in rural areas are not recognised by the Government. Instead, it is the urban areas that get higher levels of funding.

Thirdly, Wiltshire is distinctive in having one of the largest military populations in the United Kingdom. The higher demand that that generates for social services for children and families was identified by the joint review undertaken by the Audit Commission and the Department of Health inspection of social services in Wiltshire. The report stated that

"the Army presence more or less accounted for the 'excess numbers' over and above those that might be anticipated on demographic grounds alone. The work in relation to looked-after children is particularly time-consuming, because many families have moved to other parts of the country".

The additional demand for services from the garrison towns is equivalent to the current overspend of £400,000 on social services for children and families in Wiltshire. Again, that additional cost for Wiltshire goes unrecognised in the Government's funding allocations.

The growing town of Tidworth in my constituency exemplifies the problems better than most. An enormous amount has been done in Tidworth in recent years in conjunction with the Army to provide better amenities and a more attractive environment. However, Tidworth is destined to grow. One local estimate suggests an increase in its family population of about 30 per cent. over the next three to five years. On any view, that is a large increase. The frequently transient nature of the population brings its own problems in education and in the proper provision of care for children; those problems are greater than in other areas of the county, and their impact will grow with the population. It is a truism to say that it all costs money, but the money is not there because the Government's formula does not recognise the real problems that I have outlined.

The foregoing points to the nature of the problems that give rise to blocked beds. Ultimately, it all comes down to a lack of adequate or fair funding to enable Wiltshire to meet the genuine shortfall against need in its social services budget. It does not help for Wiltshire to raid other constrained budgets to try to meet some of the shortfall. That would merely shift the hardship, not solve the problem, and it would exacerbate the sense of unfairness. We need to look for genuine solutions. We believe that they could be available if only the Government would consider them favourably.

In the medium term, the Government's funding formulae should recognise the higher costs of providing services in rural areas, the applicability of the area cost adjustment to Wiltshire and Swindon, and the costs of providing civilian services to the garrison towns, especially with the further increase of military personnel in Wiltshire that is now envisaged. More immediately, the Government could make additional funding available to social services, either directly or through the NHS, to allow all delayed hospital discharges to be tackled. They could increase the specific grants for social services for community care next year to prevent hospital-delayed discharges continuing in 2001-02. They could make a specific grant available for social services for next year to cover the costs being passed to social services that will result from the Government's response to the royal commission on long-term care. It is estimated that those costs for Wiltshire will be more than £300,000. The Government should consider those suggestions carefully.

I began by criticising the Government over central funding. I have long suspected that they do not understand rural England or the special needs of a rural county such as Wiltshire. Thus, they do not understand the hardship that they are creating in such counties. I am happy to be proved wrong this morning. I have explained what the Government could do at once and in the medium term to prove me wrong. I live in hope that the Minister, who has my gratitude for listening so attentively, will understand the depth of feeling in the county about its cruelly unfair and inadequate funding. I hope that she will bring relief to my constituents and my Wiltshire colleagues by accepting our suggested solutions.

Today the Minister could signal the beginning of the end of bed blocking in Wiltshire. If she would recognise the crisis and the long-term dangers that could flow

from it, that would be a start. Wiltshire deserves a fairer deal, and I look forward to learning this morning that the Minister will provide one.

9.45 am

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) on securing the debate. The issue is important and I am glad of the opportunity to contribute, and to put the case from the Swindon end of Wiltshire.

The right hon. Gentleman claimed that the problem arises from a failure to understand rural areas and from the Government's focus on urban areas. That is not correct. The Public Accounts Committee has examined what is happening all over the country. Its report entitled "Inpatient Admission, Bed Management and Patient Discharge in NHS Acute Hospitals", which was published this month, showed that difficulties such as those we are considering happen throughout the country, and there is no distinction between urban or rural areas. The problem arises in both the urban and the rural parts of my constituency of South Swindon.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I am interested to hear the hon. Lady accept that there is a health service crisis in this context in both urban and rural areas. That is our point. However, my right hon. Friend's argument was that it arises from the standard spending assessment—which is a social services matter and does not relate to the health service. Wiltshire county council is much worse funded than Swindon borough council, for example.

Ms Drown: First, I have not said that the NHS is in crisis across the country. A huge majority of people—I hope that that proportion is reflected in the hon. Gentleman's postbag as it is in mine—receive a fantastic service from the health service. Problems exist and no doubt every day very difficult decisions are taken. However, we should not unnecessarily raise the fears of our constituents, most of whom receive wonderful service.

The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that there are problems with the standard spending assessment. They have existed for many years, under Conservative Administrations as well as under the present Government, who inherited them. However, the present Administration is studying the problem, and I shall deal with that issue later.

It is always difficult for Labour Members to listen to Conservatives talking about insufficient funding of services, because it is those same Opposition Members who say that the Government's spending plans are reckless. We hear that the priority should not be public services but tax cuts. Those two sides of the coin are not consistent. Supporting public services and calling for increased funding—I agree with that for health and social services—means supporting the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he announces increased spending aimed at improving services for our constituents.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): The problem with that argument is that the Government are not spending enough money on services in Wiltshire. That is precisely the point. They tell us in Parliament that they are spending all that money, but when it comes to my constituents, they are not spending it. The hon. Lady's argument is flawed.

Ms Drown: If the hon. Gentleman examines the figures, he will see that social services expenditure in the standard spending assessment has increased year on year. I support him in saying that we should spend more on social services across the country, but he cannot deny that, year on year, more money has been spent on the health service and on social services. Over the next three years, the health service will receive the biggest ever increase in investment from the Government.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): My hon. Friend may be aware that Wiltshire county council's overall standard spending assessment has not just increased, it is above the national average. Similarly, the council's personal social services spending allocation is above the national average. That might support her case.

Ms Drown: I thank my hon. Friend for that information. I want to talk about the title of the debate. Language is important, and the term bed blocking is unfortunate, because it makes it sound as if the person occupying the bed is somehow responsible for the problem, when he or she is not. As the right hon. Member for Devizes said, that person wants to be somewhere else: either in a nursing home or cared for at home. It would be more helpful if we were to use the term "delayed discharges" instead. That term implies that the person in hospital is suffering from the problem just as much as the wider community.

The main hospital in Wiltshire is the Princess Margaret hospital, which is in my constituency. There are roughly 30 patients there and in intermediate care beds around the town who are waiting for social services funding from Swindon borough council. That is not a new phenomenon, but it is nevertheless important, and must be dealt with. I was pleased that the Public Accounts Committee report stated that the NHS was encouraging good practice on the issue, both through targeted funding and by pushing the Government's aim of reducing delays in discharge by 30 per cent. by 2003. Clearly, the Government are trying to ensure that there are improvements in that sector.

We need to recognise that much work on this issue is being done on the ground by hospitals, health authorities and social services departments. There has been an improvement in services and relations between those bodies, and I hope that the Minister and all hon. Members present will join me in congratulating the staff of those hospitals, health authorities and social services departments on the good work that they are doing to combat the problem. They are improving the way in which they collate information about patients, and they are having weekly or daily meetings, where necessary, to ensure that they are addressing the needs of individual patients. The trusts and the local health authorities have worked together to minimise delays and to find areas in which services could be improved.

Mr. Ancram: Is the hon. Lady telling us that there is no bed blocking problem in the Princess Margaret hospital in Swindon? If there is a problem, is it increasing or decreasing?

Ms Drown: I am certainly not saying that there is no such problem. I began by saying that there was a significant problem. At the moment, there are roughly 30 patients whose discharge has been delayed. However, it would be wrong not to recognise the huge amount of work that is going on locally to try to deal with the problem. For example, there have been particular pressures at winter time. I was delighted by the programme of work that the local hospital put together to tackle those difficulties. It was not simply a matter of trying to set up more beds and get more nurses and doctors, it involved all the skills of the wider NHS team. More therapists were brought in so that people could be rehabilitated more quickly and go home. Laboratory staff came in to work extra time so that tests could come through more quickly and people could be seen more quickly. A group of staff was charged with preventing unnecessary admissions. All that work is important and it is worth congratulating those concerned.

I am also pleased that Swindon borough council, with the health authority, has recently agreed to fund an additional 14 placements, which will relieve the pressure. That has not been easy because, despite an increase in the SSA and the budget in excess of inflation, which is much appreciated, both local authority and health authority funds are tight in Swindon and money has been taken out of reserves. Those reserves, which were already low, are even lower, but significant sums have been found to support people.

To return to the point about rural and urban areas, the right hon. Member for Devizes said that Wiltshire social services has already been given an additional grant this year to try to alleviate the problem. Wiltshire is more rural than Swindon, which has not received the same grant. There has been Government action in Wiltshire, and Swindon would appreciate a similar grant because of its particular difficulties.

Mr. Gray: I want to correct a slight misinterpretation which the Minister may have made of the figures for SSAs in Wiltshire. Social services SSA for the county of Wiltshire is £128 per head. The shire county average is £148 per head, and the national average is £178 per head. Wiltshire county council social services SSA is £50 per head less than the national average. The Minister's interpretation of the figures does not bear detailed examination.

Ms Drown: Those remarks may have been better addressed to the Minister, but I shall comment on them. There is an issue with SSAs. The existing formula could be improved, and I am pleased that the Government have agreed to examine that. As responsible Members of Parliament, we cannot say that every local authority in the country should receive the same amount per person because needs vary. Our own constituencies include areas of higher and lower need, and that should be reflected in the services provided in those areas. Such issues are written large throughout the country. We know that there is a link between health and poverty, and that poverty leads to poor health. Those of us in more prosperous areas must accept that we should receive slightly less per head, but we want the services that meet our people's needs—[*Interruption.*]

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) is trying to make a political point from a sedentary position. He is being irresponsible in not recognising that we all have a responsibility for the wider country. Members of Parliament who represent relatively prosperous areas must accept that sometimes it is not fair to claim the same amount of Government money, pound for pound, as areas with five times more unemployment and five times more poverty. Where there is poverty and ill health, the problem must be addressed, and it would be wrong for responsible Members of Parliament selfishly to press for more and cause more ill health and poverty elsewhere. I hope that the hon. Gentleman, as a responsible member of a political party, accepts that.

Mr. Gray: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker, for making an intervention from a sedentary position, and I shall now make it standing up. My point was that I stand here as the Member of Parliament for North Wiltshire and I shall argue the case for North Wiltshire. I shall argue the case for Wiltshire to have the same funding as the rest of the country, and even to have more funding if possible. I do not stand here as a Minister. The hon. Lady is a Back Bencher and should be arguing for the same funding for the people of Swindon as for the rest of the country. I am amazed to hear her accept that Swindon should be less well-funded than elsewhere. That will be well noted by her constituents.

Ms Drown: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his statement. If I were him, I would question my conscience. If I were a member of the Conservative party, I would question whether he should ever be in a position of responsibility. We have a duty to consider the big issues. The logical conclusion of his argument is that no money should go to overseas aid, for example, because that would take away money from his constituents. Such an argument is morally reprehensible. Of course, I will argue for the best for my constituents, but I will always take into account the wider needs of the country and of the world because that is what we, as responsible politicians, must do. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will share that aim.

Swindon has enjoyed relatively generous settlements under the Government—indeed, much more generous that under the previous Conservative Administration. Our social services standard spending assessment for 2000-01 has risen by 22 per cent. compared with 1997-98, and it is interesting to look at the figures for Wiltshire. Like Wiltshire, Swindon's spending is 18 per cent. above SSA, which demonstrates the pressure on services. However, although the settlements are generous they have not kept up with demographic changes. Swindon's population, including the number of elderly people, is growing rapidly, which puts extra pressure on services. Moreover, we start from a very low base. For the first two years, we had the lowest council tax of any unitary authority in England, which was due to our national inheritance from the previous Conservative Government. Moreover, Wiltshire county

council—of which we were once part, and which was usually controlled by Tories but sometimes by Liberal Democrats—did not invest money in services.

The same debate about rural and urban areas has taken place in respect of education, and an effective cross-party group—the F40 group—has considered SSAs. We recognise that the Government have tried to address the problems associated with SSAs. The most recent settlement introduced a policy of funding floors, which we should all welcome, because it will help authorities that are lagging behind by ensuring that they catch up with average funding levels. However, we must ask the Government to go further. In particular, we must consider partnership grants to support work on the ground in our constituencies. Reference was also made to the area cost adjustment, and it is true that that has not helped. As a result, Swindon has lost £655,000, while other authorities with similar costs have gained by such funding.

We should also reflect on the pressure on the Princess Margaret hospital, which has undoubtedly led to specific and occasionally severe problems. My constituents often tell me that there are not enough acute beds in the new hospital, which is being built thanks to this Administration. However, because of delayed discharges, as many as 16 per cent. of acute beds are not being used effectively. If we can overcome that problem and demonstrate that there are sufficient acute beds, we can concentrate instead on other services, such as home care and intermediate care, so that our constituents can have the best, most appropriate services. I am pleased to say that a recent planning application has been made for an additional 60 intermediate beds, which would greatly help in addressing this problem.

As the right hon. Member for Devizes pointed out, solving the problem of delayed discharges would mean better economics for the public purse and better health. Those who have been discharged from acute wards are less likely to get infections. Moreover, there would be a huge psychological impact on patients. In Swindon, an excellent scheme involving purchasing beds in one of our residential homes—Langton house in Wroughton—has had an amazing impact on the people who have been discharged. The doctors and nurses who discharged them from the acute hospital thought that they might not be ready to go home for eight to 12 weeks, but, simply because they moved from hospital to a less acute setting, they got better much more quickly than anyone expected. That is partly due to the psychological impact—people tend to think, "I'm out of hospital, so I must be getting better." Such schemes can really help people's health.

The Government may say that Wiltshire and Swindon have sufficient funding and should be delivering as well as the best across the country. I would respond that if that is so, in what specific respects can we do better? In some cases we can say, "X or Y should have been done," but that probably happens everywhere. I know that the Government are working on best practice across the country, but it would be helpful if we could pass such information back to the people who are working in our constituencies to try to deliver the best that they can for patients. I recognise the hard work that is being done in Swindon and congratulate those who are doing it.

The Government are working to encourage partnerships and to spread best practice. When I was first elected in 1997, the trusts were not communicating and the health authority and social services were not talking the same language—both were defending their own budgets and territories. Now, when I meet them, it is clear that they recognise that they have a shared problem that they are tackling together. That is a huge step forward.

I want to see much more funding for social services, so that we can return to the old-fashioned home help service, which is a good, preventive service. At the moment, we have only the more intensive home care service.

I appeal to the Government to consider increasing partnership grants. That would reward the good partnership work that is taking place and recognise the fact that together the staff are doing all that they can to deliver the best possible care for local people.

10.7 am

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): It is a pleasure, I think, to follow the hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown), although I have to say that I am slightly puzzled by one or two elements of her speech. At one moment she argued that there was a crisis in her local hospital, Princess Margaret hospital in Swindon, and at the next that there was no such crisis and everything was fine. At one moment she argued that social services spending in Swindon and by Wiltshire county council was sufficient, and at the next moment that it should be more. At one moment she argued that it was reasonable that we should rank significantly below the national average for social services spending—because that allows us to spend money on overseas development, for example—but at the next that it is important that we should be spending the same. I fear that some of her speech gave out mixed messages.

Ms Drown: The hon. Gentleman is trying to make an interesting and exciting speech, but I fear that he is not succeeding.

Mr. Gray: I have not started yet—just wait.

Ms Drown: It is perfectly consistent to recognise the good work that has been done and the fact that progress has been made, while saying that much more needs to be done.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for clarifying her position. I am sure that her constituents will take careful note.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) on securing the debate. We entitled it "The bed blocking crisis in Wiltshire" advisedly. This is not a small matter, to be discussed in passing, that might justify a quick local press release, but a significant crisis in our constituencies. That is why my right hon. Friend, who is chairman of the Conservative party and has several other duties to perform, has none the less chosen to give up an hour and a half of his time, plus the time spent in preparing his speech, to come to the Chamber—as have other hon. Friends from the county and, indeed, hon. Members from other parties.

[Mr. Gray]

Of course, Wiltshire, with the exception of Swindon, is an entirely Conservative-represented county, and I am delighted that all three of my colleagues are here today.

I should like to touch on several aspects of the crisis. As my right hon. Friend said, about 68 beds in the county are blocked, and that has various consequences. It is only the tip of the iceberg, because we believe that about 60 more people are at home and awaiting assessment. They need to be admitted to Cameron ward in Chippenham hospital because, sadly, they have dementia or similar diseases associated with the elderly. They desperately need admission to the ward, but they cannot even obtain an assessment on whether they are suitable for that placement.

There is hidden bed blocking throughout the county and people from other counties, particularly Gloucestershire, are seeking places in Malmesbury and Chippenham hospitals in my constituency but cannot get them. The bed blocking crisis is in fact greater than the figure of 68 that we heard on 19 January, when the most recent census was taken, but I shall focus on that figure.

There is a crisis in local hospitals. It was interesting to hear the hon. Member for South Swindon refer to the Princess Margaret hospital. She referred to it as a Labour achievement, but it was a product of the private finance initiative, which was invented by the Conservatives. The hospital was created and planned by the Conservative Government, although she was right in as much as the new Secretary of State laid the foundation stone, turned up to open it and signed the deal for the PFI. The PFI itself, however, was a Thatcherite invention. The Labour party voted against the whole notion of the PFI for hospitals and was totally and utterly opposed to it for years. When it came to power, it decided to use that Thatcherite invention to build the Princess Margaret hospital in Swindon, among others. I do not accept that it is an achievement of this Government.

The hon. Lady seems to think that everything is fine and has stated that there is no crisis in the national health service. I fear that the *Western Daily Press* does not agree with her. It stated on 25 January, under the blaring headline "Hospital facing new beds crisis", that the hospital

"is once again having to use trolleys as beds as it struggles to cope and the crisis at Princess Margaret Hospital in Swindon is being made worse by a shortage of nursing home beds."

That may be wrong, and the *Western Daily Press* will no doubt look into it, but it certainly suggests that there is a crisis.

Ms Drown: I was trying to get across the point that there is no crisis throughout the national health service. The hon. Gentleman is wrong to raise unnecessary fears among his constituents, the vast majority of whom receive an excellent service from the NHS. I said then and I say now that that does not mean that there are not real pressures in the health service. We all recognise that.

Will the hon. Gentleman admit that, under the Conservative Administration, the health service was also regularly in crisis—to use his description? If he read the same reports on delayed discharges in hospitals under the previous Administration, he would find exactly the same problem. Statistics on the number of people who waited on trolleys under that Administration show that the problem was the same. I should be interested to know how many times, between 1994 and 1997, he wrote to his local Member of Parliament about those issues. The problems have existed for a long time.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's clarification. She used the word "also" and said that the crisis under the previous Administration was as bad as the one today, thus admitting that there is a crisis today. Whether the crisis five years ago was the same, better or worse than today's is academic, and I was not a Member of Parliament at the time, but it is clear that she accepts the general point that there is indeed a crisis in local hospitals. To confirm that, on 25 January the excellent *Western Daily Press* printed another stark headline, "Surgery delayed for 3,000 people by bed blocking". There is indeed a crisis in the national health service in Wiltshire, and I am sorry that she will not openly accept that.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): Does my hon. Friend accept that one of the principal causes of bed blocking is the uncertainty that has arisen as a result of the Government's "Fit for the Future?" regulations? They are a major contributory factor to the closure of nursing home beds.

Mr. Gray: My hon. Friend is right. "Fit for the Future?" may be the result of sensible aims, but it has created an even greater crisis in long-term care. I have mentioned the Princess Margaret hospital and the Cameron ward in Chippenham hospital in my constituency. I am worried about the number of people who are there unnecessarily. The same applies in Malmesbury hospital, where several of my constituents have been affected by the closure of the long-term care home in Minety, one of the three long-term care homes that have closed recently in Wiltshire. Those people are stuck in Malmesbury hospital and are costing the nation a fortune. It is a problem for the hospital, as it is for those who have to stay in a ward where they do not want to be. It is inappropriate that they are there, but they have to be because of the crisis.

My hon. Friend referred to private homes. It is extremely worrying that a large number of first-class private homes are in deep financial difficulties. Many are deregistering as nursing homes. For example, Ferfoot, a former nursing home in Chippenham in my constituency, has now deregistered to become a long-term care home. Many homes have been left with huge numbers of empty beds. The Conifers home in Minety closed recently with tragic consequences for its residents. They received a letter on 20 December by registered mail saying that Conifers was closing down and were asked to find alternative accommodation. Many of its residents are now going into hospital. We have many fine, first-class private homes in Wiltshire and what is happening to them is tragic.

In 1999, there were 295 private residential homes in Wiltshire. We now have only 287, and the number of beds has dropped significantly from 3,141 to 3,079. The position of nursing homes is even worse. The number of

nursing homes has reduced from 71 to 65, and the number of beds from 2,296 to 2,049. That is in an area where the population is growing older and, because of its environmental advantages, people are moving in. If anything, long-term care homes, residential homes and nursing homes should be becoming larger. We need more beds, not fewer, but their number has declined significantly.

I read the excellent *Chippenham Gazette and Herald* and *The Wiltshire Times*, but the *Western Daily Press* provides more evidence than other newspapers. On 25 January 2001, it carried the blaring headline "Care homes at risk in funds crisis". People are stuck in hospital and care homes cannot continue. They are going out of business and the whole problem is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is a vicious spiral of the worst sort.

What is happening has particular consequences for the public purse to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes referred. From the point of view of UK plc—the taxpayer—it is extraordinary that we are happy as a nation to pay £1,250 a week to keep 68 people in hospital who need not be there. They could be living in first-class private accommodation with, in many cases, their own bathrooms—one home in my constituency has a swimming pool—for only £250 a week or, if they need long-term care, for only £150 a week. The nation—the taxpayer—is wasting £1,000 per week for each of those 68 people. About £4 million a year is going straight down the drain for no reason other than that health service money comes from one pocket, while social services money comes from another. It is administrative nonsense and an absolute disgrace that taxpayers' money should be wasted in such a way.

Throughout the country, we are wasting hundreds of millions of pounds providing care that people do not need and that is not right for their circumstances. Such people are not in need of acute care. They need long-term care. We are spending hundreds of millions of pounds providing the wrong care. I hope that the Minister will deal with such matters in her response. I suspect that not only the people of Wiltshire but the nation will be interested to hear what she has to say about what the Government intend to do about the problem.

The problem has real consequences. We are discussing not merely numbers—£4 million a year being wasted in Wiltshire—but elderly people being kept in large wards and looked after incorrectly by the wrong sort of people and not enjoying their lives or having an armchair to sit in and look out of the window at the garden. Such people are experiencing deep difficulties, and even worse off than them, it seems, are those who stay at home, often in unsuitable circumstances, around Wiltshire. The home care side has had to be reduced because of the SSA system, which I shall discuss in a moment. Such people sit at home, and their carers, who often suffer in such ludicrous circumstances, are having genuine difficulty in looking after them.

I am keen to leave adequate time for the hon. Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw), who I am sure has a fine speech ready. I see him nodding. We are looking forward to that speech, although it is perhaps not directly relevant to Wiltshire.

I should like to touch on a matter that lies behind the problem. We must differentiate strictly and clearly between the rural Wiltshire county council and the urban Swindon borough council. One of the unfortunate asides in the speech of the hon. Member for South Swindon suggested that she thought it perfectly sensible that the SSA and the revenue support grant in Swindon should have increased while those in rural Wiltshire have decreased. She said that that was a result of Swindon having been part of Wiltshire county council at one time, that Swindon was dreadfully underfunded, which was rotten, especially as Swindon has poverty, single mothers and so on, and that that makes it perfectly reasonable that Swindon should have more money and Wiltshire less. That is clearly what she said, and that is certainly what is happening in the rest of the country, where £30 million pounds has been ripped out of rural SSAs and pumped into urban inner cities. The Labour Government have removed a substantial amount from rural counties—Conservative and Liberal-controlled areas—and pumped it into Labour areas in the inner cities. That was my understanding of what the hon. Lady said a moment ago, but she may want to correct me.

Ms Drown: I was simply saying that Swindon has needs, and I am pleased that the Government have recognised that. We needed the funds, and the Government are right to support us by increasing our SSA over three years by 22 per cent. I am not saying that Wiltshire should receive less support, although the hon. Gentleman's argument seems to be that all the money should go to Wiltshire and none to Swindon. I have a much more responsible attitude to the matter, and I suggest that Wiltshire, too, should get more funds—as, indeed, it has. In 1997-98, the SSA was £48.5 million, and in 2000-01, £53.8 million. That is an increase.

Mr. Gray: One moment the hon. Lady says that Swindon's money has increased, and that that is good, and the next she says that that has not affected Wiltshire's money. The truth is that Wiltshire's money has decreased significantly. The bed blocking crisis is simply the result of that. As I said, we spend £50 a head less in Wiltshire on social services than the national average.

Ms Stuart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: I am slightly anxious that I am using up my time, but of course I shall give way, as the Minister is so charming.

Ms Stuart: For my benefit, will the hon. Gentleman remind us whether he agrees with the right hon. Member for Devizes that we should provide solutions to the underlying problem, not shift hardship?

Mr. Gray: That useful and interesting piece of rhetoric ignores the nature of the SSA system. The SSA system involves only one cake. We are not discussing increasing the Government's overall spending on local government.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): Yes we are.

Mr. Gray: That shows how little the hon. Gentleman knows about the SSA system. There is a large cake, and

[Mr. Gray]

the system is the means by which it is divided and decisions are made about whether the money goes to inner cities, rural areas or poor people. It makes no comment about the overall size of the cake, merely about how it is divided. The Government have cut up the cake in a different way. They have pulled a comparatively large amount of money—yesterday the amount increased—out of rural areas such as Wiltshire, and pumped it into places such as Swindon. That seemed to be the point that the hon. Member for South Swindon was making.

To answer the hon. Lady's second point, I am not ashamed of the fact that I am not a Minister of the Crown or even a Front-Bench spokesman, although I am an Opposition Whip. I stand here as the Member of Parliament for North Wiltshire to argue the case for more funds for my constituency. I do not have a responsibility for the poor of the nation, or for overseas development, although we would all agree that as much as possible should be spent on that. The purpose of the debate is to talk about bed blocking in north Wiltshire, and I am delighted to have the opportunity to do that. It is not about how much money should go to overseas development. The hon. Lady seems less keen to talk about her constituents than I am.

We must question the Government on the issue. I am glad that the Minister is here, and I know that she has been fully briefed, because she received the same briefing as we did from the excellent Wiltshire health authority and Wiltshire county council social services department. I hope that she is ready to answer the detailed questions that my hon. Friends and I put to her this morning. We seek two things. First, she must speak on behalf of her colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions with regard to the current review of the SSA system. We need to know whether she believes that the cost adjustment system should remain in place, and why Berkshire and Hampshire receive more than Wiltshire. How can SSAs be reformed to find long-term solutions to the problems that we have mentioned?

Secondly, is Wiltshire in the same position as Hampshire county council, which last year received specific grants to sort out its bed blocking crisis? We look forward to the Minister's announcing whether she will award us specific grants this year to sort out the crisis.

I would also like to hear some longer-term, philosophical thinking from the Minister. The crisis has come about because the money comes out of two pockets—one for the health service and the other for social services. As long as that method of funding is used, the crisis will continue. Will she give some thought about whether it would be possible to amalgamate those sources and take the money from only one pocket? Only then will a final solution come about.

We have heard this morning about a very real crisis in Wiltshire. It is a crisis for nursing homes and hospitals, but, more importantly, it is a crisis for people. I hope that we do not hear a lot of political badinage. I want to hear serious answers to the questions that we have raised, and real solutions for my constituents who are facing this extraordinary crisis.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mrs. Marion Roe (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key), I remind hon. Members that the wind-up speeches will begin at 10.30.

10.28 am

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Thank you, Mrs. Roe. I am grateful to the Minister for her presence this morning, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) for initiating this important debate. I hope that the Minister, with her usual charm and courtesy, will find answers for us in her reply to the debate, but I remind her that the system of standard spending asssessments holds no fears for me. As a former Minister responsible for local government finance, I know the ins and outs of it. When I was a Minister, in a different Department from hers, anomalies cropped up and mistakes and statistical errors were made, but it was possible to put things right. I hope that she will be able to do so.

Until 18 months ago, the circumstances in Wiltshire were serious. We had to undergo the consultation on standards in care, and it was clear that that would lead to the closure of homes throughout Wiltshire. Expecting high standards of staffing and physical accommodation is one thing, but damaging over-regulation that leads to closures is quite another.

The Inwood house residential retirement home in my constituency is a fine example of a home that is under great pressure simply because someone decided on the minimum number of square metres required per person and whether that included a loo or a bathroom. Homes are being closed throughout the country on that basis. Assisi house in my constituency closes today, having been home to 20 people for 18 years.

Last year, 700 care homes closed throughout the country, with a loss of 15,000 beds for the elderly and vulnerable. Is it all the fault of the county council in Wiltshire? I think not. It would not be fair to say so. We have all argued for a proper appraisal of the situation, and I pay particular credit to Councillor Mrs. Judy Seager, the chairman of the social services committee, and the director of social services, Dr. Ray Jones, who have worked unceasingly to try to find a solution to this problem. My constituents suffered another body blow today, as we have been told that out of the £52 million announced by the Secretary of State for Education on Monday, Wiltshire will receive just £100,000, and Swindon will receive £460,000. We are among the biggest losers on the transfer of adult education, and have one of the fastest rising school rolls. That is another instance of our county missing out.

Of course there is no problem in Swindon. The hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) not only lives in another local authority area but on another planet as far as these matters are concerned. Once again, the Government are sucking the tax out of Wiltshire, and stuffing it into Swindon.

Ms Drown: I know that outside this Chamber the hon. Gentleman would be far more reasonable. The fact is

that Swindon has needs, which the Government are right to address. I hope that he, as a reasonable politician, will also recognise those needs.

Mr. Key: The hon. Lady has only been in the House for five minutes. Indeed, she has only been in Wiltshire for five minutes. Some of us have lived in Wiltshire most of our lives, as well as representing it. She will know that there has been a problem in Wiltshire long before Swindon had its own local authority. I do not want to digress, however, as we are very short of time.

One or two further points need to be made. The county and the health authority are working hard together to find solutions. Let me outline the practical impact on my constituents. Total delayed discharges in Salisbury district hospital are 45, which means 45 bed blockers. Of those, Wiltshire is responsible for 35, Hampshire for five, Dorset for three and others for two. The total number of bed days used by those 45 people is 3,384. The average length of stay is 75 days. General medical average length of stay is four days. Out of those 45 patients, 42 are more than 75 years of age. The mean average age of admission in Salisbury of the over-75 age group is 84 years. We are therefore discussing very elderly and vulnerable people. The delayed discharge rate—the number of people delayed in hospital per 1,000 over 75 years of age, which is a standard health service method of measurement—is 2.5, against a rate of 1.52 for England as a whole. We received news this week that a local deal has been done for lifetime placements, and the local NHS trust and county council social services will find the money for another 10 out of those 45. Therefore, 35 people will still be where they should not be.

The opportunity cost is huge. During the past financial year, bed blockers in my local hospital have meant that 2,920 operations have not been performed. If the county council is forced to continue without any further help, next year there will be 5,840 cancelled operations in my district hospital. That is unacceptable. We must get to the bottom of this problem. My right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes has enumerated some of the available solutions.

I want to stress the impact that the military has on the area. At my end of the county, there is a serious problem. The military are funded by the national health service as well as through defence medical services, but an increasing burden is being put on local services, especially by project Allenby, which will make the local garrisons the biggest garrisons in the country. That has a huge impact on health provision. If accidents happen on the Salisbury plain training area, the casualties do not all go off to the military hospital in Haslar, but to the accident and emergency unit, spinal unit and burns unit at Salisbury district hospital. That is another significant factor.

The crisis is of the Government's own making. As my right hon. Friend so decisively argued, the facts are beyond dispute. There were never such problems under a Conservative Government. The Liberal Democrats in Salisbury have exercised their full intellectual rigour and political clout and suggested that people write to them to complain. A fat lot of use that will be. The issue requires real politics at Westminster.

Sir Humphrey and Bernard could not have produced a finer script than what we have been presented with in Wiltshire. It would run like this: "First, Minister, you must close the care homes. Then you must apply a funding formula for the county council which makes its job impossible and wastes millions of pounds of taxpayers' money. Next, you should set targets for the Salisbury district hospital that will force it into deficit, block beds and threaten the community with the loss of thousands of operations. Then, Minister, you must issue the threat of red lighting on 1 April. That will lead to direct rule from Whitehall, with a Minister directly in charge of what happens in Wiltshire. That is just a couple of months away. That, Minister, is Labour reality." What a flagship NHS policy that is. The Minister should be proud of it. I cannot wait for the next general election.

10. 35 am

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): The right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) is to be congratulated on securing the debate, which raises serious questions. Perhaps the issues that we have been discussing affecting Wiltshire are a microcosm of the problems confronted every day by directors of social services and the NHS all over the country.

The example that we have heard about shows us a social services department being pressured into overspending its community care budget—at present by £1.5 million, and possibly by up to £5 million by the end of the year. We know, from surveys undertaken by the Association of Directors of Social Services, that the problem of over-commitment is widespread. Seven out of 10 social services departments surveyed last year considered that their budgetary position was worse in the current than the previous financial year. They expected it to be as bad, if not worse, next year.

Wiltshire social services department spends about 18 per cent. more than its standard spending assessment, so talking about increases in the standard spending assessment is deliberately misleading. Until the standard spending assessment is brought up to the right level, increases disappear into existing provision. They do not buy extra services. That is why the hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) was right when she talked of a history of underfunding. The standard spending assessment locks historical underfunding in place and penalises councils that for one reason or another have been frugal or tight-fisted in the past.

Nationally, most councils spend about 11 per cent. more than their standard spending assessment on social services. As a result, as the Local Government Association found only last week, nearly every social services department in the country expects an outturn overspend this year, totalling £205 million. Those budget pressures—not just in Wiltshire—are causing care gridlock. In Wiltshire the numbers of people over 85 are increasing quite substantially. That is a cause for celebration. It is wonderful that people are living longer. However, that reality is not factored into the equation relating to the funding of long-term care. The consequence is that the number of places that Wiltshire can fund remains the same, while more people need them. That leads to bed blocking, and more people experiencing rationing and being unable to obtain the care that they need.

We have heard details of the collapse in confidence in the care home sector in Wiltshire, but that is a national problem. In the past couple of years 15,000 beds have

[Mr. Paul Burstow]

been lost and many care homes have closed. Will the Minister tell us why, despite repeated requests, the Department of Health has refused to publish the information obtained from last year's survey to ascertain the number of beds lost from the care home sector between October 1999 and October 2000? I am told that the survey was intended to provide an idea of councils' preparedness to deal with winter pressures. Surely hon. Members should be able to see the figures, to judge for themselves how prepared councils would be. Perhaps the refusal to publish the figures is due to the accelerating rate of bed closures.

I hope that the Minister will not tell us that the problems that right hon. and hon. Members have described this morning will be fixed by intermediate care. That is a short-term rehabilitation package to bring about a patient's return home. It should not be somewhere to dump people who need permanent placements in residential nursing homes. If that is to be its function, it is a con that needs to be revealed. We need to make sure that the Government do not propose that. I hope that the Government will not hide behind standard spending assessment figures, but accept that those figures do not reflect true cost pressures on local authorities.

Finally, we need to take into account what might happen if there were a change of Government. We know that the Conservatives want to spend £8 billion less on services. That would reduce funding to social services in Wiltshire by £3 million. Under the proposals of the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), the situation would become worse, not better. More people would be left in limbo waiting for beds in nursing homes and more nursing homes would close.

The Minister may put on her rose-tinted glasses when she makes her comments about standard spending assessments. I fear that the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) was wearing the same pair.

10.40 am

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) on securing this debate. He had the good fortune or foresight to realise that this was a good week to debate bed blocking, as at this time there is peak demand for beds in the national health service, so the problem is at its peak. The Minister and I visited City hospital in Birmingham on the same day last week, so she will have seen that accident and emergency departments are not currently coping, due in part to the number of blocked acute beds to which emergency cases need to be admitted.

The debate has shown that there have been three key causes of the bed blocking problem, some of which were avoidable. We have heard about Wiltshire, but it is important to say that its case is not unique. Kent suffers badly from bed blocking. Five nursing homes have closed there, with the loss of 243 beds, and there are 225 blocked beds for the same reasons as in Wiltshire. The picture is the same nearer to me in Worcestershire, so the problem is nationwide. The possible differences and their serious consequences within one county have been thrown sharply into relief by the Wiltshire Members who have spoken.

The avoidable aspect of the bed blocking problem was the imposition of the proposals in the document "Fit for the Future?", which contains onerous regulations for the care home sector. There is some irony in that, as the regulations have resulted in the closure of many care homes and the industry being much less fit for its future. Unsurprisingly, last year the Independent Healthcare Association described them as a piece of "strident bossiness".

The introduction of standard room sizes, wheelchair access to rooms and the reduction of the number of shared rooms to 20 per cent. has had a serious impact on those who have to decide whether they can continue in business under such regulations. I accept that the Government are aware of the extreme concern that the regulations have caused the care home industry. They have climbed down on several issues: they have been prepared to reduce the standard room size for an existing care home from 10 sq m to 9.3 sq m, and have made a distinction between existing and new-build care homes, so that new-build homes will have a standard room size of 12 sq m.

It is not beyond the wit of man to realise that the care home industry is left wondering what the standards will ultimately be. That degree of uncertainty will cause problems.

Mr. Burstow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Spelman: I am sorry but time is tight and the hon. Gentleman has had the opportunity to make his key points.

The Government's approach has been ham-fisted, and has led to a huge loss of capacity in the system. I hope that the Government were embarrassed when the hon. Gentleman pointed out that they were unwilling to provide figures on the loss of care home beds. However, they will be aware of last year's Laing and Buisson study, which showed the loss of 25,000 beds in the care home sector. That is an enormous loss of capacity, and one of the key reasons why we are debating the bed blocking crisis today. It is quite separate from the standard spending assessment issue, which has been well elucidated.

The uncertainty caused to the home care industry by the imposition of the regulations is entirely inflicted by the Government. It cannot be attributed to the previous Administration. Moreover, the Government would be wrong to interpret that as meaning that the Conservative party is more worried about the providers of care home places than the users. That is untrue. My right hon. and hon. Friends have made it clear that the problems of those in blocked beds, those who need to go into hospital but cannot, and those in care homes that are being shut are of paramount concern to our party. The Minister will be aware that the mortality rate is exceptionally high among care home residents who have to move out of a home in which they had lived for a long time. Let it not be said that the Conservative party cares more for the providers than for the users.

Care homes throughout the country are underfunded by approximately £50 a week. In order to remain in business, some care homes are turning to the families for top-up funds. That could cause difficulties, because £50 may be a lot of money to people who are rather

euphemistically called third parties. The third party may be a son or daughter, a carer or other relative. The Government should not have allowed that to happen; they have presided over a serious decline.

There are knock-on consequences of bed blocking. I make no apology for mentioning again my recent visit to the City hospital in Birmingham; I am sure that it is as fresh in the Minister's memory as it is in mine. What I have to say is directly relevant to the bed blocking problem. The Minister and I visited a busy accident and emergency department that is not coping, despite the extra money made available to deal with winter pressures—money that has been allocated also to Wiltshire hospitals. It is no good blaming someone else for the fact that the hospital cannot cope. The hard fact is that the nation's accident and emergency departments cannot cope with a flu epidemic in the middle of winter. That is the Government's responsibility. They said that they would do something about it.

In the middle of February last year, out popped the new term "intermediate care". I asked the City hospital in Birmingham about intermediate care and about step-down bed arrangements, and I was told that it was not a reality for that hospital because it was in the midst of a crisis. Birmingham social services are as overspent as the social services department in Wiltshire—Birmingham is overspent to the tune of £14 million. The overspend in social services departments is one of the main contributory factors to the crisis that faces the NHS. That was well summed up by my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), who graphically described the problem by referring to the two pockets.

The problem has not been solved because the two sources of funding are completely separate, largely because civil servants at the highest level have a silo mentality. They seem unable to talk to each other about how the problem could be solved. It is yet another example of the Government's failure to define the problem correctly and to find an answer. It was this Government who coined the phrase joined-up government, so where is it?

10.48 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) on securing this morning's debate. There has been considerable confusion among Opposition Members about what is needed. Do they not want us to shift hardship cases to solve the bed problem? The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) said that he did not want any political answers, whereas the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) was looking forward to the next election. I make no apology for saying that hon. Members cannot have it both ways in such debates. If they want a detailed response from Ministers, they must allow them sufficient time. If the members of the Opposition Front Bench raise wider issues, I shall address them, even if I have to do so outside the Chamber.

The hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) mentioned her visits to Birmingham's City hospital, so she will know that Birmingham social services received an extra £1 million to solve its problems. An extra £1 million was given to its accident and emergency department, and the go ahead was given for a £22 million ambulatory care centre. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire said that the private finance initiative was a Conservative idea. It may have been a Tory idea, but they could not make it work. We are making it work.

The flaw in the Opposition's argument is that they cannot have it both ways. They cannot ask for more money and at the same time accuse us of being reckless. They should not go down the discredited route of saying that we need to do more of the same. There has been a deep recognition that we need to reconfigure the services and work together. Conservative Members complain that the funding streams come from two sources, but that is exactly why we are encouraging social services and the health service to work together.

Mr. Ancram: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Stuart: No. I want to deal with the basic argument put by Opposition Members.

Mr. Ancram: Well answer my question.

Ms Stuart: The right hon. Gentleman should allow me to give him an answer. I still have a few minutes in which to do so, although he may not like what I have to say. It is important to recognise that the way forward is for the two services to work together. It is no good criticising and asking about what would happen if this or that were the case. We are changing the way of working. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) expressed doubts about intermediate care, suggesting that it is a quick fix. Far from it: it is part of a whole package.

I refute the hon. Gentleman's allegation that we refuse to publish figures on the loss of beds. The Prime Minister said in Prime Minister's questions on 29 November that although there had been a 15,000 gross loss, the net loss was 8,600. That must be seen in the context of the 20,000 home care packages.

Mr. Burstow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Stuart: No. I want to make a little progress.

We have made a total commitment to improving public services, which we have matched with funding. Opposition Members, with their talk of crisis everywhere, fail to recognise that we are changing the services and making improvements. I should like to know how they would make improvements in the services while cutting £16 billion under their tax guarantee.

Today we have the opportunity to discuss what happens in Wiltshire. We have a responsibility to put the position in Wiltshire in context. It is no good suggesting that we should not blame the previous Conservative Government. We inherited a system with too few doctors, too few nurses and not enough beds. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire said that he wants more beds. We will provide more beds, but to do so we require extra staff, who need training.

I shall make a brief point on the accusations about the "Fit for the Future?" proposals. It is extraordinary that Conservative Members want it both ways. We are

[Ms Stuart]

consulting on the best way to implement the policy. That is not a major U-turn. If they are suggesting that under the "Fit for the Future?" proposals the only measure that private nursing homes have to put in place at the moment is a complaints procedure, they are either misrepresenting the facts or displaying a total lack of understanding of what is going on.

Wiltshire has to be seen in context. We are investing more money throughout the country. From April, Wiltshire health authority will receive £408 million, which is a cash increase of £29.4 million on the previous year, and a staggering increase of £167 million on the figure for April 1997. Hon. Members should remember that that contrasts with the meagre increases in real terms of 0.5 per cent. and 1.4 per cent. that Wiltshire received in the last years of the Tory Government. The allegation that we are ripping money out of Tory rural areas and giving it to Labour urban areas is unfounded and not substantiated by the figures. Bed blocking involves health and social services. [*Interruption.*] Will the hon. Member for North Wiltshire please allow me to answer his question? I shall be unable to do so if he does not listen.

We are putting investment into not just health, but social services, which are receiving more money. Under the Conservative Government, spending on personal social services rose by an annual average of just 0.1 per cent. in real terms—that is not a misprint or a mispronunciation. Under the Labour Government, spending on personal social services will increase by an average annual rate of 3.4 per cent. in real terms. Conservative Members may not like to hear that, but I am afraid that those are the facts.

Just to make my earlier point clear, for 2001, Wiltshire county council's overall standard spending assessment increased by 5.6 per cent., while Swindon borough council's increased by 4.9 per cent. Both of those increases are above the national average increase of 4.4 per cent. Conservative Members cannot turn this into a debate about rural areas not getting extra money, because the figures do not stack up. In the same year, the personal social services standard spending assessment for Wiltshire increased by 5.8 per cent., and for Swindon by 5.5 per cent. Again, both those increases are greater than the national average. As hon. Members are so exercised about local government spending, I am sure that they will play their part and spend some of their valuable time contributing to this afternoon's debate on local government finance in England.

Investment in the partnership has already begun. The social services and the NHS are working together to support the winter planning preparations in Wiltshire. Additional funding of more than £3.2 million has been provided to the Wiltshire health community. From the £63 million announced in August of last year, Wiltshire received £636,000, which is being used in a wide variety of schemes across the county, such as providing 22 additional beds for discharge and rehabilitation support in Swindon and Ridgeway Downs primary care groups.

The Tories will not match that funding, whether it is the £63 million announced in the summer, the extra allocation in November, or the special grant made to Wiltshire over the past six months. They are committed to their tax guarantee. They should not come here and complain that services in their constituencies do not receive enough money. They do not recognise the extra money that goes into the service.

Mrs. Spelman: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Stuart: I shall give way to the hon. Lady to allow her to make just more one point.

Mrs. Spelman: I appreciate that, as I gave the Minister an additional two minutes to accommodate such interventions. I should like to place on the record that the £16 billion in cuts is a figure plucked from the air. She knows full well that we have pledged to match entirely the Government's spending on the NHS.

Ms Stuart: I am grateful for that intervention. Will the hon. Lady clarify whether her party is also committed to matching Labour's social services spending? I would be happy to give way again if she could give me an answer. The core of the debate has been that bed blocking is caused by the NHS and social services not pooling their funding. Unless the Tories match their commitment to NHS funding with a commitment to social services, their promises are empty and worthless.

Mr. Burstow: Will the Minister confirm that, in a parliamentary answer to me, the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), has refused to publish figures showing the number of bed closures in nursing homes? That is a fact, which is on the record. Will she confirm it?

Mr. Ancram: On a point of order, Mrs. Roe. Is it in order for the Minister to refuse to take an intervention from the person who led the debate, but then to take interventions from Conservative and Liberal Democrat Front-Bench Members?

Mrs. Marion Roe (in the Chair): The right hon. Gentleman will know that the Minister is entitled to do that.

Ms Stuart: I shall give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Ancram: I put four sensible and moderate suggestions to the Minister. I am looking forward to hearing her response to them.

Ms Stuart: I was outlining the whole package, and I was also making the point that the standard spending assessment review is on-going. There is a debate about that this afternoon. However, this debate is about bed blocking, and I am talking about how the NHS and social services work together. The extra packages that have been put in place in Wiltshire have led to the Princess Margaret hospital receiving an additional £408,000 for its modernisation fund. Wiltshire and Swindon are increasing spending on personal social services.

Hon. Members have singularly failed to recognise the progress that has been made. I am not saying that the system is perfect. However, the solutions we propose are extra funding in the short term and a restructuring of services in the long term, which, as the right hon. Gentleman said, is not a matter of shifting hardship, but of solving the underlying problems. It is a 10-year plan, and we are well on the way. Conservative Members have no solutions other than arguing over figures that simply do not add up.

Employee Rights

11 am

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): Just before Christmas, as we approached the 21st century, Vauxhall workers woke up to hear on the radio that their jobs and way of life were threatened with destruction. Most of us outside the Vauxhall work force considered that an outrage, but those who worked there were entitled to go further and speak of devastation for their families, and of how such things should not happen in a civilised country that claims to have the rule of law and acceptable minimum labour standards.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) and for Luton, South (Ms Moran), who have worked to ensure that Parliament faces this issue squarely. Although the blunt reality is that too many Vauxhall workers have no right to information and consultation, this debate extends beyond Vauxhall to the rights of employees in general. In the main, the right to know what is going on and what is likely to affect individual employees simply does not exist for most who work in British industry and commerce.

Vauxhall workers are not the only ones to have been treated with contempt. The same problem arose at Coats Viyella and Biwater, and other hon. Members will want to raise similar issues of local concern. Britain is simply out of step with the rest of the European Union. Last week, Vivendi, the French company, held its European works council meeting in Paris. Vivendi employs some 25,000 people throughout Europe. Its employee representatives examined detailed company proposals on employment structure, employment trends and a range of other issues. Interestingly, although they were able to identify the situation in France in minute detail, no such detail could be discerned for the United Kingdom.

The right to information and consultation is a simple trade union issue. It is morally right and proper that employees should know what is going on, and it is sensible that they should demand that right; but it is also in the interests of companies to ensure that employees are properly consulted. There is considerable evidence to suggest that firms that communicate do better. My hon. Friend the Minister will be aware of a study that was undertaken at the behest of the Department of Trade and Industry by the Industrial Society. As the DTI itself said, all firms included in the case study asserted

"that their adoption of a partnership-based approach has helped them achieve enhanced competitive performance."

Consultation is in the interests not simply of the rights of workers, but of companies. Although I am not sure that it meant what it said, even the CBI agreed with that view, stating:

"The CBI has long supported effective employee involvement as a key contributor to business performance."

Of course, good employers already support such involvement, but too many others simply do not. Some 52 per cent. of firms that employ between 25 and 50 people offer little or no consultation to their employees.

[Mr. Tony Lloyd]

Vauxhall was rightly condemned by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, but we lag a long way behind in the international stakes.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): My hon. Friend will know that there is a further pressure—globalisation. The ferocious competition between the trading blocs is leading to restructuring, especially in Europe. Is it no essential that British workers should have the same consultation rights as workers in the rest of Europe?

Mr. Lloyd: My hon. Friend is right. One problem that we face—not only on information and consultation, but across the board—is the lag between the rights and protections that are available to British workers and those that are available to their European colleagues. That means that, in case after case, British workers are the first to be laid off. We are an easy country to invest in, but also an easy country to disinvest in.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Would my hon. Friend care to comment on the situation facing steel workers in my community in Ebbw Vale? When Corus was set up some 18 months ago, I received a statement from the managing director, Tony Vickers, saying that the plant was safe and that there was no threat to jobs. Now, if we are to believe the serious press, the plant faces closure.

The sad thing is that the workers, public representatives and the Government are not being consulted and the meetings that have taken place have left the Government no clearer about what is happening. The people who work in the UK steel industry and who have built it up into one of the best in the world have the right to be consulted about the future of their plant. Not only have they not been consulted, but the management will not even tell them when the redundancies will be announced.

Mr. Lloyd: My hon. Friend is right. The Corus saga bears out everything that has been said this morning about the need to change the basis on which British employers operate. I was disappointed that Corus turned down flat the offer by the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation to discuss a buyout. I am not in a position to know whether that would have been the right way forward, but a company that treats its workers with contempt deserves little in the way of plaudits from the general public.

Since the furore over Vauxhall broke out, we have heard strong statements of condemnation from the Prime Minister and from the Secretary of State, who announced some weeks ago that he was contemplating a change in legislation, saying that more should be done to ensure effective consultation with employees. Welcome as his comments were, he did not go far enough; he was merely talking around the issues involved in collective redundancies legislation.

The simple fact is that, as in the case of Corus, the need for consultation goes far beyond the point at which redundancies are announced. It must take place during the periods when employees can make a difference to the decision making of management. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will consider carefully the possibility that the present review will be inadequate unless it is cast wider.

On the EU directive, the Government have made it clear that they do not want to take that route. Like many people, I am somewhat mystified by their resistance. Some critics, such as the CBI, argue that the directive would damage small and medium-sized enterprises and that although effective employee involvement is critical to business, it cannot be legislated for. That is not a very progressive view. The CBI has stated:

> "Any legislation imposing a duty upon employers always to inform and consult employees in advance...would...undermine managerial prerogative."

Frankly, we have gone beyond the days of the feudal state and of managerial prerogative being the only right that exists in the corporate sphere.

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): Before my hon. Friend moves away from the issue of redundancies, does he agree that it should not be a managerial prerogative to do what was done at Coats Viyella? The DTI was notified late one night of a decision that was announced to employees the following morning, the mater having been referred to the Stock Exchange first. That decision resulted in hundreds of redundancies in my constituency and contradictory press releases during a two-hour period. There was a 13-week gap from the initial announcement until it was said that part of the company would be sold off . We are still waiting for information on how some parts of the company will be disposed of. There has been confusion throughout and a lack of information for Government Departments, unions and representatives such as myself on what is happening in the company.

Mr. Lloyd: I hope that this Chamber will condemn that use of the so-called managerial prerogative because it was not an acceptable use of the power. It may have been legal, but it is immoral and, in the long term, disastrous for British industry.

I turn to the European directive. The Government said that British company law is radically different from European law and that the one-size-fits-all approach is inappropriate. I have looked carefully at what the directive would do and those arguments do not apply. The most up-to-date version of the directive provides minimum requirements on information and consultation, as is right and proper; it would be pointless without those minimum requirements. It specifies a floor of 50 employees, which is quite high. Only 2.8 per cent. of United Kingdom companies would be caught and it is arguable that the cut-off point is too high, not too low.

The directive would allow national Governments to determine what procedures were appropriate for individual nation states. It allows considerable freedom to the British Government to say that British company law is different from that in other countries. Finally, it provides considerable scope for local agreement between management and employees to be accepted as being consistent with the directive.

On all those counts, the arguments against the directive do not apply and I must tell the Minister that I am bemused that the British Government are now

accused of blocking the directive. At the Employment and Social Affairs Council on 20 December, the British Government used obscure procedural devices to keep the matter off the agenda. I am sure that my hon. Friend will want to respond to that, but the real issue is that a qualified majority exists to implement the directive.

It would be a tragedy if Britain were the one country out of step with the European framework. It would be a tragedy if we turned our backs on the clear need for change that hon. Friends have described, following the terrible experiences of British workers in recent months. It would be crazy if we were accused of siding with extremists such as the CBI, whose view of the directive is so ridiculous as to put it beyond reasonable consideration.

The change is necessary—I hope that even the Opposition accept that following recent disastrous experiences—and should be introduced quickly.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that in all trade and commerce, there is a need for some confidentiality when negotiations are taking place? Negotiations cannot, realistically, be conducted step by step in public. If he is saying that proper communication with the work force is necessary, what parameters of confidentiality can reasonably be imposed so that normal commercial negotiations are not blown out of the water by being played out in public?

Mr. Lloyd: Of course everybody accepts the need for confidentiality. The trade unions, for instance, know that their members have the same interest in confidentiality as management. I urge hon. Members not to construct the debate as if it were workers against the company.

I shall give an example that moves us into the absurd in terms of confidentiality. I know of a Europe-wide merchant bank—I will not give its name—one of whose non-union European works council representatives learned of threats to jobs in the bank across Europe. He could not have obtained that information within the United Kingdom set-up, and would not have done so without the European works council directive. That has nothing to do with confidentiality. It is about a basic right to know, which is provided under the European works council directive but not under British law. It is about time that British law caught up. There is no question of a managerial prerogative to refuse to give information; it is a basic human and employment right to know. I hope that the Opposition will concede that point.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Does my hon. Friend agree that the tradition of consulting the work force on major restructuring has worked well on the continent? The usual procedure is to consult the work force representatives, who are well schooled in the need for confidentiality. It is not a question of immediately informing 10,000 people, but of making sure that the representatives are involved from an early stage.

Mr. Lloyd: If one looks around this Chamber, there is probably several thousand years of trade union membership among those present. My experience is that trade unionists are well aware of the need to protect confidentiality when it affects the running and good management of individual operations and companies. My hon. Friend is right. We do not need lessons in the need to maintain secrecy when it is important. However, we do need to make sure that there is consultation, so that the workers know what is planned for them as individuals and are able to respond collectively in the best interests of the company.

I appeal to the Minister to tell us what is wrong with the directive. If the directive is adopted by qualified majority voting in June this year, as is now possible, those who stand out against it but have not advanced a strong case will look a little ridiculous, if nothing else. If we are to follow the route of national legislation, will the Minister tell us in clear-cut terms when that legislation will kick in? The current reality is spates of redundancies, such as those at Vauxhall and possibly at Corus and other big and small companies. We need to know when British workers will be given the protection that would be taken for granted in any other part of the European Union.

11.18 am

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) on securing this debate, which is well supported within the trade union group of the parliamentary Labour party. I also echo his words of congratulation to my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South (Ms Moran) on the way in which she has conducted herself in this Chamber in the context of the appalling situation facing Vauxhall workers.

Many Labour Members will know that I was involved in creating some of the early European works councils, especially in the late 1980s when I had an international responsibility for the creation of the Unilever European works council, so I speak with some experience of the process.

It has been argued that consultation can have an adverse effect on markets, because of market confidentiality and so on. GM-Vauxhall told me, after the current situation was made public on Teletext, that it could not give me full details of what was going to be announced for two reasons. The first was that the workers must be told before anyone else; that was a bit sick, because the announcement was all over Teletext and the national news. The second, which was outrageous and untenable, was that the matter was sensitive in terms of the stock market. One can see that that is nonsensical if one examines the stock values of GM's traded stock over the last year. I refer to data available on GM-Vauxhall's web site, which I presume is accurate. Unfortunately, we cannot display graphics in the Chamber, so I must describe the information. A graph on the web site shows stock values for the past 12 months. Interestingly, a steady downward trend started in mid-May of 2000.

At that time—the markets are sensitive and traders knew that something was about to happen—the market started to trade heavily. In the period May-June last year, there was massive trading in GM stock, way ahead of the norm. The price continued to decline without a blip, until GM made its announcement just before

[Mr. Andrew Miller]

Christmas, which shows that the argument about stock market confidentiality is nonsensical. The market knew that something was going to happen. The trend began in early summer 2000 and continued downward.

I have experienced pan-European and UK works councils, and they all have confidentiality clauses. Discussions with the work force and its representatives about sensitive issues are covered by such clauses. Last night, I examined every service sector European works council. I deliberately chose a sector outside manufacturing to illustrate my point, in case I was accused of being emotive about the problems facing Vauxhall workers, colleagues in Luton and my constituency, which are inextricably linked.

In the service sector, I could not find a single works council that did not have a confidentiality clause, but there was only one case of a company having triggered it. In that case, the company had asked the works council to exercise sensitivity because a takeover was imminent. It was accepted that it was perfectly proper to give the work force the facts. The argument that sharing information with employees is damaging to shareholders does not stand up to examination and, as far as I can ascertain, there has never been any evidence for it. Indeed, quite the opposite is true. The engagement of workers adds value to the decision-making process.

Consultation is a good management tool, and consultation bodies allow management to hear news direct from the work force—the horse's mouth. The bodies can obtain information about what is happening in the company. It is a two-way trade. As daft as it may seem, the European group of trade union representatives at Unilever knew more about the structure of the company, its representatives, its product lines, volumes and predicted outputs than individual site managers in the United Kingdom. One reason why Unilever eventually caved in and accepted that there should be a consultative process on a pan-European basis was that it recognised that the work force had better information than it had and that it might be a good idea to get in on the act. There are management reasons why companies should engage in such processes.

The process of receiving early warning of what is happening in a workplace is generally a two-way trade. I can provide doubters with several concrete examples of information from employees helping the business to develop. There are plenty of examples when strategic plans shared with employees have materially benefited the way in which companies operate.

Consultation creates stability. It creates a better understanding of the overriding issues that affect the business. Undoubtedly, a better-informed work force is a more productive work force. When confidence exists in a company and employees understand precisely what is happening inside the business, the co-operative nature of such a relationship maintains productivity, even in difficult times.

Stability also helps to smooth out the process of acquisitions. It stops the short-termist approach that applies in the human resource departments of some companies when it is only discovered the following day that the company has bought another business. Engaging the work force in such activities resolves problems. No one has a monopoly on what is good information; it must be shared openly within those forums that are represented by works councils.

Different views are being expressed regarding Vauxhall and information is bubbling around all over the place. I cannot say what will happen to the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South; or, indeed, to my constituents. The rumour-mongering through the inadequate management chain has left people in the dark.

One of my constituents, a national official of the Transport and General Workers Union, has given me a detailed view of his analysis, supported by information that he has collected from the trade union side. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman), with myself and others, met employees and, briefly, the management last Friday in Ellesmere Port. I still have not been told in any detail what the company wants to do. Why should I be? I am not an employee of the business. But those who have given their heart, their soul and their life to the company do have the right to be told.

Many members of the work force in my constituency have relied on that business for their employment for many years; in many cases, for a lifetime. It is not just a one-way street. They have relied on the business, but, let us be honest, the business has relied on them. Those employees have turned round what was a failing business less than a generation ago and made it into one of the most successful vehicle companies; yet they cannot be trusted to be given information about its medium-term strategy. That is an unacceptable state of play.

I welcome the statement of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry last week that everyone shared my anger and that of the work force at the way in which the situation was handled. As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central described, we have an opportunity to address such matters. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to put into context the situation that is facing us today in respect of Vauxhall when considering our responsibilities under the directive.

I echo the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith). We are dealing not only with Vauxhall, as Corus, too, acted abysmally. Three years ago, a transfer of undertakings in my constituency closed the steelworks that had existed for 100 years. As a result, people lost their pensions because the pension fund was under-funded. At an employment appeals tribunal, the company said that the information that they provided to the work force at the time was false. It said that no transfer of undertakings took place, and it now acknowledges that the information that it gave to Her Majesty's Customs and Excise and to the European Union stated exactly the opposite. Had a proper dialogue taken place, such a mess would not have arisen. It is an appalling state of affairs and yet another solid argument in favour of more information-sharing with employees inside businesses in the United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mrs. Marion Roe (in the Chair): Order. I ask hon. Members to keep their comments brief, so that as many Members as possible can contribute to the debate.

11.32 am

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) on securing this important debate. Two years ago, when Vauxhall's management announced that problems were emerging in the plant, they were fast off the mark to contact me and members of the Government to secure support for funding for General Motors. It wanted to ensure support from the work force for what was hailed as a flagship partnership agreement. That pay and productivity deal was acclaimed as an exemplar of partnership arrangements. In other words, the company consulted at that time and, as a result, we were able to save the plant. Its productivity and profitability increased, as is still the case today.

Let us contrast that with the situation up to Christmas eve, when workers heard via local radio that their jobs were going. They had not been involved in any consultation process. What modern business operates in such a way in the 21st century? General Motors believed that it could get away with it. That is why it is essential that the Government act now to ensure that legislation is effective, so that we never again hear on early morning radio details of redundancies such as those at Vauxhall in Luton.

The way in which General Motors announced its plans for Luton was a disgrace. It is the unacceptable face of modern business. People clearly have a right to know if they face redundancy before the media finds out. I hope that the Minister will assure us that, notwithstanding the CBI and some Opposition Members urging us not to legislate on the matter, he will ensure that there is strong and forceful legislation to guarantee workers' rights to consultation when redundancy is imminent.

It is clear that the announcement came out of the blue. I suggest that the company not only failed to consult its work force, but went to some lengths to conceal the fact that there were difficulties. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) referred to emerging trends, so the company could have consulted the work force much earlier. It is clear that the company discussed the issue with trade unions before the announcement, but it assured them that a package of measures would save the plant, saying that there would no job losses or any impact on jobs.

I contacted the company a few days before the announcement to ask the reason for the extended Christmas closure, and was assured that there were no problems in the plant. At that point, the company must have known of the prospect of imminent closure and the potential loss of 2,000 jobs. We were presented with a fait accompli, and a flagship agreement was simply thrown in the faces of the work force.

The situation could have been different. If there had been consultation in advance, we could have changed the company's mind. I congratulate the trade unions on their work to outline the financial implications of closure and the strong arguments for the plant's productivity and profitability. Such arguments could have made a difference. We must ensure that they are addressed by GM, and that it understands that it cannot present its workers with a fait accompli and expect to walk away from the consequences.

I welcomed the statement of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry at Question Time a few weeks ago, when he said that he intended to review the employment legislation affecting collective redundancies. Different legislation would have made a difference. As a Government, we could have suggested aid packages to GM. Ironically, money is available in the Luton area to secure such plants. European structural funds, objective 2 funding and assisted area status funding is available for precisely such circumstances, but GM did not approach the Government to ask for that money.

Had there been a right to consultation before the decision was made, the trade unions could have made their coherent case as to why the European market was not in sufficient difficulty to legitimise the closure of one plant in the United Kingdom. We could have all asked the fundamental questions that remain unanswered. Why is a profitable plant being closed down? Why are the so-called losses of the company—they seem to be a one-year write-off of funds rather than actual losses—being used to justify the closure? How much is it costing the company to tear up contracts with supply-chain companies, many of them signed only weeks or months earlier in expectation of a second Vauxhall line?

Legislation is urgently needed, but, more importantly, it should ensure on-going consultation rights for workers. I recently raised the matter with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State at Trade and Industry questions. It is not good enough, although it would have helped in the circumstances with which I am concerned, simply to give notice of redundancy within a few months of the event.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Is the hon. Lady aware that just before Christmas and the Prime Minister's departure for the European summit negotiations in Nice, he gave me a categorical assurance that the Government would not allow worker representation?

Ms Moran: I am interested in whether the hon. Gentleman's party would introduce any measures to safeguard workers' rights.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): The answer is that we have no intention of doing so, but perhaps the hon. Lady would answer my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) and tell us whether she agrees with the Prime Minister, whose view is clearly the opposite of hers.

Ms Moran: The hon. Gentlemen doth protest too much, methinks. As we have heard, the Conservative party would not pass measures to protect workers with respect to redundancy; not only would the Tories fail to do as much as the Government are prepared to do, but they would rip up workers' rights introduced by the Government—the right to join a trade union, the right to paid holidays, and so on. Their free market would have told the Vauxhall workers, "Go hang; we will not help you." Will Conservative Members tell me when a Government of their party assisted workers as the present Government have done? I will not hear such hypocrisy.

[Ms Moran]

We need legislation and on-going consultation so that workers can participate in the business plans of their organisations and understand the imperatives for productivity and profitability. That partnership can work, and has worked in the past. Companies ignore that approach at their peril. There is a strong business reason for advocating such an extension of the legislation. The Industrial Society has concluded, as a result of research—some of it in partnership with the Department of Trade and Industry—that employees should have the right to make their views heard on major changes affecting the businesses in which they work

The Industrial Society also considers that consultation has proven business benefits. Before Conservative Members again protest that there should not be legislation, I remind them of the clear benefit that new measures would provide in reducing the bureaucratic burden imposed by the current piecemeal approach to consultation legislation—in addition to the benefit of recognising the stakeholder rights of employees.

Consultation is relatively widespread in the United Kingdom in comparison to the continent, but significant no-go areas exist, particularly among smaller companies. However, there is also a significant gap affecting the degree of influence that can be exercised after consultation. The evidence from the Industrial Society is that employees' motivation and productivity improve after the passing of measures such as those I advocate. A study by the Involvement and Participation Association shows that participation tends to be associated with a wide range of positive outcomes. Work done by the Industrial Society for the Department of Trade and Industry has shown that the adoption of a partnership-based approach helped all case study firms to achieve enhanced competitive performance. A 1997 European survey confirmed a positive correlation between the economic performance of a company and the scope for employees to contribute their views.

The Industrial Society has recommended measures creating an obligation to consult on major business decisions and an opportunity for the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service to be involved when necessary. It argues that if the Chancellor wants to increase United Kingdom productivity, he should persuade Ministers to widen consultation rights. If staff are consulted on major decisions that will affect them, it will pay off in better employee trust, commitment and performance. The Government can achieve those benefits by legislating to ensure that on-going consultation is introduced at the earliest opportunity.

I welcome the Secretary of State's statement that he will introduce legislation to prevent morning radio redundancies. We owe it to the Vauxhall workers to make sure that legislation ensures the widest possible consultation, so that no other workers have to endure what the Vauxhall workers went through. A strong Vauxhall workers Bill that gives employees the rights to proper consultation would be a great honour and a real tribute to the hard work and loyalty of the Vauxhall work force.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mrs. Marion Roe (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that there will be three winding-up speeches, starting at 12 noon. I ask hon. Members to keep their comments brief so that as many as possible can speak.

11.45 am

Mrs. Diana Organ (Forest of Dean): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) on securing this debate. Many hon. Members have strong feelings about the need to improve consultation and the way in which workers are kept informed, and I wish to mention a constituency matter. First, however, I want to speak on the essential subject raised by the debate.

The European Union directive that gives workers the right to be told by their employers about impending decisions and the right to have their views on such matters taken into account is not radical. It is wholly reasonable that workers should have that right. They should be entitled to be told about their employer's economic and financial status, about recent developments and possible changes in the company's activities, and about the prospects for job security. They should know about decisions that are likely to cause significant changes in the organisation or work that might affect employment contracts. Workers should have time to digest that information, to prepare their opinion on it and to meet with management to discuss it and take to matters forward.

Workers in the UK do not enjoy the same rights as those in other EU member states, which is wrong. The rights afforded by the directive are not only fair but necessary in modern industrial relations. As John Monks, the TUC general secretary, said:

"Today's industrial relations aim to be about partnership and problem solving."

That partnership can work only if both sides are fully informed about the operation for which they are employed. It is wrong for employees to be told about key decisions after they have been made. It is wrong for workers to learn on the radio or from the press what is about to happen to their jobs.

A situation similar to that at Vauxhall is now being played out at Mitcheldean in my constituency by Xerox. The past three years have seen two major changes at the local plant. The first, in 1999, resulted in the company being the subject of censure and criticism at European level, partly because of the lack of information and consultation. The company has a history of not sharing information and not consulting workers. Every time that there is a change, the workers reel in shock, because they do not learn until the last possible moment what is about to happen at the plant. They learn about such decisions after they have been made instead of taking part in them. They are unable fully to work with the company to ensure their job security.

Xerox is the largest employer in the Forest of Dean. In 1998, it employed 2,900 people on its business park site, of which 1,900 were involved in manufacture. In 1999, the company decided to transfer 1,700 jobs from Mitcheldean to a new plant in Dundalk, Ireland. The plant was set up with the advantage of a low level of corporation tax—a rate of 10 per cent. was offered by the Irish Government—and for each new employee in Dundalk the company received a substantial subsidy from the Irish Industrial Development Agency. The

company stated that it was committed to the future and that Mitcheldean would be a manufacturing site well into the 21st century. Some compensation.

The company came in for considerable negative publicity within the European Parliament for the use of European Union money for job movement rather than for job creation. The company also failed adequately to consult with the work forces involved.

Xerox faces a massive problem, with financial difficulties on a global basis. A wholesale review of its operations and a radical re-structuring of its manufacturing in Europe are under way. Its three main plants are located at Venray in Holland, which employs 2,000 people; Dundalk, which—even after the transfer of 1,700 jobs—employs 1,000; and Mitcheldean, which employs 1,500, with another 300 employed in supply chain operations on the business park. Dramatic reductions in employment at Xerox could have a devastating impact on the local economy in the Forest of Dean, since many hundreds of other jobs are linked to that activity. More than 2,000 jobs are dependent on the viability of the Xerox plant in Mitcheldean.

Xerox issued a statement on 10 January, which was vague and gave no time scale for decisions or a review. It talked about everything being in and everything being out. As before, the work force was left not knowing what was happening with regard to jobs and job security. The company says the problems are economic, that its cost bases are too high and that costs must be cut to make the plant competitive. The review groups operating in Mitcheldean are considering all possible ways of cutting costs. In the past, the plant has attained all the targets set by the company.

Mitcheldean is the plant with the greatest experience of the digital products that the company aims to produce globally. It is recognised that it is cheaper to make parts at Mitcheldean than in other plants. It is working hard to improve its cost effectiveness and competitiveness to bring them up to the levels found in Korea. All of that obscures the fact that, on another continent, the company has made its decision. The company has effectively taken the decision in advance of the process of consultation and information. The company says that it is evaluating and reviewing the work. That is rubbish. It has made its decision, which is a clear breach of Community law. The MEP for the south-west, Glyn Ford, is taking up the matter in the European Parliament through written questions tabled yesterday.

One reason why I believe that the decision has already been made is that the Dundalk plant was set up with the advantage of grants and substantial subsidies. The company would have to make restorative payments—thousands of euros—for every job lost in Dundalk. It is easier for the company to shed jobs in the United Kingdom than in Ireland. However cost effective the jobs in Mitcheldean may be, the payments that will have to be made for any job losses in Dundalk will outweigh any savings.

Dundalk has been afforded protection. Joe Browne, the director and general manager of Xerox in Ireland, has said that around 2,500 jobs will be cut in the European operations, but the numbers in Ireland would not be affected. That begs the question of where the 2,500 jobs will be lost. Xerox has made its decision, and is just managing the release of the information. It has engaged a political public relations company, Grayling, to assist with that.

Xerox does not want the criticism that it received when it was restructuring and moving jobs to Dundalk. The company will carefully time any major announcement on redundancies and closures so that it is not made when issues such as consultation and information are high on the agenda, either here or at the European Parliament; especially when the European Parliament maybe discussing the directive.

Over the years, trade unions and work forces have complained that they have not been given information or had real consultation. Consequently, in the present situation, it is impossible for them not to think the worst scenario. It is difficult to build an effective, trusting industrial partnership in that environment. The local management have tried to address that in recent years but, since the culture and attitude of the company globally is not so inclined, it is difficult for them to do so. A constructive relationship is difficult to develop.

The situation facing the workers, the management and the company at Xerox in Mitcheldean is serious. Securing as many jobs as possible for as long as possible on the site requires efforts from all concerned and the support of local agencies, such as the regional development agency, Gloucestershire development agencies, national and European Governments.

The Government must sign up to the employee information and consultation directive. That would not do much to assist the workers at Mitcheldean now, but if they had had those rights over the past few years, they and their representatives would be better prepared and would be able to work constructively to keep the plant competitive. They would have had the right to know what was happening to their employment and their job security. Although at a local level the plant management have recently made greater efforts to consult, it is difficult for them to do that when it runs counter to the ethos of the company, which involves making announcements to fit the company's time scale and to fit in with what it wants to do. It is important that we have rights for workers, so that the Mitcheldean workers—who I hope will remain workers there for a long time to come—are not treated in that way.

11.55 am

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) on securing the debate. I also congratulate my other hon. Friends who have spoken, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South (Ms Moran), who has played a strong role in the determined campaign by the work force and the whole town to stop the Vauxhall closure, and to keep motor car production in Luton.

I want to make some simple points to the Minister about rejecting the Tory mantra of burdens on business. It is evident from events at Vauxhall that removing all constraints from multinational companies does not help our economy. It does not persuade those companies to stay in Britain, and it does not help the work force, who have been sold down the river. Many countries that have much stronger worker protection have done just as well, if not better, in terms of attracting investment from multinational companies.

We should not get involved in a Dutch auction, where we try to reduce worker rights to the lowest-possible level in the vain hope that we can attract multinational

[Mr. Kelvin Hopkins]

companies to these shores. British workers must have the same rights as those elsewhere. Governments must work together to ensure that democratic government means something, and that they do not have to lie down and be walked over by multinational companies.

I worked at the TUC in the 1970s. At that time, there was a big change in the organisation's culture. We used to have the view that trade unions had negative rights, in the sense that we had the right to strike and to take industrial action against companies that had different interests and different views. That does not work when unemployment rises. In that situation, industrial action by trade unions is not as effective as it might be.

In the 1970s, workers and trade unions decided to promote the idea of industrial democracy. The Institute for Workers Control initially developed the idea, but the TUC published a major report on it, which included rights to consultation and information. That is the direction that we wanted to take 25 years ago. We continue to press for movement in that direction.

Two weeks ago, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry moved some way towards considering consultation rights. I am pleased that the Government are moving in that direction and making a clear break with what the Tories have done over the past 20 years. I want to see the Government move a good deal further in promoting trade union and worker rights, including the right to consultation.

In the past fortnight, I have promoted a private Member's Bill on consultation rights. It is 17th on the list, and probably will not get very far. However, I hope that it will, at least, help to persuade the Government that we want full workers' rights to consultation and information, so that what happened to the workers at Vauxhall does not happen again.

11.58 am

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd). He has clearly struck a chord, and he has also talked a great deal of sense. For most of us, the starting point is that several companies, notably Vauxhall, behaved in a crass and insensitive way. The key point, which has been picked up in several interventions, is that they were also very short-sighted. If a big company is trying to sign up its work force for a productivity package or a new flexible work force arrangement, the work force will look around at the company's other operations and draw its own conclusions as to whether the management can be trusted. The kind of behaviour exhibited in Luton sends all the wrong signals.

It seems strange that the management did not sit down with its work force representatives and say, "We have a problem here. We cannot compete because of economic conditions, excess capacity in the industry and so on. Have a look at our books, at our costs—these are the difficulties that we share. Go and talk to your friends in the Government about it and we will do our best." The company should have treated the work force in an adult way, and tried to involve it in the decision-making process. That would be grown-up management, and I do not understand why it did not do that.

There are two issues that can be summarised briefly. First, should there be compulsion and regulation? Secondly, should that be established at a national or European level? In an ideal world, good management practice should be voluntary. In Holland—which I know reasonably well—Denmark and Germany, prior consultation is spontaneous because it has been embedded in their culture for decades. It has deep roots, and is related to their political system and much else. In this country, we do not have that culture.

There are two arguments for introducing regulatory compulsion. First, if one does not regulate to reinforce good practice, bad practice will tend to dominate. Every company with 100 workers that is faced with difficult decisions will look at blue-chip companies and multinationals and say, "If such behaviour is standard practice, why shouldn't we do the same?" Secondly, there is something in the argument that one can gain a competitive advantage by adopting hire-and-fire labour practices, although unions tend to exaggerate the force of such practices. I doubt whether companies decide in which part of Europe to invest £100 million on the basis of a hire-and-fire labour policy. None the less, such considerations clearly play a part at the margin, so some element of regulation and compulsion seems justified in principle.

In respect of compulsion and regulation at a European level, the Government have applied the subsidiarity principle. They argue that certain matters should be dealt with at a European level but that others should be dealt with nationally, and that labour law is clearly the province of the nation state. I have some sympathy with the subsidiarity principle. In many ways, my party is the most pro-European, but we nevertheless accept that there is too much European standardisation. The test of the subsidiarity principle is right and should always be applied, but it is difficult to apply it to the issue before us. Many industries—for example, the car industry—operate on a European basis. European business planning is relevant not just to the Renault-Nissan arrangements, but to Ford in Europe, the German operations of General Motors and the Japanese companies. To that extent, the subsidiarity principle does not apply to those companies.

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): My hon. Friend talks about subsidiarity in European terms, but I would like him to consider the global aspect as well. I draw his attention to an issue that extends beyond Vauxhall, and which is set out in early-day motion 254. Merchant Navy officers have offshore contracts with Associated Bulk Carriers, which is being sold by P&O. They have given many years of loyal service to that company, and are entitled to information and consultation, rather than being kicked out with three months' half-salary in lieu of notice, on contracts that are now based in Bermuda. Incidents such as that say everything about what is happening to our once great Merchant Navy, and I hope that my hon. Friend will take them into consideration.

Dr. Cable: That is a helpful intervention, because it reminds us that the problems associated with redundancy are not confined to the traditional manufacturing industry or European enterprises, but occur throughout the economy.

In conclusion, we should be open-minded about how to tackle this problem. I am not a labour lawyer, so I cannot comment definitively on the implications of labour law, but it would seem that are two approaches to the problem, the first of which is set out by the TUC. As the hon. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) said, these days the TUC is a modern-minded institution that, in general, tries to help to create a positive business environment. The TUC's approach is to treat the EU directive as a broad framework of protection within which, at a national level, it can sit down with the CBI—and unions can sit down with employers—to work out arrangements that are relevant to this country. If that is not practical, perhaps the Minister can explain why not. As a framework for commonsense—argument, it has few obvious flaws.

Alternatively, the Government could adopt a similar approach to that which has evolved in relation to competition policy. A few years ago, strong European directives and laws governed monopolies, mergers and restrictive practices. Over the past five years, the view that Europe is becoming over-centralised has taken hold. Consequently, the subsidiarity principle has been increasingly applied and much competition law has been pushed down to the national level—except in cases where mergers and monopolies are clearly European in character. The European directive could be recast so as to apply its provisions to cases where a European element is involved—such as in the car industry—but in all other cases legislation should be national in character.

If the Government take that route, they will have to explain how the national approach will evolve. Workers are not asking for much. They are not asking to intervene in the running of the companies for which they work, but for prior consultation on key decisions that affect their livelihoods. I would be surprised if the Government cannot find their way through the thicket of European and British law to resolve the problem.

Mr. John Cummings (in the Chair): The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) has graciously offered to make his speech a little shorter to enable me to call Mr. Harry Barnes.

12.6 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): There is no greater argument for the introduction of employee consultation than the case of Biwater—a pipe manufacturing company in Clay Cross in my constituency, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd)—where, before Christmas, 700 jobs were lost with no prior consultation.

The attempted takeover of Biwater by St. Gobain was first known about in April last year. Discussions about what was to happen took place between the GMB, the shop stewards, the work force and Biwater's management. They were assured throughout that their future was guaranteed—although two of the managers involved went over to St. Gobain after the takeover. Within minutes of the takeover on 4 September, it was announced that the plant would be closed within 90 days. It closed on 22 December, although some people had already lost their jobs.

Despite the fact that deputations had met the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, and he had spoken to Jean-Louis Beffa, the managing director of St. Gobain, about consultations on any changes, the work force was not allowed to enter into any discussions other than those concerning how the redundancies were to take place. Of course, it sometimes overstepped the mark and tried to raise other matters, but, as far as the management were concerned, such discussions were not to take place.

The loss of 700 jobs had a devastating impact on the area—yet there was no need for it to happen. Biwater was a viable works, and 80 per cent. of its output went into exports. St. Gobain's interest in taking over the company was to knock out a competitor, take over its order book, asset-strip and sell off those assets. There should have been prior consultation and discussion. I am convinced that had the directive existed and there had been consultation, that plant could have been saved. The importance of the measure cannot be exaggerated and I hope that the bitter experience of workers in Clay Cross will lead to suitable legislation.

12.10 pm

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): The hon. Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) has done us all a favour in raising this matter and I hope that I shall not destroy the future career of the hon. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) if I say that his contribution was particularly thoughtful. My ulterior motive in encouraging the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) to speak was to continue my enjoyment of the great spat between old Labour and new Labour—the fissure in the party and the great project is now clear for all to see as the old trade union bloc asks for certain measures, which the Minister and perhaps the Prime Minister will pretend to give, but will never deliver. I hope that they will not be taken for suckers by their own Front Bench.

We should listen to the CBI, which was, amusingly, described as extremist today. I have never heard it so described in such a context. Digby Jones, the director-general, warned:

> "A one-size-fits-all policy for every business employing more than 50 people is exactly the type of Brussels initiative that will hinder UK growth, investment and job creation. Companies need the freedom to communicate with staff in ways that reflect national and local customs and practice."

Many of those customs and practices are well established and work as every mature company wants them to work.

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Cunninghame, South): Does the hon. Gentleman condemn or condone Vauxhall's actions?

Mr. Duncan: I shall come to that in a moment. It is a fair point, which has coloured all the contributions to this debate.

Before the general election, Labour promised business:

> "We will not impose burdensome regulations on business."

However, the reality is that business is struggling to cope with the imposition of an extra £5 billion a year in regulatory costs. Since 1997, the United Kingdom has fallen from fourth to ninth position in the world competitiveness league.

[Mr. Duncan]

Perhaps the Minister will tell us the status of the blocking minority to the directive. As I understand it, his allies in opposing the measure were Germany, Denmark and Ireland. Can he confirm whether the Germans are still opposed, because there were reports before Christmas that their resolve was weakening? That is important, because the Swedish presidency has made clear its wish for progress on the matter. Sweden's Employment Minister stated:

"We are looking to take an important step towards achieving a directive on worker information and consultation."

The directive will be adopted by qualified majority voting, so the Government must ensure that they have sufficient allies to block it. We heard much at the Lisbon summit last summer about how the EU would be a powerful engine for economic advance. If that amounts to more than the empty rhetoric that we are used to from the Government, why has the Minister failed to persuade more of his EU counterparts that the directive is exactly the sort of measure that undermines business competitiveness and increases business costs? I hope that he will clarify the position.

It was disgraceful that the redundancies at Vauxhall were announced on the radio. That was appalling. It was also unprofessional on the part of the broadcaster and doubly devious on the part of the person who leaked the information. The problem was not so much the process of consultation as the fact that the announcement was leaked before it was given to the work force. It was a complete and utter disgrace on someone's part and if the culprit could be found, he would face universal national opprobrium.

Mr. Hopkins: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that the decision would have been more acceptable if we had known about it before it was announced?

Mr. Duncan: The problem with the directive is that it does not cover the fact that the openness of what is said to a series of people down a chain of information has to be consistent with the process of negotiation. If all aspects of negotiation, whether commercial or based on employment, are played out in public, there will be massive problems, which may militate against a successful conclusion and the achievement of the firm's objectives. All that would have happened had the works council been told, is that some kind of rumour or half-announcement would have been made public, half-baked and before matters had been concluded. The danger is that compulsion in law could work against the interests of a work force, because management would be compelled to reveal, step by step, every aspect of their negotiation process.

Mr. Miller: Where is the hon. Gentleman's evidence?

Mr. Duncan: It is self-evident. Every reputable company will involve the work force at the earliest possible stage of negotiations, in a way that is consistent with the best commercial interests of the firm and the work force. Such a one-size-fits-all legalistic prescription could end up working against the interests of a work force. Its supporters think that that will not happen, but in many cases, such regulations ultimately have that effect. The Opposition want firms to be able to build up proper partnerships with the work force, so that they are not denied the opportunity to do what is best for them by legislation that is too prescriptive and narrow, which might work against the interests of many people.

12.16 pm

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): This is an important and topical debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the. Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) on securing it.

I do not intend to spend long on the comments made by the Opposition. Suffice it to say that the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) has many attributes, but understanding social justice is not one of them. I once said that trying to explain social justice to the Conservative party was like trying to explain origami to a penguin. The hon. Gentleman's contribution should be left out of the debate.

First, I want to explain the Government's current approach to information and consultation generally, and then I shall talk about the European directive and high-profile recent events, which have largely prompted this debate.

Our approach must be seen within the context of our overall approach to employment relations, which were set out in the "Fairness at Work" proposals. If my colleagues and I are absolutely honest, when the Labour party was deciding its agenda on coming back into government after so many years in opposition—I was part of that process in a previous incarnation—the information and consultation issue was never really at the top of that agenda. That is one of the historic problems, on which my hon. Friend the. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) touched, of the trade union movement in this country especially.

In a very short period, however, we implemented the minimum wage, the working time directive, the right to trade union recognition and the right to be accompanied at grievance and discipline hearings. Let us not have any suggestion that this Government are acting against workers' rights. The question is where to place the important issue of information and consultation in the context of future Government action.

We are committed to the promotion of partnership. We believe in information and consultation. Our argument in relation to Europe, which I shall discuss later, is about the ends, not the means. Central to everything that we have done in relation to "Fairness at Work" is the attempt to encourage a genuine spirit of partnership. One can set up all the mechanisms, structures and works councils in the world—my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) is well aware of this, as he has studied the matter in great detail—but the important issue is how to ensure that the work force can have a genuine influence on and input into management decisions.

The solution is not having token workers on the board, as we had under the Bullock proposals. I experienced the industrial democracy experiment—as did my hon. Friend the Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton)—at first-hand level as a local shop steward. It did not work. The mechanisms were in place,

but management moved the decision-making structure. When workers sat on the board, decisions started to be made in a sub-committee of the board. We had the right to approach any issue locally, regionally and nationally. On the trade union side, we were not over-enthusiastic about the experiment and did not put the major trade union players in to bat. In effect, the entire project disintegrated. Mrs. Thatcher—

Mr. Duncan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Johnson: I do not have time. I have only 10 minutes. A refusal often offends; I should have made it clear at the beginning that I would not have time to take interventions.

How do we arrive at a genuine—

Mr. Duncan: That is very shabby.

Mr. Johnson: The hon. Gentleman would know everything about shabbiness.

How do we genuinely influence decisions? Informing and consulting employees is an integral part of harnessing the energy and commitment of the work force. The debate has hinged on certain specific, well-defined circumstances, such as collective redundancies. My hon. Friend the. Member for Manchester, Central said that he hoped that our review would not concentrate on collective redundancies. However, almost every contribution has centred on what happened to workers at Vauxhall, and BMW and in Clay Cross. We must examine collective redundancies and transfers and investigate the legal underpinning of those processes when necessary and practicable. We have done that, and I want to have time to explain the rights that British workers have at the moment, so that we can record them.

Mr. Duncan: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He made some good points about legislation pushing decision making into other layers of secrecy. I have been absolutely upfront about my opposition to the directive. However, the Prime Minister has said that he opposed it and, in the past, the Minister has said that he opposes it. Is he in favour of the EU directive or not?

Mr. Johnson: I shall discuss the European directive in a moment. We have just wasted a couple of valuable minutes.

We believe that employee involvement mechanisms must reflect the requirements of individual organisations. Employee involvement goes to the heart of the way in which an organisation is managed. Organisations vary greatly in that respect. Some operate in a global context; others are national or regional. They have different ownership structures and patterns of employment, and some are subject to Stock Exchange rules. Structures imposed from above will not work as intended.

Labour Members, and the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), were as one in asking for genuine information and consultation mechanisms. The establishment of a constructive dialogue between employees and management cannot simply be decreed through legislation. That is why, until now, we preferred to pursue a voluntary approach. That approach included the partnership fund and the launch of the TUC partnership institute last year, which stemmed from the partnership fund. The comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South (Ms Moran) on the Industrial Society relate to that approach. We want genuine involvement and a culture change.

As I explained, the Government's policy has been to encourage information and consultation on matters to which no statutory requirement applies. Some people say that the voluntary approach is not working. I ask such people to read the work force employee relations survey, which I do not have time to detail. It is the most comprehensive survey carried out in this country, and it is well respected by the trade union movement; partly because it shows that trade union membership is a plus for the company and the work force. The survey showed a large extent of voluntary work force involvement throughout the country, which suggests a healthy pattern.

Recent high-profile cases have suggested that we cannot be complacent. The Luton closure is the latest example—like BMW-Rover and Ford recently—of the problems that British workers are experiencing. An interesting point that I do not believe was sufficiently covered in the debate is that the decisions in all three cases were made—

Judy Mallaber: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Johnson: I really do not have time.

All those decisions were made outside the United Kingdom, and they should all have been covered by the European measure that we wholeheartedly supported. I do not remember the position of Opposition Members, but it was probably against the measure; that is usually the case if a measure mentions workers. We supported it precisely because we agreed that in trans-national and pan-European companies—with decisions being made in Munich or Paris or elsewhere in Europe—we had to have a mechanism to ensure that British workers were informed and consulted.

Although it is recent, we must review that measure because it has not worked sufficiently in the three cases that I have mentioned. That is an important part of our review. We must take stock of what happened, particularly in relation to the disgraceful way that workers in Luton found out their fate from a radio broadcast. We must ensure that whatever we introduce—or if we change the arrangements—such issues will be dealt with. The three high profile cases concern Europe.

Judy Mallaber: What about Coats Viyella?

Mr. Johnson: Coats Viyella is a good example of something that happened in the United Kingdom. I am merely trying to put the matter into context. Even if we had accepted the information and consultation directive from Europe, and applied it domestically, we would have been going through a process in which there was only the appearance of consultation. The actual decisions would be made outside the UK. That is what the European works council was designed to put right.

[Mr. Johnson]

The review announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will not be restricted to consideration of the redundancy issue. It must also take into account the accusation that it is cheaper to sack workers in the UK than anywhere else. The review must be wider. The process will involve three or four months of review followed by a decision, because it is important that we do not repeat past mistakes, such as the Bullock report, which was an experiment in industrial democracy. We must ensure that the problem is resolved.

As far as the European Union directive is concerned, our position has not changed. We are not alone in believing that it breaches subsidiarity, and the countries that support us in that belief have a long history of trade union involvement. I draw attention to the European works council. The European company statute that we agreed on 21 December has a full section on industrial democracy information and consultation, and that is the right way to proceed in Europe. However, we must protect our domestic situation. The countries that oppose the directive, under qualified majority voting, feel the same way. They have sophisticated systems and they do not want a one-size-fits-all measure to interfere with them.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central that I did not use some obscure procedural device on 21 December. I know more about "ABC of chairmanship" by Citrine than I do about "Erskine May". Coming from a trade union background, I know that if something is not on the agenda, it is not discussed. My hon. Friend can call that a procedural point if he likes. The situation in Europe is the same, because it breaches subsidiarity. If we are to resolve the problem in the United Kingdom, we must, given our history of employment involvement and industrial relations, take account of our domestic situation.

The history of this subject is fascinating. A statue should have been built to honour Alan Flanders, a young trade unionist who worked for the TUC; I suppose that my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North was a young trade unionist once. Alan Flanders was the man whom Ernie Bevin sent to Germany after the second world war to recreate the German trade union movement, which had been banned by Hitler since 1933. To a great degree, Alan Flanders developed co-determination. Although we exported that sort of model, those of us in the trade union movement were not exactly enthusiastic. We all grew up with free collective bargaining, civil rights only with a union card and no state interference. We have changed tack. We are not as well advanced as some countries in Europe, and we have had to take a different route.

I have not had time to mention all the important legislation, such as the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981 and the collective redundancies directive—which was amended and improved in 1999—and other issues in relation to workers' rights. We are determined to have a proper review to consider whether the important concerns highlighted so effectively by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South can be resolved domestically, as part of our overall approach to social justice and fairness at work.

Police (South Buckinghamshire)

12.30 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): It has been my privilege since 1997 to represent the Beaconsfield constituency, of which South Buckinghamshire district forms the core. Recent surveys have shown it to be one of the wealthiest and most economically successful areas in the country. It has low unemployment and is, above all, a pleasant place in which to live. Far from being cloistered by their wealth and success, local residents are active in charitable and community work.

It has become clear during the past 18 months, however, that there is a growing problem with crime. Of course, there is always public anxiety about crime. I once served on the Lambeth police community consultative group, and I have seen problems of crime at the sharp end. Sometimes, people's anxieties are misplaced, but my mailbag and the evidence of my surgery tell me that crime has been increasing along with local residents' anxiety.

Residents have complained about burglary and car crime in particular and, in Burnham, about disorder, which is centred around the presence of several antisocial families causing fear in their neighbourhood. There is also a major problem with travellers, some of whom live wholly outside the law, causing damage to property, degrading the sites on which they unlawfully settle, and using their bases for other criminality. That matter became so serious that I raised it with the Home Secretary last March. I am extremely grateful to him and the Home Office for taking the issue seriously and issuing new guidelines to try to deal with the problem.

This month, Home Office research conducted by the university of Leeds, and highlighted in a Channel 4 programme, "The Crime List", identified South Buckinghamshire as having a serious crime and policing problem. Taking into account the many economic and social factors that affect crime, on the basis of which the Home Office allocates resources to the police, the survey rated South Buckinghamshire bottom of the 376 districts in terms of police effectiveness in dealing with crime. The press promptly dubbed South Buckinghamshire the worst-policed area of England and Wales.

That description is a gross oversimplification and singularly unfair to the police. Some types of crime, such as violent crime and sexual offences, are very low in South Buckinghamshire. We are 29th out of 376 for violent crime, and 16th out of 376 in the league table for sexual offences. The district is covered by two police areas, one of which, Chiltern Vale, is based in Wycombe, and the other in Slough, both of which are outside the district itself. Both areas are commanded by relatively young officers, Chief Superintendents Setchell and Beckley, for whom I have a high regard. They are dynamic and proactive in trying to fight crime, and are approachable for the local community. A recent raid on a travellers' site by the Chiltern Vale police also involved customs officers and the RSPCA. They netted a haul of stolen cars, illegal shotguns, stolen property, red diesel where it should not be, and ill-treated animals.

Beat officers are good. Some of them are extremely good. Community-police liaison is superb. Currently, though, no police stations are open full-time in the

district. The police station at Iver is manned and kept open part-time with the help of volunteers, which is a good reflection of local support and participation. The district council does its best to help.

None of that has stopped the rising trend in certain types of crime, which has reached levels that are too high for the local police to tackle effectively, and certainly not as they would wish, as they tell me. The problem is that, because of its relative affluence and advantage, the area acts as a magnet for criminals from adjacent areas that have historically had much higher crime rates and, in fairness, much greater indices of deprivation.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate, which obviously covers my area as well. I endorse his remarks about our police force. Does he agree that one of the problems that the force faces is in the recruitment and retention of officers, especially because of the high cost of living in the south-east? No matter how excellent our police officers are in executing their duties, if we cannot recruit and retain them, we have a serious problem.

Mr. Grieve: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend, and I am grateful to her for attending the debate, as we share the Chiltern Vale police district. I will move on in a moment to deal with her point—she has captured the issue in one sentence—but first, I shall illustrate to the Minister the sort of problems that we are having.

Property crime generally, including burglary, theft, handling, fraud and forgery, and criminal damage, is at 25.4 offences per 1,000 population, compared with a national average of 19.6. It is particularly telling that burglary from dwellings is at 28.3 offences per 1,000 households, placing the district 330th in the catalogue of 376. In the village of Hedgerley, the rate is a staggering 55 offences per 1,000 households.

Theft from vehicles is at 30.3 offences per 1,000, which puts us 373rd out of 376 in the table. That is three times the national average. In Dorney, another small village on the Thames near Slough, the rate is over 75 offences per 1,000. Those are horrific figures. Theft of vehicles is at 7.8 offences per 1,000 population. Vehicle crime generally, theft both from and of vehicles, is twice the national average in England and Wales, and the gap is growing. It is a feature of most of the crimes that I have just cited that the latest figures show increases. Burglary has risen by 29.3 per cent. since last year, vehicle crime by 7 per cent., and criminal damage by 23.9 per cent.

To put those figures in perspective, all crime is down by 4.4 per cent. over Thames Valley as a whole. Equally, I accept that those crime levels do not compare with very high-crime areas in the Thames Valley, such as Slough town centre or Reading. What I find worrying—the Minister should, too—is that robbery, which largely means ram raids and holding up shops, which was hitherto very low, is showing signs of increasing at a time when it seems to be decreasing in other places. It all points to a deteriorating situation.

It would be nice to say that all that was unexpected, but it is not. The cause is not an inefficient or lazy police but lies elsewhere, in how the resources have been allocated. As the Secretary of State confirmed to me in his answer of 20 January 2000, spending on policing on an average per capita basis in Thames Valley in 1999-2000 was £108.88, compared with a national average of £123.19. Yet Thames Valley is a large area with significant policing demands.

Historically, increases in establishment agreed with the Home Office failed to keep pace with the growth in population. As a result, when in April 1995 funding was introduced on a complex needs formula, removing Home Office controls, a number of damping mechanisms were introduced. Those were designed to prevent places such as Surrey from losing too many officers, but the damping mechanism in Thames Valley has left the authority without the resources necessary to raise its establishment to the level that it needs.

In the police's view, we are £10 million short in grant and standard spending assessment over the six years. Worse, extraordinary items of policing, such as the Newbury bypass and the problems at Hillgrove farm, Witney, have cost the authority £11 million. When there was a problem at Huntingdon Life Sciences in Cambridgeshire, the Government saw fit to offer £1 million to help. Thames Valley has not seen one penny of assistance in respect of those extraordinary policing costs.

Up until 1998, South Buckinghamshire escaped the worst aspects of the formula, because historically it had been policed with a larger establishment than some other Thames Valley areas. The rumour is that, historically, because of the number of police officers living in the area, there was no problem in attracting a high level of policing to protect their homes—I do not know whether that is apocryphal. In that year, it was determined—frankly, inevitably, in view of the pressures elsewhere in the Thames Valley area—to apply the total resource allocations formula, or TRAF, to determine police numbers, and South Buckinghamshire suffered in that process.

I still have the correspondence and briefings from when my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) and I made our representations. Chiltern Vale took a cut of 9 per cent. in budget, on top of a 2.5 per cent. cut that applied to the force as a whole. That was 30 police officers and 20 civilian staff. On top of that, another 20 probationary officers were lost at the same time, as the service was over establishment. That was a huge cut. It is interesting to note that we were told at that time that crime had been reduced by more than 10 per cent. over three years, and burglary was down by one third: the result of good policing and adequate resources.

The effect of the changes has been entirely negative for South Buckinghamshire. In April 1997, there were 316 police officers in Chiltern Vale. Today, despite enormously creative attempts by the chief superintendent to raise the number of officers by cutting in other areas, we are below 300. In Slough, cuts in numbers were never envisaged—it is, after all, a high-crime area—but even there there are 254, which is seriously under strength, with 18 vacancies.

It is not surprising that one of the principal complaints, with the rising crime rate, is the inability of the police sometimes to fulfil the basic response requirement of getting to the scene of a burglary, when it is not an emergency, within two hours. If staff are off sick, longer delays will inevitably occur, and the police

[Mr. Grieve]

cannot be in two places at once, but public confidence in police efficiency is thus eroded and the closure of the police stations in the district, with Gerrards Cross no longer operating 24 hours a day, adds to a sense of being abandoned.

Other recent examples include the removal of community officers from Burnham and Iver back to Slough police station to deal with more urgent issues there. The fact that, in truth, the police are still working very hard, and concentrating on priorities, is not noticed. The complaints, in turn, have an adverse effect on police morale, as they see their hard work no longer being appreciated or recognised.

On some evenings, there are only two patrol cars on the road in the whole of the Slough police district. Some of my constituents point out that the one police force in the country that has seen an increase recently is Durham, and suggest that there may be a link with the Prime Minister's constituency. I have not the slightest idea, but such comments will continue unless clear answers can be provided.

Part of the problem with the police establishment is that the high cost of living makes it difficult to recruit and retain officers, as my hon. Friend said. The ending of the housing allowance in 1994 meant that officers recruited after that date received £4,000 per annum less than those previously joining the force. I accept that the decision was taken under the previous Government, but the Metropolitan police at that time enjoyed an uplift of £2,000, and will now enjoy an uplift of £6,000, over Thames Valley officers. It is hardly surprising that, as quickly as Thames Valley officers are recruited, they haemorrhage either into London or out into the country, to enjoy a better standard of living. Last year Thames Valley recruited 244 officers and lost 245. The briefing prepared for the Minister by Thames Valley police specifically states:

"These difficulties are threatening to frustrate our attempts to take up the extra resources provided under the crime fighting fund, and are in danger of undermining our efforts to reduce crime levels and the fear of crime across the Thames Valley."

I hope that I have persuaded the Minister that something must be done about issues that are a real problem, and not just some politically motivated exaggeration. I am aware that, under the provisional funding settlement of 2001-02, Thames Valley will get an increase of 5.8 per cent., receiving over £4 million from the crime fighting fund and £1 million for rural policing. Frankly, however, that will have no beneficial impact unless the recruitment problem is solved. Thames Valley needs the ability to provide a substantial uplift in line with the Metropolitan police. If the problem is reluctance by the Police Federation to allow for differentials, all I can say to the Minister is that he is going to have bang some heads together pretty hard and pretty quickly.

Some thought should also be given to the problem of policing rural areas such as South Buckinghamshire. The area is sandwiched between urban centres with high crime and high police priorities. With those competing priorities, my constituents seem to lose out. That might not happen if there was a separate police district covering our area and possibly part of Chiltern Vale as well.

When the issue first broke, a local journalist suggested to me that, being relatively wealthy, South Buckinghamshire might be better able to cope with higher levels of crime and ought to accept its fate. I pointed out to him, as I do now to the Minister, that it is the money from the enterprise and thrift of my constituents that pays for the policing successes in places such as Knowsley, North in Liverpool. My constituents are, of course, conscious that they have a better standard of living and greater opportunities than people do there, but they are still entitled to expect a police service that inspires confidence and can deal with crime adequately. The dedicated police officers are there, but not the resources. That is the issue that I hope the Minister will address today.

12.46 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I congratulate the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) on securing this debate, and I am grateful for him giving me notice of the main points that he intended to raise, which will lead to a better-informed debate.

I also acknowledge the intervention of the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), whom I am particularly glad to see here, as she has a long-standing relationship with my constituency and it is always a pleasure to share a debate with her. She tries to keep quiet about the Norfolk connection, but we advertise it as widely as possible because she is such a credit to the Conservatives in a rather thin field.

I was grateful for the remarks of both hon. Members in praise of the police in their constituencies. I add my tribute to the police in their constituencies and to the Thames Valley force as a whole, which has such a good record.

This debate is timely, because of the concerns that have been raised about policing in South Buckinghamshire recently, and in particular since the transmission of the Channel 4 programme on policing and crime on 13 January 2001. That programme drew up a league table that compared police performance in each district or unitary local authority area in England and Wales. It used the results of some regression analysis carried out by the university of Leeds to equalise a range of socio-demographic factors so that each local authority district could, it claimed, be fairly compared regardless of the nature of its population and the level of deprivation that it faced.

The Home Office has not tried to devise a national league table in that way, because there are methodological issues that are of concern. However, we have gone down the route of devising families of crime and disorder reduction partnerships and basic command units of broadly similar socio-economic characteristics. From those, the public and BCU commanders can benchmark and compare like with like.

We published our most recent figures earlier this month, and the previous figures, published in July, were on the same basis—the first time that such data have been published in that form. That should enable people to have informed debates of the type that the hon. Gentleman is trying to stimulate today.

The Thames Valley police have made known to me their disappointment with the content of the Channel 4 programme. South Buckinghamshire is affluent, in

comparison with many areas with high levels of social deprivation, and in terms of violent crime, it is indeed one of the safest parts of the Thames Valley. It is important to place that on the record, given the nature of the programme.

The league table constructed by Leeds university is an interesting approach and I look forward to receiving more details from its creators of how it has been produced. When setting up inter-authority comparisons, we have found it far more helpful to generate families of crime and disorder reduction partnership with similar characteristics. That allows more direct comparisons between similar areas and makes benchmarking more accessible to all concerned.

South Buckinghamshire, which is in the crime and disorder reduction partnership family 11—as seen in the published tables of Home Office documents earlier this month and last July—is in the first quartile, the safest, for crimes of violence against the person and for sexual offences. I emphasise that that is within the crime reduction partnership family. It is in the fourth quartile, the worst, for robbery, burglary from dwellings and theft of and from vehicles. It is performing poorly in those respects, but not in terms of crimes of violence.

Across England and Wales as a whole, South Buckinghamshire remains one of the safest areas in terms of violence against the person and sexual offences. It is in the third quartile for robbery, but remains in the bottom quartile for burglary and vehicle theft. A similar pattern emerges across the Thames Valley police authority area. The best approach to stimulating debate about these matters is through more specific analysis rather than through an overall table produced nationally and published in a Channel 4 programme.

Our assessment is that South Buckinghamshire's higher than average property and vehicle crime levels are due to a combination of factors. The area borders several large towns that suffer deprivation. It is also well served by the motorway network, so it can be targeted by travelling and opportunistic thieves. The Thames Valley force is working in partnership with various agencies to promote safer communities and to target prolific offenders, which can be difficult in areas of high mobility.

Thames Valley's own crime reports show that individuals who leave articles such as mobile phones and laptop computers on show, particularly in company cars, contribute significantly to the rise in property-related and vehicle crime. When I recently visited the police in Slough, that point was made forcefully to me. Despite their best efforts, the police cannot solve these problems alone. That is why we developed the partnership approach for attacking vehicle crime, one product of which was the Vehicles (Crime) Bill, which completed its final stages in the House yesterday. In a series of other measures, we are working jointly with the police, local government, motor manufacturers and the insurance industry to attack vehicle crime and achieve our targets.

The Thames Valley police authority has set five-year targets to reduce domestic burglary by 40 per cent. and vehicle crime by 30 per cent. As the published figures demonstrate, it is a challenging target and it amounts to a head-on confrontation with the problems illustrated in the tables. I want formally to congratulate the force on setting such challenging targets in conjunction with the other authorities in the crime reduction partnerships.

The hon. Gentleman asked about funding for the Thames Valley force. We shall debate the police funding settlement for England and Wales later this afternoon. Thames Valley police are set to receive funding support of £245.1 million next year—an increase of £13.4 million or 5.8 per cent. over 2000-01. The average increase for forces in England and Wales is 4.9 per cent. I skimmed lightly down the table of increases and found that only six of the 43 forces have received better overall increases than the Thames Valley force.

It is worth placing it on the record that the 1998-99 increase for the Thames Valley force was 5.3 per cent., compared with 3.2 per cent. nationally; in 1999-2000, it got 2.4 per cent., compared with 2.5 per cent. nationally; and in 2000-01, 3.2 per cent., compared with 2.8 per cent. I have already provided the figure for 2001-02. Over the years, the Thames Valley force has done better than the national average, but that is not to dispute the issues of funding that the hon. Gentleman raised. However, the national context should help him to make appropriate judgments.

In addition, the Thames Valley force has received £4.3 million from the crime fighting fund for recruiting police, about which I shall say more in a moment; £8.7 million for the costs of the Airwave police radio system; and £1.3 million from the rural policing fund, which was established in response to the campaign around the country for more resources for rural policing. Those are all significant amounts and the Thames Valley force will use them well. I hope that they will go some way towards dealing with the situation that the hon. Gentleman describes.

I have met the chief constable and the police authority to discuss the funding for the extraordinary costs to which the hon. Gentleman referred. We have established a clear rule for such funding. The decision on the Huntingdon laboratory in Cambridgeshire took account of the specific circumstances there. I acknowledge the case that has been made about having had to deal with the environmental and animal welfare protests.

We have consistently stated that police numbers are important as part of a comprehensive package of measures. Thames Valley police has 3,748 police officers, as at the end of September 2000, which is eight more than on 30 March 2000, six months earlier, and 53 more than on 30 March 1997. I am delighted that the ambitions of the Labour shadow Home Secretary to have more police officers than when we took power have, under the Government's outstanding leadership, been well overachieved in Thames Valley, and I hope that that fact will be acknowledged.

Mr. Grieve: I accept that, but I hope that the Minister will deal with the fact that it is a much slower take-up of numbers than the police would want, because of the problems with recruiting and maintaining their manpower.

Mr. Clarke: I will come to that legitimate point. Thames Valley has 177.1 officers per 100,000 population. Six forces have lower levels of officers per 100,000.

[Mr. Clarke]

Because time is limited, all that I shall say about the crime fighting fund is that the process is being moved forward and that, because of the problems to which the hon. Gentleman referred, we are prepared to be flexible on allocations. The police negotiating board is considering whether there should be an allowance for officers in forces outside London, including Thames Valley, and we await its recommendations on that or any other issues to do with police pay and allowances. It is not appropriate for me, as a Minister, to second-guess the position of the police negotiating board—an august body whose deliberations can never be tested by anybody.

The employers' side has made proposals in which the chief constable and the authority for Thames Valley have taken a full part. We shall await the outcome of the PNB deliberations. I cannot express optimism or pessimism about that, except to say that the employers would not have made their case unless they considered it well founded, as the hon. Gentleman has acknowledged. I hope that, on the issue of police housing—there has been substantial debate in the authority about its housing sales policy—the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham will put their weight fully behind those who argue that the police should maximise the housing available to police in the Thames Valley area and not rashly dispose of housing more rapidly than they need to.

We accept the hon. Gentleman's fundamental point about the need to increase presence and reassurance in rural areas. Only yesterday, I was discussing how to do that with leaders of the national police service. We are making progress on various initiatives, including mobile police stations, rural parish special constables and targeted patrolling, to address issues of police presence and visibility. I know that he will join me in celebrating the fact that police numbers are higher in the Thames Valley area than when we took office. The same goes for police stations: in March 1997, there were 53 in Thames Valley; in March this year, 55.

None of that is meant to deny that there are major problems that need to be addressed, but we can say categorically that we are seeking to tackle precisely the issues that have been raised by the hon. Gentleman in what I have certainly found to be—as I hope that he has—an interesting and worthwhile discussion.

North Lakeland Healthcare NHS Trust

1 pm

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): I welcome the opportunity to debate the findings of the first report of the Commission for Health Improvement. However, I very much regret that it is a report into a serious case of patient abuse in my constituency at the former Garlands psychiatric hospital, which was run by North Lakeland Healthcare NHS trust. I am pleased to say that this weekend I visited the site of the hospital; it has been closed, the demolition has started and the patients and the staff have been transferred over to the new Carleton clinic—an excellent facility.

In order to appreciate fully the scale of the problem, I shall have to outline some of the background details of the events and abuse that took place. In December 1998, two bank nurses from another hospital were working in the Garlands hospital, in Kielder House ward. They were so appalled by the abuse that they saw that they reported it to the senior managers. I would like to thank those two members of staff for taking that brave decision. I understand that they were heavily criticised by some of their colleagues, but whistleblowing has to happen in the NHS and they did the right thing.

I will briefly outline the sort of abuse that was taking place in Kielder House ward. In December 1998, two elderly patients in their night attire—not wearing their dressing gowns—were locked outside on a veranda in the cold. The staff refused to let them back in for a considerable period of time. Other incidents included patients being tied to commodes—a great indignity and against all the rules—and fed their meals at the same time. Other patients were sworn at and told they were past their sell-by date, that they should be in their box—in fact that they should be dead. They were subjected to verbal and physical abuse. One patient was struck in the testicles by a male nurse who was a judo expert. That was the level of abuse.

An internal inquiry looked into the matter and in March 1999 it reported with 33 recommendations to improve the situation in Kielder House and in the new clinic. I saw a copy of the Kielder House internal review in April 1999 and was appalled. I have been in public service since 1972 and have dealt with many difficult situations, but I was very angry when I read about the abuse that was taking place and lost sleep that night.

I had a meeting with Mary Styth, who was the chair of the trust. She expressed concern about the abuse and called for an external inquiry into what had happened in Kielder House ward. The inquiry was set up by the regional health authority. In August 1999 it discovered a previous report into abuse in the hospital in 1996.

The catalogue of abuse was very similar and it was then in ward 21, which was merged with Kielder House ward later. The 1996 report, which included complaints by student nurses, had been ignored and no real action had been taken. In fact, there was a cover-up in 1996. The chief executive of the trust said that he had not read the report for three years. In August, it was decided that he should be suspended.

In March 2000, the external inquiry reported. It found that a range of unprofessional and cruel practices took place in Kielder House, and severely criticised the

1996 investigation. Following the publication of the report, the chairman of the trust, Mary Styth, was summarily dismissed by the Secretary of State, and six members of staff were subject to disciplinary action.

I am sure that the 1996 and 1998 incidents were not isolated. Sadly, we must presume that abuse carried on throughout the period, if not longer. Later, I will mention the failure of various organisations to detect and stop the abuse, but I would like to make it clear now that none of the failures of the system absolves those who perpetrated that abuse. There was no excuse for it.

Following the external review and the large amount of publicity about the abuse and the sacking, the Government rightly called in the Commission for Health Improvement, and we are now considering its report. It said that the abuse was some of

"the worst involving elderly patients in recent years".

It was highly critical of the management that investigated ward 21 and Kielder House, saying that there was a complete failure of effective management and a "whole systems failure". The report accused the trust of failing to respond to the early warnings of whistleblowers. Despite the evidence, the commission found a culture of denial among some staff, who did not believe that the abuse had taken place.

I shall move on to lessons to be learned and problems that were created. North Cumbria health authority failed to act following the complaint from Carlisle MIND about abuse at the hospital. Although the health authority's headquarters were only 10 minutes' drive away from Garlands hospital, it worries me that there was a remoteness between the two, as though they were 100 miles apart. I also felt that the non-executive members of the health authority were not informed of the problems at Garlands.

We are lucky in Carlisle to have an excellent community health council, which has been ably led for many years by its chief officer, Peter Canham. However, due to the nature of its visits, the CHC failed, in that it did not pick up the abuse. I repeat my belief that the abuse was systematic in the hospital, not occasional. Although we have a good CHC, and although I am not totally convinced that I support the Government 100 per cent. on the alternative to CHCs, the fact that they have structural problems was shown in this situation.

The only organisation to come out of the affair with any credit was Carlisle MIND. I have to declare an interest, as I am its vice-president and my office shares a building with it. It flagged up the fact that abuse was taking place at Garlands hospital, and it told the trust and the health authority. Unfortunately, it was ignored. The director, Ann Dawson, should be praised for her diligence and persistence. I am rather annoyed that when Carlisle MIND wrote to the health authority asking for funding for another five years to allow it to continue with its work, the health authority agreed to fund it for only one year. Whether we like it or not, an organisation with money for one year only that rocks the boat too much may not receive money for following years. I shall return to that subject later.

What issues, national and local, have resulted from the report? First, it is obvious that the trust had structural problems when was it was set up in 1994. It was a community and mental health trust. The majority of the effort and resources went into the community, and the hospital probably came second. I do not want to say too much about the new structure of health care in Cumbria because the Minister already knows my views. However, from 1 April, Cumbria will have a single mental health trust. I was initially worried about its size, but I believe that it will allow the trust to concentrate on giving the community a good mental health service, which is timely.

Another important factor is funding. We can blame various causes, but mental health has been underfunded for generations. Although we tend to concentrate on acute cases, it is time to ensure sufficient funding, nationally and locally, for mental health trusts. I hope that the Minister will take that on board.

Another important aspect is the way in which the Government treat non-executive members of trusts. The chair of the trust, Mary Styth, was summarily dismissed by the Secretary of State. The chief executive of the trust was suspended for more than a year, and was given the opportunity to plead his case. He underwent a disciplinary procedure and was rightly dismissed. However, I believe that non-executive and executive members of trusts should be treated equally and that both should have a right of appeal. I accept that members are appointed for a fixed term, but if they are dismissed they should have the opportunity to plead their case.

Next, I wish to mention the police. I make no bones about it: I would like to have seen the perpetrators of the abuse brought before the courts. However, my impression is that when we have problems in our hospitals, whether in Cumbria or elsewhere, the police adopt the unofficial national policy that such matters are better dealt with through internal disciplinary procedure than through the courts.

I greatly admire Cumbria police; I am sure that the Minister would agree that it is one of the best police forces in the world. Crime in Cumbria has been reduced by 21 per cent. in the past year. However, I am worried that no prosecutions were brought. I know that it is difficult, and that mentally ill people do not make good witnesses, but I believe that the two nurses who made the allegations and those who were disciplined were not interviewed. I do not know that for definite, but I have corresponded about the case with the chief constable. If the Association of Chief Police Office has a national policy of not getting involved in cases in hospitals and institutions, I suspect that the Minister should attend to it.

The future of the external reviews also needs thought. Will the new system set up by the Commission for Health Improvement supersede the external reviews such as the one at the Garlands hospital? A major flaw in the review was exposed by the commission's report. The first external review gives the impression that no consultants or doctors were involved in any of what happened at the Garlands hospital. Those conducting the review failed to interview the consultant concerned. I understand that he was off sick with a broken leg, but that should not have precluded his giving evidence. It was only when the commission looked into the matter that some responsibility was laid upon the consultant. Are external reviews now in the past, with that function to be taken over by the commission, or will they run parallel?

[Mr. Eric Martlew]

A general question that I want to raise is how organisations such as MIND in Carlisle can be funded so as to retain an independent voice when they want to criticise an authority. It is not fair for an institution to have to depend for money on an organisation that it monitors.

The report has highlighted several problems that, hopefully, will now be tackled by the agencies concerned, especially the trust. We must look in a positive way to the future and hope for the restoration of public confidence and the improvement of the hospital's reputation. The vast majority of staff who worked at Garlands and who now work at the Carleton clinic are professional and conscientious and look after their patients well. However, if the hospital is to have a clean bill of health, the commission should return to conduct an audit; I shudder to use the word Ofsted. I understand that improvements have already been made. The commission needs to establish that it is satisfied that the people of north Cumbria and Carlisle have the mental health service that they require.

1.17 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) on initiating the debate and on his presentation of the arguments. I pay tribute to the work that he has done and continues to do to improve NHS services in his constituency. Carlisle has a powerful champion for the national health service in my hon. Friend.

The North Lakeland Healthcare NHS trust provides a range of mental health and community health services for a mainly rural area from a number of sites across north Cumbria. Last year 63,500 patients were treated by the trust, which provides a wide range of services from paediatrics and community midwifery to mental health services for all ages. I know that my hon. Friend is particularly concerned about those services.

I share my hon. Friend's concern about the findings of the various inquiries into the events at the North Lakeland Healthcare NHS trust. I appreciate his efforts in bringing those matters to the attention of Ministers. A clearly unacceptable state of affairs was allowed to develop in the trust. Standards of patient care and treatment fell seriously short of what we expect from the national health service. In addition, the trust failed to deal properly and effectively with abuses, which had been taking place over several years, as my hon. Friend made clear.

Allegations of abuse were first brought to the trust's attention in May 1996 by student nurses working in Garlands hospital. Those allegations were investigated by the trust's patient services manager and training manager. At that time, the internal trust inquiry concluded that

"the type of patient in this ward leads to a marked difference between theory and practice"

and that

"some of the difficulties encountered may have been created by the students' understanding of the relationship between theory and practice".

That is totally unacceptable. No disciplinary action was taken and no report was made to the police. It was the failure at that stage to take effective action to deal with obvious evidence of unacceptable practices in the trust that lay at the heart of the subsequent events.

In December 1998, as my hon. Friend made clear, two bank nurses made further complaints about the treatment of patients in Kielder House ward in the same hospital. The complaints investigation uncovered other aspects of care that gave cause for serious concern. One member of staff was dismissed, one resigned and three were given warnings. I would like to express my gratitude and admiration to those two nurses. It was their actions that finally began the process that led to measures being taken to deal with the appalling treatment of NHS patients in the hospital. Those two nurses acted in the best traditions of the nursing profession.

The former chief executive of the trust met the police in January 1999 to appraise them of the draft report into the allegations, which could lead to suspensions and disciplinary action against staff. As a result of that discussion, the police concluded that it was not an issue for them as there was insufficient information to justify further investigation into the actions of any individual. As my hon. Friend is aware, the trust initiated a further internal investigation.

I understand that the police have now been sent copies of both internal investigations and are currently reviewing the evidence.

My hon. Friend was concerned that there was a national policy not to prosecute cases of alleged criminal behaviour by people in hospitals. I can assure him that no such national policy exists. Anybody who works in the NHS is subject—just like all of us—to the full operation of the criminal law, and that will continue to be the case.

My hon. Friend is also aware that, following that internal investigation, an independent external review was instigated by the Northern and Yorkshire NHS Executive regional office. The report of the independent external review found, in particular, an unacceptable culture of care, which allowed

"unprofessional, counter-therapeutic and degrading, even cruel, practices"

to take place. It also found that the governance of the trust was at risk through a significant blurring of roles and responsibilities between the chair and the chief executive, and that the trust lacked an atmosphere of openness and had no effective arrangements in place to ensure proper clinical governance.

The responsibility for the continuation of such a regime in any NHS trust must lie squarely and properly with the chairman of that trust. That is why we did not hesitate in removing her from her position. Chairs in the NHS are directly appointed by Ministers with the clear remit to deliver health services of the highest possible quality, which was not happening in the North Lakeland trust. The abuse and mismanagement on the scale experienced in North Lakeland meant that the chairman's position was not sustainable. Although the former chair was responsible for the overall management of the trust and must take responsibility for its failings, it was clear that senior management were also at fault. A number of disciplinary actions against

senior managers have followed. To date, the chief executive and the director of personnel have been dismissed, and a range of serious disciplinary actions have been taken against six other members of staff at the trust.

We took the decision to send in the Commission for Health Improvement. The commission reviewed the previous reports and examined the management, provision and quality of care provided across the trust. It found that there was

"an almost complete absence of effective corporate management and clinical governance processes—in effect, a whole systems failure."

The Government accept the commission's findings, and we expect the acting chief executive and chair to take on board the recommendations and to implement the action plan drawn up to address them. I have asked my Department's regional office to work closely with the trust and the health authority to ensure radical improvements to the management and the delivery of services at North Lakeland. It is important that the community served by the trust can draw a line under the appalling sequence of events to secure a future marked by the highest quality of care.

Action being taken now in the light of the CHI's report will be vital to achieving that. I am pleased that since publication of the commission's report a number of important developments have taken place. An action plan to address all the commission's recommendations has been implemented; a service staff skill mix review was started in December and a draft report is due to be produced by today; clinical governance training for all board members has taken place and further sessions have been held with senior managers and clinicians.

The trust is actively reviewing and re-defining its corporate values with patients, carers and staff. Discussions have been initiated with the local community health council and the local branch of MIND to establish a patients council, which will be useful. The Northern Centre for Mental Health is supporting the trust in reviewing the allocation and responsibilities for standards and quality across the trust.

A user-focused complaints policy was introduced in November. Complaints are now valued as opportunities to learn about and improve services. My hon. Friend will be aware that a comprehensive review of nursing standards across the trust is also being carried out.

We have reorganised management structures in the NHS in north Cumbria. The North Lakeland trust will be dissolved on 31 March, to be replaced by a districtwide dedicated mental health and learning disabilities trust. That will provide the opportunity to refashion a modern, efficient and effective mental health service appropriate to meeting the needs in my hon. Friend's constituency.

The action taken will help to ensure that these events do not happen again. I welcome the intention of the Commission for Health Improvement to review the new trusts in north Cumbria one year after its report on the North Lakeland trust. I hope that a very different picture will emerge. My hon. Friend asked me to ensure that we would revisit the trust, as it were, and I assure him that we will.

My hon. Friend also raised important points about checks and balances in the system, and about how groups representing patients and users can be heard effectively. I should make it clear that the Commission for Health Improvement found a whole systems failure. The trust was responsible for the appalling circumstances about which we have spoken. I praise the contribution of the local branch of MIND, which raised its concerns with the trust and the health authority. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his comments on MIND, as it stood up for patients at Garlands hospital.

The Government's reforms are helping to renew public confidence in the NHS through greater involvement than in the past of patients, carers and the public in the planning and the development of health services. The Government are determined to ensure that the voice of the patient is heard loudly and clearly in the new NHS. The NHS cannot operate behind closed doors and keep patients in the dark. New ways need to be found to take patients into its confidence. The NHS plan sets out how we intend to do that.

This week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave further details of our plans. We intend that every local trust should have its own independent statutory patients forum, run by patients. The forums will have rights to inspect standards of care and cleanliness. A patient will be appointed to serve on the local trust board so that patients' interests are at the heart of local decision making. I hope that my hon. Friend will welcome those reforms. In turn, the trust will have to demonstrate that it has responded to the concerns of the patients forum.

Other changes that we are making include ensuring that patients are regularly asked for their views on their care, and requiring trusts to publish a prospectus to set out how they intend to address patients' concerns. A new patient advocacy and liaison service will be established in every trust to give patients on-the-spot help with care and treatment problems. A new complaints system, more independent than the old one, and a new, independently commissioned and independent advocacy service will be available in every area when a patient needs specialist help with a complaint.

At health authority level, independent local advisory forums that will include patients will scrutinise the whole local health service. There will be more patients' representatives at every level in the health service. That will include existing organisations such as the General Medical Council, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and the Commission for Health Improvement, and new organisations such as the new independent appointments commission and the independent reconfiguration panel. Patients will have seats at the top table.

The issues in the North Lakeland trust should not be considered in isolation. The Government are committed to delivering significant improvements to the NHS across north Cumbria. Year on year, we have increased the resources to the NHS in my hon. Friend's constituency. This year has seen a cash increase of more than £19 million, which is 6.4 per cent. above inflation, or a 9 per cent. increase in cash terms. Next year, we shall ensure a real terms increase of 6 per cent., which is more than £17 million in cash terms.

[Mr. John Hutton]

My hon. Friend was concerned about the financing of mental health services, and I agree with many of his comments about the inadequate funding that has dogged them for many years. That is why I hope that he shares our commitment to modernising, investing in and improving mental health services, as set out in the NHS plan published in the summer. I accept that much is to be done, but new, dedicated funding is coming on stream.

I am sure that my hon. Friend and I agree that the trust needs to move forward, and in so doing it must ensure that its patients and the whole community enjoy a relationship of full confidence and trust in the services that it provides. That is what every member of staff in the trust wants and is committed to achieving. It is what my hon. Friend and I both want to happen, and I look forward to working with him to ensure that it does.

Northern General Hospital, Sheffield

1.30 pm

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): I am pleased to have been able to secure this debate, as it provides an opportunity for the Government to make a statement on the record about an issue of serious concern to all those involved with the transplant service at the Northern General hospital, Sheffield. That includes the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley), and other local Members, all of whom have been concerned about the service, which covers quite a wide area.

I intend to cover three main areas in the debate, and I hope that the Minister will be able to respond to each of them at the appropriate time. First, I will examine the rationale behind any move to reduce the number of transplant centres in the UK as a whole. Secondly, I will talk about the service in Sheffield in particular, and the valuable role that it plays within the NHS. Thirdly, it is important to discuss how decisions about service changes in the NHS are made, as that has been a source of complaint from many of the people who have contacted me on the issue.

There has been an underlying assumption behind the review of cardiothoracic transplant surgery that the national specialist commissioning advisory group—NSCAG—has been carrying out for the Department of Health that there are too many cardiothoracic transplant centres, and some should be closed. I understand that that is the brief to which it has been working. However, I suggest to the Minister that to accept such a strategy of fewer units, which are by definition further apart, may be selling the NHS short.

My vision for the NHS, which I hope that the Government share, is that it should continue to be one of the best health services in the world. In my view, it would be disastrous for the NHS to end up as some kind of safety net service that withdraws from the more complex and expensive procedures that some people will always need. In that respect, I can see the need for the skills of transplant centres growing rather than reducing over the coming years.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): Is it not the case that at the very time when we are trying to expand the number of organ donors, it makes no sense to reduce the number of centres? If anything, there may be a need for some rebalancing of the geographical areas for harvesting donors. We should concentrate on that, to get the best distribution throughout the country, rather than concentrating on resources in the south-east.

Mr. Allan: That intervention helps to move us on to the issue of the shortage of organ donors, which has been one of the driving forces behind the strategy that has been set out. My presumption is that the shortage of organ donors is a problem that we could overcome. We should be tackling that, rather than closing the centres that could actually do the operations if the donations were occurring. I agree that there is currently a shortage of organ donations. The answer is not to give up but to campaign actively to increase the number. The Northern General itself ran a successful campaign in Sheffield before Christmas, using the local media and getting thousands of people to sign up for donor cards.

I am interested in schemes such as the credit card scheme, as it seems that the vast majority of people these days carry a credit card. If that were also a donor card, that would be an immediate and straightforward way of identifying someone as a donor. We are only beginning the process of expanding donation. It is true that the effort to expand the number of donors may be set back by current events surrounding organ removal without consent, but the Government could and should make a clear distinction between those unfortunate events and consensual organ donation to save lives. There are some good examples of how consensual organ donation works. I hope that the Government will be clear about not allowing that to be dragged into a debate about non-consensual removal of organs, which all of us would quite rightly condemn.

The Sheffield Heart and Lung Transplant Society has put it to me that a review of the donor zones mentioned by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe), which decide which units receive which organs, would create a more efficient service and possibly make the existing transplant centres more effective. We are also witnessing the advance of new technologies that may expand the possibilities for medical intervention. We have recently debated the advances in stem cell research, which could create new ways to regenerate organs. There are advances in mechanical devices all the time. Those new techniques will require the skills necessary to prevent rejection, and to work with new tissue or implanted mechanical devices, that have been developed in transplant centres throughout the country.

What a travesty it would be if new technical solutions came on stream but there were no medical staff with the experience to use them. The present transplant staff have been trained all over the world for 15 years to achieve the skills necessary even to begin some of the procedures. They work in close-knit teams and achieve great successes. They, in turn, train future medical staff in these highly specialised skills.

The closure of units will disrupt that pattern and risk the NHS losing skilled people, and the global market for staff with transplant skills cannot be ignored. In any reconfiguration, there is the potential to lose people with vital skills who will train the next generation of staff in the new techniques. I ask the Minister to consider whether it is not incredibly short-sighted in the long run to risk the loss of skills when major medical advances are anticipated that will create a need for more, not fewer, staff with these specialisms.

Most importantly, a reduction in the network may have a damaging effect on patient care. The seriousness of the matter was underlined by a submission from members of the Sheffield patients group. They told me that the typical procedure for a patient undergoing a cardiothoracic transplant begins with an assessment of the suitability of the patient for a transplant, which involves a four-day stay in hospital. There is then a two-year wait, with various episodes of in-patient and out-patient treatment. The transplant surgery itself requires an in-patient stay of about three weeks. After being discharged, the patient must attend hospital for a minimum of four hours a week for the first four weeks, fortnightly for the next four weeks, monthly for the next six months, quarterly for the next year and every six months thereafter. In such an intensive period of attendance at the hospital, its geographical location is much more significant than it would be if a patient went in and out of hospital only once.

With such an intensive treatment schedule, any increase in the distance travelled is a major burden for the patient, not only in time, money and so on, but in health terms, as patients are very frail when their operations take place. At present, patients from areas such as Hull, Grantham and Nottingham have to travel for up to two hours each way to the Northern General hospital in Sheffield. If they had to go to Manchester or Newcastle—the alternatives if the unit were to close—that would increase to between three and five hours' travelling time each way. On present figures, that would mean that 100 post-operative patients in the area, including those in Barnsley, Sheffield, north Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire would have to travel for six to 10 hours a day. If closure goes ahead, a group of existing patients will have to start travelling those excessive distances immediately.

In addition to the problems for patients and their families who may wish to visit them, closure could significantly increase NHS costs, especially if out-patient appointments had to be changed to include overnight stays because the travelling distance was too burdensome for a two-way journey. That expensive option would, however, have to be considered.

I said that I would refer to the case for the Sheffield unit. In doing so, I am not trying to talk down the other transplant units, as this is not a beauty contest between them. However, I want to place on record comments about the qualities of the Sheffield unit that have been passed to me by patients and others.

The transplant programme started at the Northern General hospital more than 10 years ago, since when it has provided more than 230 patients with successful transplants. The facility was much improved recently with the opening two years ago of the £20 million Chesterman wing, which has some of the best facilities in the country. The team now operating at the Northern General has a tremendous reputation. A study carried out by the Royal College of Surgeons showed that it was one of the most successful in the country. There is an active support group for the unit.

Graham Earle, chairman of the Sheffield Heart and Lung Transplant Patients Society, told the local newspaper, *The Star*:

"Sheffield has the best records for post transplant survival, the shortest waiting time for pre-transplant assessment and an excellent after-care service. How they can think of shutting it is beyond belief."

We have a first-class unit in a modern building, opened in this Government's term of office, providing a service that is much valued by patients. I am sure that other units are similarly valued by their local groups. An additional factor is important in considering the Sheffield unit: need. There is an acknowledged link between high rates of coronary heart disease and areas of high social deprivation. Similarly, the incidence of lung diseases is higher in areas of certain industrial activities such as mining.

The area served by the Northern General has a very high level of such problems. In the former coalfields of Yorkshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, people have suffered from years of poor health caused by

[Mr. Allan]

poverty and the legacy of the former industrial activities. Barnsley and South Yorkshire have the highest heart disease rate in England. Those local factors are reflected in the high demand for cardiothoracic transplants at the unit. That is reflected in an extensive waiting list, which already, sadly, means that some people die before they can be treated. The loss of the Northern General unit would be likely to worsen the situation and leave that high-need population travelling much longer distances for their treatment, increasing their stress, at further cost to their health.

I am worried about the lack of public consultation. I want to leave the Minister in no doubt about the unacceptable nature of the decision-making process in this case. The main source for information has been the local newspaper, *The Star*. It has done an effective job in putting information into the public domain and has acted as a responsible local watchdog, but it is unfortunate that the Department's process does not appear to have included any more formal system for making the public aware of what is being considered and seeking their views on possible changes. The perception is that the results of the review were to be presented as a fait accompli to the users of the service.

I accept that people making decisions about the reconfiguration of services will always be criticised for not consulting properly by those who feel that they are losing out. Where my political colleagues are in power in local government they have had to deal with exactly that situation. In this case, there does not even seem to have been an attempt at public consultation. That is particularly serious given the nature of the service in question.

Cardiothoracic transplant units, by their nature, create long-term on-going relationships with their patients. I referred to the typical schedule as set out by the patients group in Sheffield when I talked about the need for a good geographical spread of centres. There are already hundreds of patients in the Northern General catchment who are at various stages of trea..nent and have an expectation of working with the hospital over several years to come. As one of them put it to me, they are very much stakeholders in their own treatment. In that context, the failure to make clear, authoritative public statements about the reorganisation to date has been a serious failing. I hope that the Minister will be willing to do something to remedy that today.

I have one last general point about NHS openness. The Secretary of State was very forthright about that in another context this week. The situation is not exactly comparable to decisions about the treatment that someone has received, but there are similar questions to be answered about the relationship between the NHS and the citizens of this country. We feel a tremendous sense of ownership of our health service and pride in its achievements. I was very conscious of that during the five years that I spent working in the NHS. NHS staff will often go that extra mile because it is for the public benefit. However, the decision-making processes in the NHS have often been remote from the people it serves. I believe that ordinary people can understand the concepts surrounding decisions about NHS service delivery. Those who hold power should not be defensive and seek to restrict information but should go out and involve people in the decisions that affect their lives.

The Government came into power with a commitment to save the NHS. I am sure that we will have the partisan debates about how successful they have been ad nauseam over the coming months. I ask the Minister today to consider seriously one aspect of the NHS debate, which would not cost a lot of money: the democratisation of the service. The alternative is to continue to have the NHS damaged by the perception that its users are being treated simply as patients having things done to them and not as full participants who both use the service and have a say in how and where it is delivered.

Ordinary people such as the users of the Northern General transplant centre should be entrusted with the information that they need to be involved in the decision-making process. I hope that the Minister will be able to give a commitment to doing that, and to publishing a full range of information on this particular decision. I hope that she will be able to explain clearly how public consultation will take place, and to set out a detailed timetable for the decisions on the review that will have to be made. I hope that at the end of the process she will be able to announce that the centre of excellence that is the Northern General transplant centre will continue to provide its valuable service within the NHS.

1.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) on securing this debate. I do not disagree with any of his comments on what we expect of the NHS, its openness and its consultation with patients, but I hope that I can make clearer what has been happening in terms of organ transplants.

I would also like to make it clear that, as one of the transplant units under consideration is in Birmingham and is located in my constituency, it is important that I state publicly that, despite taking this debate here in Westminster Hall, I will play no part in the decision-making process to identify the units that will be consolidated. It is also a sign of the strong feelings of the hon. Members who represent the three constituencies in which the units are located that they are here. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) for his intervention, as he is correct when he says that we should do everything that we can to increase the number of organ donations. I went through the background briefing and was struck by the number of letters that we had received from various Members. This issue goes across all parties, and people feel very strongly about it.

In terms of organ transplants, we are in a good position in this country. Over the past 30 years, organ transplantation has become established as the best treatment for people suffering complete failure of vital organs. In the case of liver transplant and cardiothoracic transplant, that is heart, heart-lung and lung transplants, the procedure is literally life-saving. In the case of kidney failure, renal dialysis can sustain people while they wait for a suitable organ to become

available, but to put that into context, currently we have approximately 3,000 transplant operations, with organs from 900 donors, and there are more than 6,000 people on the transplant waiting list. More than 8 million people have joined the NHS organ donor register, but one of the difficulties is that only a very small percentage of those dying are suitable as organ donors. The main source of organs is from people who have died from sudden brain injury such as a stroke or resulting from a road accident, and there was an assumption in the early 1990s that the numbers would continually increase, and while I of course welcome the reduction in road accidents, it does have some consequences.

Last February, there was a review in response to a number of important issues that had arisen concerning organ transplantation, including a report on the future of organ transplant services by the Royal College of Surgeons of England. My noble Friend Lord Hunt of Kings Heath announced measures that, taken together, provided a comprehensive strategy for the development and reorganisation of transplant services in this country. He accepted the RCS's recommendations on minimum levels of staffing for transplant units. The recommendation was that, because so much organ transplantation takes place at night or over the weekend, surgeons would work no more than a one in four on-call rota. That would require a minimum team of five surgeons. Currently, very few organ transplant units meet that requirement.

The hon. Member for Hallam raises the issue of training, but unless the unit and the programme itself are of a sufficient size, training cannot take place. He mentions future technologies, but those are very likely to require different skills that are already being developed in a number of the non-transplant units. While the renal transplant service is affected by these issues, work to address them is at a much earlier stage, so I will concentrate, as he has, on the cardiothoracic services.

Our national cardiothoracic transplant service is recognised as being among the best in the world, and we are rightly proud of it. Following its designation as a national service in 1986, it has been restricted to relatively few centres, preventing the proliferation of a large number of cardiac centres, as happened in some other countries, in the belief that the number of organs would continue to increase. Four new adult cardiothoracic transplant centres were designated, so that by 1991 there were seven adult centres in England.

I am worried that there may be confusion. Just because there is a greater concentration of cardiothoracic transplant services, would not in any way affect what we expect from the expansion of cardiac surgery, which would happen in many places. The hon. Gentleman correctly referred to the very high incidence of heart disease in his area. There will be a continued expansion of the service, so it is not "instead of" but "as well as".

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): The Minister has quite rightly drawn attention to the importance of specialisation. I wonder whether she would care to pay tribute to the work of New Heart, New Start at Wythenshawe hospital, in Manchester, which has raised £1.8 million for the construction of a dedicated heart transplant ward, which will give Wythenshawe the only fully comprehensive heart transplant unit in the whole of western Europe.

Ms Stuart: This is the kind of thing that could get me into trouble. I would not wish not to pay tribute to extraordinary local fundraising, but my paying tribute to those activities should not be seen as indication that I take sides in the very close race between Sheffield, Manchester and Birmingham. I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman has such an active local organisation, but the decision is still open.

I return to what has happened in the Northern General hospital in Sheffield, because it is one of the new centres. The others were St. George's hospital in London, the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Birmingham and Wythenshawe hospital in Manchester. The three original centres were Papworth hospital in Cambridge, the Freeman hospital in Newcastle and, perhaps the best-known of all, the Harefield hospital in Middlesex. Hon. Members may be aware that the programme at St. George's has now been suspended following an unusual run of poor results last year, and the Commission for Health Improvement will be investigating that.

The early promise of expansion of cardiothoracic transplantation has not been fulfilled. Our assumption, in the early 1990s, that the number of available organs would expand has proved wrong, as a result of improvements in road safety and the prevention of strokes in younger people. Those are important health gains, which of course we all welcome, but they have had consequential effects.

For example, between 1990 and 1999, deaths from road traffic accidents in people aged 16 to 59, the usual age for adult heart and lung donors, fell by nearly 40 per cent. from 2,893 to 1,820. That is clearly very good news, but it has had an inevitable effect on the supply of organ donors. In the past five years, the number of organ donors under 60 has fallen by 15 per cent. The fall could have been greater had it not been for the dedication of intensive care units and the efforts of transplant co-ordinators and transplant teams in identifying donors, alongside our continuing efforts to increase organ donation, such as running major campaigns with credit card companies, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned. There is also the Boots initiative to persuade people to join the register. I think that he is absolutely right when he refers to the mood of the time.

We are having this debate after Alder Hey, and we face a significant challenge in re-establishing trust. It was interesting that many of the Alder Hey parents said that they would have given permission if only they had been asked properly. We will drive the issue of informed consent throughout the NHS. I know that in some areas extremely valuable work is going on with ethnic minorities to improve rates of organ donation.

We recognise that, however successful we are in arranging organ procurement, the supply of hearts and lungs, which come only from younger donors, will remain severely limited. Despite all our efforts, the impact on the cardiothoracic transplant programme has been considerable. Adult cardiothoracic transplant operations—heart, heart-lung and lung transplants—performed by the centres fell from 423 in 1995 to only 290 last year. During the same period, heart transplants performed in the seven centres in England fell from 262 to only 172.

[Ms Stuart]

We are committed to maintaining excellence, but a difficult decision must be made on the number of centres so that the coverage of the surgical teams can be maintained. We have accepted the advice of the Royal College of Surgeons in its 1999 report on minimum levels of staffing. It will be evident to hon. Members that, with such complex treatment, if the number of transplants falls below a certain level, the members of the transplant team will begin to lose their skills and standards may fall. We must ensure that each transplant team is well staffed with access to all the support that it needs. It must perform enough operations to maintain a high level of skill in all the members of the team, and it is essential to ensure that the service remains of the highest possible quality for the sake of patients.

The national specialist commissioning advisory group is responsible for advising on which services should be provided nationally. The group considered the impact of the various factors and recommended last year that the national programme should be delivered from four centres in England. That would allow each unit the optimum infrastructure to support a programme of at least 50 heart transplants, which would allow each surgeon to perform an average of 10 heart transplants a year. That size of programme would also maintain the skills of the whole multidisciplinary team and would ensure that properly resourced organ retrieval teams are available to retrieve and make use of all usable organs.

Those recommendations are fully supported by many organisations, including the Royal College of Surgeons and the cardiothoracic transplant advisory group of UK Transplant. Dr. Roger Boyle, director of coronary heart disease services, has been consulted and fully supports the proposals. The Government have agreed that the principles are right and that some reconfiguration of the service is necessary if we are to maintain the high quality of the best services.

I recognise what the hon. Gentleman said about the long-term relationship that patients build up with a particular team. They develop strong ties and loyalties and the prospect of any change is disturbing. The Government want to keep disruption of patients and transplant teams to a minimum. One way of achieving that is to maintain the larger programmes, as far as possible, but any changes to the service will affect some patients. I stress that if any reconfiguration of teams involves loss of cardiothoracic surgeons because we want to keep teams together, we would strive to replace them so that other cardiac surgery, particularly to fit in with the national service framework and expansion of services, also happens.

Most patients on the waiting list will be treated by the team that they know. However, in future, some new patients may have to travel further to a transplant unit. Many patients already travel long distances, as they would have to do for any highly specialised national service. In the case of most highly specialised services, there will always be tension between improving geographical access and maintaining clinical excellence.

The hon. Gentleman referred to patient involvement and the national service. The provision of the service has never been a question of money. The issue is not about making financial savings but about where the service should be provided to meet national demand.

On patient consultation, we hope that the conclusions of the current study will be available in the not-too-distant future so that people can comment on the discussion document. The important point is that we are totally committed to a first-class transplantation service in this country, and we shall continue to do our best, as part of our work on informed consent, to ensure that organ donors carry donor cards. No decision has been made on which hospital will be chosen, but it will be made in the best interests of ensuring that the facilities—

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central): When?

Ms Stuart: My hon. Friend is trying to tempt me. The discussion document will be issued soon and I cannot make an announcement today. However, I take on board what has been said about patient involvement. We all agree that we want a service that is in the best interests of patients. With a national service, patients may have to travel, but the reward is better care.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 1 February 2001

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Space Industry

[*Relevant documents: Tenth Report from the Trade and Industry Committee, Session 1999-2000 HC 355 and Government Response thereto, Twelfth Special Report from the Committee HC 908, Session 1999-2000.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Clelland.*]

2.30 pm

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): Space policy is not often discussed in the House. Indeed, I do not think that there has been a Select Committee report on the subject since that produced by the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee in the late 1980s. Perhaps its report was not quite as lengthy and detailed as the one that my colleagues and I have produced.

It is strange that we do not discuss space more frequently, given the amount of public interest in space and space travel, and the excitement of science fiction, such as "Star Trek", "Doctor Who" and "Star Wars". It is rather unfortunate that the British film industry has produced Oscar-winning special effects in movies such as the Star Wars series, but the real thing seems to have evaded the interest of British Governments and the capabilities of certain sections of British industry. If both industry and Government turned their minds to the subject, they could make a bigger contribution than they have made so far.

The responsibility must lie partly with Government, because the space industry is one in which national leadership is paramount. In the UK responsibility has been vested in the British National Space Centre, whose structure and organisation are exemplars of the ad hocery that can be both a boon to and a burden on public administration.

The 1988 Lords Select Committee report described how the BNSC was formed in 1971 as an ad hoc inter-departmental working arrangement, staffed by people from the Department of Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the National Environment Research Council and the Science and Engineering Research Council. The BNSC was reformed in 1985. Only three years later, however, the Lords Committee still had no confidence in the leadership offered not by the individuals but by the institution of the BNSC. The Committee said:

"unless we can summon up more enthusiasm for space—a quality that Ministers have criticised—we cannot rely on our partners to go on collaborating with us".

That was a clear indication that insufficient priority was being given to space. I think that the criticism was partly of the BNSC.

I want to make it clear that I am not attacking individuals. By its nature, the BNSC is a recipe for administrative and budget-winning disaster. It is answerable to a number of Departments but has only a small part of each Department's vote. It is likely to be the tail-end Charlie in any fund allocation exercise.

The BNSC is staffed by seconded civil servants. The number of people from industry who come in is insufficient. There is probably no kudos attached to a secondment to such an institution. It does not have its own vote in financial terms, but depends on contributions from members of the resources board, which represents all the partners.

It is little wonder that we spent 0.028 per cent. of our gross domestic product, compared to the United States, which spent 0.187 per cent., France, which spent 0.157 per cent., Italy and Japan, which both spent 0.048 per cent.—that is a little closer to our figure—and Canada, 0.042 per cent. This country is a major player in civil and military aerospace, and at least some of those skills and techniques could have been transferred to the British space industry. We cavil and complain about the small sums involved and the paucity of resources, but it is equally worrying that the sums spent have declined in real terms year by year in the past decade.

I hope that the Minister will say what financing the BNSC will have in the next three years. The sums involved are not particularly large. They do not pose the threat of a great drainage from the main flow of the partners' budgets, but they are vital to the space industry.

As important as the money, is how it will be spent. We are pleased with the Government's promise to produce an annual report which should assist transparency and accountability. That is a constructive response to the Trade and Industry Committee's report.

The United Kingdom Industrial Space Committee said that it was one thing to have a strategy, but that strategy was of dubious advantage without an action plan to realise it. With the funding available over a three-to-five year period, we should move away from the short termism that has bedevilled space planning in recent years. We expect a cautious reply to the debate from the Minister, but if he assures us that there will be a review or a revaluation of spending in the past decade, for example, we would learn some lessons on projecting expenditure that could be applied in future.

Space strategy has international dimensions. Members of the Select Committee will make our annual visit to Brussels next week and meet representatives of the European Space Agency and others. I hope that the Minister, when he responds to the debate, will say what he thinks of the view expressed by the UK Industrial Space Committee that our European partners are too preoccupied with the applications of space rather than with space research and science. Whether or not the Government share that view, greater priority should be given to the development of space science.

There have been some encouraging signs in recent months, not least the creation of ASTRIUM, which is a major force. It is not the only voice in the British space business but it is the biggest. Proper weight should be given to opinion across the spectrum so that a single big player does not dominate the debate and all the players in the UK space industry have an opportunity to express their opinion. Proper opportunities should be given to all the players in the UK space industry.

[Mr. Martin O'Neill]

Would the Minister share his thoughts on security? Are the Government happy with requests from the European Union and the Western European Union to use the assets of the European Space Agency for military observation purposes? Would that be acceptable to all European Space Agency members? Is it worth jeopardising the participation of countries that would perhaps find such a defence application unacceptable? I do not have strong views on the issue but it merits consideration—it is a small grenade that I lob into the pond to get the Minister's reaction. Since we debate the subject so infrequently, it might prove to be a catch-all debate.

We are talking not only about the relationship with our international partners. The Government have established a fairly good working relationship with industry and the partnership arrangements have been relatively successful in the recent past. The UK Space Industry Committee feels that the Government's partnership arrangements are sometimes too inflexible and that its one-size-fits-all approach may not be appropriate in every instance. In the unfortunate experience of the EGNOS programme—the European Geostationary Navigation Overlay Satellite Service—when its procurement stage was reached and there was talk of getting partnerships together, Britain dithered over how to secure 50:50 partnership arrangements. As a consequence, we missed the boat—if that is the right expression; missed the rocket might be more appropriate—in terms of taking the leading role that our technical expertise should have afforded us. Rather than British companies being in pole position and adopting a more influential role, we are now visibly having to pick up the remaining crumbs.

There is obviously an interface with defence and security but not all the delays and export licensing procedures are necessary. There is no debate involving international trade and globalised businesses in which we do not run up against that old sore of export licences, but it is galling when the delays in the treatment of export licences result in business going to other countries, not least EU or NATO partners who obviously have much the same concerns as we do about the desirability of entering into such contracts.

The next stage of the Galileo programme has also been delayed. It was supposed to start in December and has now been postponed to April. Apparently, there are doubts about whether income flows will be enough to give commercial investors a return. It is a wee bit worrying to hear that the case for Galileo has still to be proved. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is the lead Department on it. One does not have to be an entrepreneurial whizz kid to work out the business significance of the programme. While it is understandable that transport and communications matters are at the heart of the programme, we cannot allow the DETR to lose sight of the business opportunities that its realisation will create. I should like to think that we will stop leaving ourselves open to the charge that there is undue delay or diffidence in this area.

As I said earlier, what became obvious to myself and my colleagues on the Committee was the great enthusiasm and excitement of the people involved in the space business. The word "anorak" is often used disparagingly, but in this instance it is not something that is particularly offensive, or it should not be taken as that. These are a group of dedicated people who fired themselves, and others who come into contact with them, with the sheer excitement of what they are about. If anything captures the public imagination, it is the exploration of space.

Could the Minister tell us today what the Government's view is on Mars exploration? It is about time they gave us some excitement in our lives—as far as space exploration is concerned—by saying, "Yes, we are in favour of doing something serious about the Martian challenge", and then getting behind it. If we want young people becoming involved in schools and universities in serious science, then we have to inject that degree of excitement and imagination at critical points of their scholastic careers, and to have something with which these young people can make a connection.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): The Mars lander vehicle of the Beagle 2 project, which the Open University co-ordinated under Dr. Colin Pillinger, gives exactly that opportunity of excitement. I once asked the Prime Minister a parliamentary question on the very subject, and now the Government have given some backing. The private sector has also played its part. That is exactly the sort of scheme to which the hon. Gentleman is referring.

Mr. O'Neill: I have to say that the Pillinger example is a great one; the problem is that it is the only one. We need more examples of that character, and to achieve that we come back to the issue of national leadership. This is not a matter of party dispute. The hon. Gentleman and I have discussed it privately on a number of occasions. Although we are often hard pressed to find much that was good about the past Administration, I would pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his endeavours on behalf of the space industry—which were almost successful—in keeping the space programme limping along, in keeping it alive.

We now have to move beyond the incubatory stage, but in order to do that we must also address issues. I want to discuss the issue that dare not speak its name—"launching", and whether or not we should have a UK launch capability. I am not the world's expert on matters relating to space. I do think, however, that more serious consideration should be given to this issue, than the dismissive approach, which is often adopted by the British National Space Centre and Government. It should be the subject of a serious study and we should be able to come to a rational decision.

We do not need the rather cumbersome approach that is currently being adopted, where there is a market assessment of every element that is a bit bigger than a widget. That is a classic product of the "Yes Minister" system of government: there is a review of every single bit, and money and time is spent on reviews instead of on conducting a straightforward independent study, which could be carried out at a measured pace and would enjoy the trust of all who participated in providing evidence to it. At the end of the day we could then say that for 10 or 15 years we will or will not play a major part in the development of a launch capability. It is necessary to say, in these circumstances, that

perhaps the greatest fear that we have is fear itself. There ought to be an attempt made by the BNSC in this way and Government have to give a lead.

The Government have to be given credit. I know that my hon. Friend is not the Minister responsible but that it is Lord Sainsbury who is in another place. I have to pay tribute to him because he has, in large measure, developed the nascent programme which the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) sought to keep alive in the dying days of the past Administration. We need more than that. There are rising expectations and we have to give the British space community a sense that the Government are backing this work and that the priorities are set in the context of a longer-term strategy for developing the industry's strengths and exploiting new areas of technology that the UK is in a strong position to develop. If we could do that, we could excite the public and particularly encourage young people to study space science. There is a wealth of talent in academia and in the UK.

We bemoan our inability to produce enough good scientists and technologists. We hear the ritual complaint that more people are doing media studies than anything else or that they end up doing that. That is because people think that it is glamorous or that they might get on television. Heavens above, the glamour and excitement associated with space is far greater than carrying an Uher tape recorder around on behalf of a local radio station on a wet Tuesday afternoon to an old folk's treat, which is the nature of the end product of media studies for all too many people. People do not appreciate that. The advantages to UK plc of a higher priority and a better sense of purpose and direction to the space industry would go no small way towards encouraging other areas of British business and industry as well as British academia.

My colleagues and I on the Select Committee enjoyed our brief foray into space policy. The fact that the Government have taken a decision to produce an annual report will provide successor Committees—I am assuming beyond a general election which might be held this year—to invite interested parties to discuss the contents of these reports in the years ahead. This debate will not necessarily become commonplace. If it does, it will assume other dimensions which are not particularly attractive. If it can engage the attention of Parliament by being effective, we can praise it and if there are shortcomings, we can criticise it. Sometimes, all too sadly in this House, it is more attractive to criticise than to praise. The Government have done a good job in the available time, but by doing so they have created a demand for even more effort, more assistance and more resources.

I hope that today the Minister will be able to tell us that more resources are available, and that there is a better focus and greater encouragement for all those who are thinking about or who are involved in the UK space industry.

2.54 pm

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): It comes as something of a surprise to be in the Chamber again for a debate in which I am not speaking from the Front Bench. Some people would think that I am a glutton for punishment because I seem to spend most of my life in this Chamber discussing various parts of the world. I make my few comments today purely in my capacity as a Member of Parliament, not in my capacity as a Front Bencher dealing with international matters.

I am delighted that we are having a debate on space policy and on the Select Committee report because it has been some seven years since the previous debate on space: an Adjournment debate in 1994 secured by me and answered by my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor). I think that I am correct in saying that he had been a Department of Trade and Industry Minister for some three or four hours when he was summoned to the House to respond to the debate. Needless to say, the record shows that he acquitted himself admirably. I associate myself with the remarks by the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) about the way in which my hon. Friend handled his brief when he was in charge of space matters, among other things.

The Minister has been in his post considerably longer than my hon. Friend had been when he replied to that debate, so we will expect great things from him when he rises to his feet. Not least, I hope that he will tell us that we will not have to rely on the good offices of either Select Committees or Back Benchers to have future debates on space, but that the Government will think about inaugurating an annual debate on space in Government time in the main Chamber of the House of Commons. I hope that he will give that some thought. It would be welcomed by hon. Members who have consistently taken an interest in these matters.

I make a few comments that lead from the excellent work by the Select Committee. I agree with much of what has been said and what appears in the report, so I am able to keep my remarks fairly brief. The institutional arrangements are an area that the Select Committee recommended for review. I read the Government's response to mean that they supported the Select Committee's view.

ESA has grown out of the European Space Research Organisation and included the failed ELDO—the European Launcher Development Organisation. The remit was to help to build a competitive space industry, notably for communication satellites. It was the centre of excellence in European space and was the natural leader in Europe; it was inconceivable at the time that individual countries could afford comprehensive competence in space. When the British National Space Centre was set up in 1985, most of the innovative funding was provided by Government. Expensive projects, such as space station, were politically justified and therefore had to depend on Government funding.

What is the situation today, some 16 years later? The pursuit of space science still depends predominantly on Government finance. The European Space Agency has a proven track record on developing European space science and an enviable record on international co-operation with National Aeronautics and Space Administration in the United States and other countries' space programmes. I would not want to change that. Indeed, it would be fair to congratulate the European Space Agency on having appointed the eminent Professor David Southwood from Imperial college as science director on the retirement of the successful present science director, Professor Roger Bonnet, who has led ESA space science to its present position of international eminence.

[Mrs. Cheryl Gillan]

As to the rest, we have a totally different scenario. Our space companies have prospered, originally on a national basis, but now on a European basis. UK industries operate with their erstwhile French and German competitors in ASTRIUM. Those companies are comparable in size to companies in the United States and have matched their technical and competitive capabilities. I would, however, still like them to grow into greater entrepreneurial and financial risk takers. It is worth mentioning that smaller companies, among others, have grouped themselves into an organisation called ASTOS, the Association of Specialist and Technical Organisations for Space, which does well in representing smaller industries in the sector.

For those companies to grow into greater entrepreneurial and financial risk takers, more space programmes and policies need to be switched to industry, with fewer being the initiative of the European Space Agency, which prefers Government funding and has little experience of market forces. Although I welcome the belated involvement of the European commissions, which have complementary roles to the ESA, we must not let them rule the roost as they have even less experience of market forces than ESA.

I can illustrate my point with one or two examples. The Galileo project is massively expensive with no certain market, largely because the United States is now providing the Global Positioning System free. Incidentally, I have an excellent gadget in my car, a satellite navigation system that I find indispensable. Not only does it take me along routes that I would never discover by studying a map and successfully get me to my destination, but it gets me out of major cities that are unfamiliar to me. It has proved to be an absolute bonus. Many of our car manufacturers are fitting that as standard in cars and it will be a growth market.

I have no doubt, therefore, that there will be market demand for Galileo services, but I recognise why, in the current circumstances, the industry is reluctant to provide upfront funding. That does not mean that the project should be run by an organisation in which the commission takes the chair and ESA provides the design and contracting functions. Surely we must establish an industrial consortium to design, build and exploit the system if it is to have any chance of commercial success.

That could mean Government support through subsidy. We should not be frightened of that. After all, if we think about how Airbus was created and run, who would have thought that Airbus would be equal to Boeing by the end of the previous century? Certainly the companies could not have taken the risk without Government support. That is arguably good use of taxpayers' money.

In looking at the British National Space Centre, the Minister should consider appointing a new director general from industry or from outside in order to give pre-eminence to individuals with market experience. I should like to make it clear that that is not an attack on the present director general, who is a fine official and has made a very good impression since he took over. At the very least, however, that option should be considered by the Minister. He should not allow the position to remain an hereditary one within the civil service. After all, that was not envisaged when BNSC was first set up.

I agree with the Select Committee that we should rigorously review our attitude to future launches. We missed the bus by refusing to join the Ariane programme when our Blue Streak had been 100 per cent. successful, notwithstanding the failure of the ELDO rocket. I still have a vivid picture in my mind of the rusting rocket in the jungle in Kourou in French Guyana—a success story that we never pursued, an opportunity that we missed. We deprived our industries of a lucrative market. What can be more lucrative than building a high-tech component for Ariane that is used only once and destroyed and is then reordered for the next launch? After all, Ariane is remarkably successful and now has more than half of the commercial launcher market.

The future lies in reusable launcher vehicles that can reduce the cost of launches to a 10th; some say more. We have innovative industrial and technical contributions to make, but the long-term cost of developing a successful launcher seems to terrify us. Obviously, that means that we must co-operate with our European colleagues, but we should not refuse to take part at the early stages, as the Government are doing. The marketplace is well established. Launchers will be required and, if the early research points to the probability of a successful reusable launcher, surely money will be made available from the private sector to help to fund the development.

We should not lapse into thinking that that is a sector in which the French have become predominant and that we must leave it to them—quite the reverse. Let our industries and technical people free to persuade others that they have some inspirational ideas. As things stand in the European Space Agency, that can be done only with Government support. I am sad that that support has been refused.

I welcome the debate. We need to examine the institutional arrangements rigorously to put our industries in the driving seat on future developments. I see ESA carrying on in space science more or less as at present, but it should act as the research centre for application programmes. Industries, which must operate in a competitive environment, should be responsible for the direction and specification of the work. Naturally, they will have to make a contribution to the funding of the research and development, but they will have greater confidence if they have control of the direction and specification of the work and the ability to stop it if the research is getting nowhere commercially.

I hope that I have not taken up too much of the Chamber's time, but, as it has taken nearly seven years to secure this debate on space policy, I should just like to pay tribute to the space industry in this country, which has kept hon. Members engaged in debate and informed on developments throughout that time through the good offices of the all-party parliamentary space committee. The United Kingdom Information Storage Consortium and the British Association of Remote Sensing Companies have led the way. The organising officer Frank Richardson has ensured that MPs have been given the opportunity to meet and to discuss space issues with industrialists in a way that provides an excellent example to other industries. I thank him and the companies in the sector for

maintaining the involvement of parliamentarians and hope that the Minister will ensure that space policy is high on his and his Department's agenda in future.

3.7 pm

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): It is an honour to follow, for the second time in seven years, my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan). She was correct in her opening remarks. I was sitting with my new boss at the DTI, my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), being allocated my various exciting responsibilities, when at about 10.30 he looked at his watch and said, "Well that's pretty clear. By the way, you'd better get back to your private secretary, because in 10 minutes' time you're answering a debate in the House on space policy." That was the debate that my hon. Friend had initiated.

There was a denouement that evening. The Prime Minister held a reception at No. 10 for Ministers and I duly turned up. He took one look at me and said, "Oh, Michael Heseltine tells me that you've already performed in the House since your appointment this morning, and that you didn't make any spending pledges. That's a good thing, because Ministers have been sacked for less." I had survived for 24 hours and did not make any spending pledges, although subsequently—I can now speak with the gross irresponsibility of an Opposition Back Bencher—I wished that I had. There would have been satisfaction if I had committed the Government to spending more on the space project and got away with it—*[Interruption.]* This is an unscripted aside.

I must declare that I have at various times acted as an adviser to Surrey Satellite Technology Ltd., close to my constituency—which is the world's foremost designer, launcher and monitor of the products from micro and mini satellites—and to Satellite Observing Systems, which, with SSTL, had put together a project for GANDER—the global altimeter network designed to evaluate risk, to which I may return later. Sadly, that project did not receive British National Space Centre backing, despite being an ideal example of what Britain could do in space. It is vital to develop it if we are to make the world's shipping safer and more effective.

I shall now reflect on some of the interesting points raised by the excellent Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill). One does not have to agree with every word of the report to view it as first class, and a huge contribution to the debate about Britain's role in space. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and the Select Committee on their report.

The main problem is that resources are limited under all Governments. Another is that space is not an issue on which Governments wish to stand or fall, so when it comes to the spending round, Ministers fighting for the space project are unlikely to come out well.

Sometimes enthusiasm among the wider public reaches unreasonable proportions. I know that if posterity notices me at all, it will accuse me of being the Minister who did not take part in the project for the international space centre, which has no British flag flying on it. There is not enough time to record the interesting history of that episode in full, so I offer an abbreviated version.

In short, most other countries did not take part in the international space station project either—and some who did wished they had not. The German Minister cried on my shoulder, saying that Chancellor Kohl had insisted that because the Americans and Russians were going to take part, Germany could not be left out. The French Minister took me out to dinner to ask me to help persuade his Prime Minister that the French should not take part in the space centre project, because France could not afford it. I offered that help, but it was decided that if the Germans were going to participate, so must France. Both the French and German Ministers then took me aside at a conference to explain why the Italians had to participate if the French and Germans were: and money was lent to the Italians to help them with their bid. Our budget was not big enough to contribute to a project that undoubtedly receives public admiration, but is second-rate science.

The Chairman of the Select Committee also spoke about education and enthusiasm. I took part in many sixth form and university conferences on space, and there is no doubt that a Minister speaking to such an audience does not engender breathtaking excitement—particularly when his speech is delivered two minutes after Helen Sharman has finished. In case anyone does not know, Helen Sharman was the first British woman in space—courtesy of the Soviets—and her photograph is enshrined in the Mir space centre library in Moscow. She is certainly larger than life, and bounces around the stage. Sixth formers looking for inspiration about space do not look to Ministers, and I obviously did not bounce very effectively. The young looked up to people who had been out there and done things.

I regret that we have not done more to direct British participation in manned space travel. I greatly admire one of my predecessors, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), but he did not regard it as sensible to carve out part of the budget to contribute to the project. We have lost some of our past enthusiasm for it, but I understood my right hon. and learned Friend's financial constraints.

I wish we had done more on launch capacity. It is impossible to have a proper space policy without a good commercial launch capability. Once it had become less about putting Frenchmen into space and more about launching satellites, the Ariane project was very good indeed. I should like to pass on a reminiscence connected with that project. I had had a small union flag placed on Ariane 5 when it was launched into space one Tuesday. In those days we had Prime Minister's Question Time twice a week, and that Tuesday happened to be one of those days. Unfortunately, Ariane 5 exploded. The Prime Minister had had the normal briefing from departmental Ministers, and had heard some months beforehand my proud mention that we had now got some money in Ariane 5. No. 10 phoned and said, "What's all this about our money exploding in space?"

I had to explain that the good news was that we were in the development programme but not in the Ariane 5 rocket that had gone up—but that the bad news was that piggy-backing on that rocket were some important satellite experiments that had been led by the United Kingdom—by the University of Kent, by both the universities in Leicester and others—and were intended to look at the magnetosphere and the ionosphere. Sadly,

[Mr. Ian Taylor]

of course, those had been lost, although subsequently part of that mission was recreated. Those are the risks for space Ministers if things go wrong.

The United Kingdom space industry is vital and diverse. Logica, in my constituency—its space and defence element is based in Cobham—is a typical and vital player. To the wider public it is better known for its other activities, but is nevertheless a crucial player constantly at the cutting edge of expertise. There are many other companies, some of which I know about, that have contributed to the fine technology required for the engineering perfection necessary to get into space and to survive once there.

We have, of course, been involved in space science projects as well as civilian projects. The Hubble telescope, for example, has a leading British content. All that means that industry needs to know there is a future for space activity and plans for it. Some of the areas with which I had most difficulty in wrestling as a Minister were the public-private partnerships. Those allowed industry to participate in the project and get the full benefit from doing so, but at the same time the Government, or someone else who would get the project going, would be an anchor tenant, so that the ultimate commercial exploitation of it, which would come from the users of the raw material, could be developed.

Many projects have been stillborn, or British industry has not participated sufficiently, as those elements were not properly brought together. I have already mentioned GANDER, a project that could put 16 satellites in space to give a complete guide to wave movements and incipient storms at sea, so that in real time ships' captains can change course or manoeuvre. Losses at sea run into hundreds of millions of pounds, as Lloyd's will confirm, and yet at the moment we have inadequate satellite coverage. That means that the information to ships' captains tends to be theoretical or projected by mathematical models, unless by chance a satellite is over the area at the time.

We could get that project off the ground with a combination including industry and private investors. It is led by Britain, and we could do some exciting work with altimeters; again, Britain could take a lead in that. However, that would require assistance from Government, as an anchor tenant, so that the long-term future of the project could convince industry that it was in their commercial interest to back it, and to get the products out of those satellites into better management of shipping fleets. Some of the big shipping owners, such as the oil companies, certainly have expressed serious interest in the project.

If we are really to make sure that Britain makes progress in the commercial application of space technology, we need public-private sector partnerships that work better. The British National Space Centre was slightly unfairly criticised, although I understand the motivation of the Select Committee in doing so.

The paradox of government is that interdepartmental co-operation is obviously necessary, but rarely works. I remember going to the Department of Transport, as it was in those days, trying to persuade it to get in on the ground station of what has become the Galileo project. To some extent we were successful. I remember going to the MOD and being much less successful in getting the people there to understand that the same project had important interests for their Department.

In both those cases, BNSC was a staunch ally for me as the Minister with responsibilities for space at the DTI, but we could not overcome the turf wars that went on inside the Department. One of the problems of anyone transferred from, say, the MOD to BNSC is that he retains his friends, but little influence, in the MOD. In turf wars, Government Departments look after themselves.

The BNSC is an excellent organisation, but it has the problems within it that interdepartmental co-operation leads to. It has done a very fine job. I was the Minister who, in 1996, initiated and put through the first overall strategy review of what we should be doing in space. That was largely piloted through by the BNSC, and as a result we managed to re-focus some of its efforts, moving, perhaps, from a project that was becoming mature in certain areas to other projects. I do not have time to discuss, as the report does, the relative maturity of telecommunications, earth observation and so on.

I hope that the Minister will bear in mind the fact that space is one of those subjects about which, as the Minister responsible, one has to be aggressive. There is no point in being nice. One has to kick the living daylights out of your colleagues at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Ministry of Defence so that they give in, because they do not want one back. That does not always work, but I would much rather fail and leave bruises than not have tried. The Minister may care to take that on board.

I do not want to take up any more of hon. Members' time, but I am a great enthusiast for space. I think that what Colin Pillinger has done with the Beagle 2 Mars lander, which I mentioned earlier, is quite remarkable. Our universities have phenomenal scientific ability and expertise. I have mentioned some of them today. The universities in London are also active. We have, for example, the laboratories of University College.

The Beagle 2 Mars lander will depend on parachutes to get down to the surface, which is the business of Martin Baker, in the private sector, working closely with the Open University and Colin Pillinger. The probe, which will go into the surface of Mars to analyse it in situ and avoid the corruption of the material that bringing it back to earth would involve, will give us for the first time some idea of whether there has been bio-organic life on Mars, particularly if there are any methane traces. Those are incredible opportunities, and British science is in the forefront of them.

In welcoming this debate, and the work of the Select Committee, I add my voice to those in this Chamber who have said that space has a terrific role in education, in enlightenment, in broadening our horizons, and in commercial reality, because of the value of the data that we achieve from earth observation and telecommunications. All those factors should be better recognised by Government than I was able to achieve in my time in office—and I am sure that toady the Minister will astonish us by talking about the budget increases that he intends to announce shortly.

3.23 pm

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): I grew up with space in my head.

Mr. O'Neill: It is still there.

Mr. Öpik: Somebody had to say that.

While my friends were watching "Star Trek", I was watching the stars, because my grandfather was a professional astronomer for 70 years. That was why I was inspired to realise how marvellous, unimaginable, inspiring and breathtaking the opportunities for the human race really are when we start looking up—and even how, to some extent, it helps to put the problems that we create for ourselves here on earth into perspective. If we can survive without destroying ourselves—or, indeed, allowing ourselves to be destroyed—I am sure that we will move on to colonise the solar system. Mars will probably be the next significant staging post after the moon. Who knows, we might even colonise other solar systems in the suburbs of our galaxy.

The UK can take part in that exciting voyage. It will be a voyage not only of scientific discovery but of potentially enormous commercial benefit to the country. My biggest concern is that the UK has been faced at least three times in the 20th century with comparable commercial opportunities in glamorous and exciting areas of technological advance, but did not take them. First, the TSR2 fighter project was an example of a technology in which Britain could have led the world. Tragically, for political reasons, we chose not to pursue the project and cancelled it. The exceptional Lightning fighter survived only as a result of the rather stealthy and quick reactions of its manufacturers in taking it out of the political debate.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) mentioned the second opportunity—the Blue Streak project, which was technically superb for its time. Again, for political reasons—I would say primarily for financial reasons—we abandoned that initiative. If it had been allowed to evolve, it would have given us a commanding lead in the European Space Agency.

Thirdly, and perhaps most tragically in the past 20 years, came the demise of HOTOL. Again, Government did not support a superb and inspiring initiative by British business people and scientists. We must not allow that to happen again. This interesting and exciting document on UK space policy should enable us to draw a line in the sand and say that we will not walk away from the opportunities that the world of space presents to us and to British industry.

The hon. Member for Ochil said that people who were interested in space risked being accused of being "anoraks". I must point out that the technology in many modern anoraks comes directly from the Apollo space programme. Even those who wear anoraks without meaning to support the space project are benefiting from the work done in the 1960s, primarily by the United States.

This morning I spoke to Patrick Moore, who cited a couple of important examples of how space investment has led directly to benefits in everyday life. He saw, I think in Bristol, a device to scan babies for medical reasons that was derived directly from space technology. We all know the example of the teflon frying pan. The non-stick frying pan exists because men walked on the moon in the 1960s—but I stress that they were not cooking with one on the moon; things were not quite that primitive.

Many other examples in technology and computer development point to the benefits of the enormous, virtually pure research project that the United States undertook. Admittedly it was undertaken for national prestige, but it led to enormous commercial benefits. It takes vision to achieve those goals, and political courage to make the investments that sometimes pay back only in the long term. If we consider how paybacks have come about in the past, we see that such investment does pay back.

In that context, I shall comment on the Government's observations on the report. I want to highlight the ease with which we can become so cautious that, although with good intent, we tie the hands of people in the British space industry and of scientists who are interested in space. I do not think that the Government intend to shackle the opportunities that we have been discussing.

On the European Space Agency, the Government response says that it is important

"to have a very clear statement of the objectives of any programme proposal and to seek the best value for money in achieving those objectives."

That is fair enough. But there is a danger that the words "value for money" will end up being used to justify non-investment in admittedly expensive but valuable programmes. Yes, we should go for value for money but we must recognise, as with the explosion of the Ariane rocket, that sometimes there is a big risk in space research. The Government must accept that investment in such research will be more risky and obscure than the standard investment in health, education and so on.

On higher education and space, the Government are right to respond by agreeing with the report that space is "a beacon subject". That is one area in which the Government can safely invest; a small investment earmarked for space research leads to an enormous return in inspiring young people and attracting them to science. The Apollo programme, for example, attracted some of the best brains and the most able individuals, who wanted to be part of an exciting national project. I am sure that the same can be done in the United Kingdom. People regard the SETI—search for extra-terrestrial intelligence—programme as a bit of a laugh, but for very little money it keeps people talking about space, although I do not expect the Minister to commit the Government to major investment to search for extra-terrestrial intelligence.

The Government are equivocal on the Galileo project, and I understand why, but scientists and British experts are firmly behind it. I take issue with the Government's response that the case is still to be proved, because if we delay our support for too long we may miss the boat and thus the attendant benefits.

The subject of launchers was raised; the Government's response, understandably, focuses mainly on the cost. Their response to the report was:

"For the UK to pay its GDP share of this, the DTI element of the civil space programme would need to double."

[Mr. Öpik]

Yes, but even if it were doubled, it would still be a relatively small amount of money in absolute terms. If we are to be involved in cutting-edge technologies, we should seriously consider a step-change in the amount of investment. I assume that it would be a lucrative industrial opportunity for those far-sighted British manufacturers and inventors who want to be involved in the programme. For example, David Ashford, who runs Bristol Space Planes, has done a great deal of work developing prototypes for single stage-to-orbit aircraft, or aerospace craft, or whatever one calls them. For a small amount of funding, a great deal more could be done. There are many other examples of that kind of opportunity.

The Government response states:

"The BNSC is a flexible and dynamic partnership."

The BNSC has been criticised, but in my dealings with it, it has always been constructive. It employs visionary individuals who are more than able to steer the Government in a strategically consistent and positive way. However, the BNSC is sometimes treated with caution by the scientific community, which is suspicious that there may be other agendas that could cause friction or act as a barrier to investment in pure scientific research. The work on near-earth objects has done much to dispel that, and I should be interested in the Minister's perception of how BNSC can further improve its links with the astronomical and space communities.

In response to the report's claim that

"UK space strategy must be sufficiently flexible to be able to react to potential future applications of space technology",

the Government said:

"The UK Space Strategy was established following extensive consultation with the space community."

That is absolutely vital, as that partnership can ensure that the Government do not repeat what happened in respect of HOTOL, which was a missed opportunity. The report also criticised the space strategy document for being limited in ambition, and I would agree with that concern.

My final comment on the report is that I would like reassurance from the Minister that we will not slip back into the small thinking that could prevent David Ashford and other such individuals from co-operating in line with the kind of strategy that the Government document has already laid out.

No space debate would be complete without my mentioning the near-earth object task force. As hon. Members know, I have spent considerable time in the past two years getting the Government to take the threat of cosmic disaster seriously. I remind hon. Members that the likelihood of an impact—sufficiently big to wipe out most of the human race, and seven tenths of life on earth—is 100 per cent. It will happen, we just do not know when. It could be before I finish speaking—in which case I apologise for the fact that my words will be the last thing that hon. Members hear—or it could be in 50 million years. My guess is that it will be somewhere between those two—*[Laughter.]* I suppose that that is not a very daring speculation to make; I apologise for sounding so vague.

On a more serious note, there is some evidence to suggest that the last fatalities from cosmic impact in the UK took place in 1783, from when there is a reasonable amount of evidence that 16 people were killed by an unusual object from space. Dinosaurs were wiped out 65 million years ago, and we know that species will be wiped out again in the near future—unless we take action to prevent it. Jupiter was hit in 1994 by fragments of comet Shoemaker-Levy 9, and there are many other examples, which show us the certainty of the danger. One thing that worries me about the UK space policy document is that this aspect was not mentioned.

There is an industrial opportunity, as well as a scientific one. Telescope Technologies Ltd—TTL—which manufactures some of the finest telescopes in the world, and is based in Liverpool, has constructed a robotics telescope which would be perfect for the purpose of tracking what is coming in the earth's direction. Diverting the object would take international co-operation, and I have no doubt that the UK could benefit commercially, as well as scientifically, by making a commitment in principle to work on that basis now.

I raised this matter at Prime Minister's questions, and the Prime Minister requested that I be patient and wait, because there might soon be some response to the near-earth object task force report, which was published in September 2000. Can the Minister give me any more information than that? Can he give me an assurance that the Government will respond fully to the 14 recommendations of the near-earth object task force?

When I started on this project many people laughed, but I am glad to say that—aided in part by Hollywood—people now understand the danger, and actually recognise that this is not cloud cuckoo land, or empty speculation. It is scientific fact, and there is clear and present danger that the human race needs to face up to sooner or later. The UK has the expertise to play a profoundly important role, for example with Mark Bailey at the Armagh Observatory, and with Jay Tate and the many others who helped with the campaign at Spaceguard UK.

Finally, I conclude with a disappointment. I was saddened that Helen Sharman had to be taken into space by the Russians. It would have been great if we in Europe had progressed enough to be taking ourselves into space. I have much respect for the Russian space programme, but it served to highlight the fact that western Europe's manned space programme has fallen quite far behind compared with other partners.

I hope that the Minister will respond to some of the points already made about a manned mission to Mars. It would be cruel to suggest that that would present an ideal opportunity to send the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland there; none the less, it would be good to be involved in a manned space programme.

I remind hon. Members that when JFK committed the USA to sending a man to the moon, the USA had had 15 minutes of manned space flight experience. We are a lot further along the track to a manned mission to Mars, and I have no doubt that British involvement in such a project would inspire the next generation of scientists to recognise the opportunities in space technology, and the next generation of British business people to turn those opportunities into tremendous profit for UK industry.

3.40 pm

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): There is no chance that a near-space object will protect the Committee from my contribution.

I congratulate the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) on the report. That Committee is as near as one can get to the Public Accounts Committee, on which I sat for almost 10 years and which, as all hon. Members know, does not look at policy. It is a sign of the maturity of Select Committees that they are starting to look at policy issues without dividing into partisan groups and to make effective and constructive contributions on ways in which we can make legislation more effective in future. The Select Committee on Trade and Industry is in the forefront of that change. I value its reports, which are well worth reading.

We have all expressed our credentials—some a little more esoteric than others—and our interest in space technology. I have followed the House's space agenda for some 20 years, was fortunate enough to visit the Ariane satellite under construction, saw the space satellite farm ASTRA in Luxembourg, visited satellite construction companies in the UK and also went to Peru to see an Ariane launch—I obviously put a hex on it as it fell into the sea, which did not best please the French. I read the report with a growing feeling of nostalgia because the old issues keep coming back. The EU-ESA relationship continues, in a state of dynamic tension. The old dalliance with launches was floated delicately to us. Several of my hon. Friends and the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) touched on that issue, to which we may return at the end of our debate.

The report also mentions earth observation. There is a worry about the lack of enthusiasm about taking up the data that are being produced and paying for it in the process. There is also the perennial problem of project management. The Government have made a series of sensible decisions over the years. They have not always got it all right, but they batted hard for satellite communications right at the start and that, in addition to the funding that they gave, was a valuable fillip for British industry. In particular, our IT industry did well from that boost.

With one small exception, the Government were also right about launches. I do not want to disagree too much with my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor), but putting the pimple called Hermes on top of an Ariane rocket and shoving two unfortunate people into space with a thermos flask of tea because that is all that could fit into the capsule—with nothing for them to do but come back when they reached their destination—was not a satisfactory use of taxpayers' money. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) rightly expressed concern about the financial viability of that operation. However, we can all agree to disagree.

The Government have a serious problem in that the Conservatives are apprehensive about politicians being able to back winners. I can now move into one of my manufacturing speeches and talk about the National Enterprise Board, which did not have a single success in picking winners. It will be seen how all this fits into a seamless whole when I advance my next point.

Space is at the cutting edge of technology; it is right at the forefront and if manufacturers get it wrong, they will go out of business. If manufacturers lose a battle, they can actually lose a war. However, countries never go out of business, although they may have hard times and may have to cut back. Therefore, when a decision is made to provide backing to this cutting edge of technology,

"to boldly go where no man has gone before",

it is incumbent on the Government to take a larger part of the risk, gradually seeing the risk diminish as commercial involvement comes in behind. Major projects that will push forward the general advancement of mankind are about the only area of government where that is applicable.

If I were to go through every single point in this excellent report, our debate would last long past the allotted three hours. I shall take up three or four points that have already been mentioned by previous speakers; indeed, if I have them noted and they have already been raised, they are probably the points that matter the most. I can only endorse what my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) said. This debate is the first one on this subject in this Parliament, when the space industry is an issue that should be given the chance to canter round the course more regularly than once every six or seven years. I hope that that message is understood by the various members of the Government and the government machinery and that we have a debate on the space industry more often.

I am delighted that the Government have managed to retain the organisational arrangements that were put in place by my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton when he was Minister for Science and Technology. I say that because organisations need stability—it is not necessary to see constant change to the point that an arrangement never settles down long enough for us to discover whether it works.

I also echo the point about the uncertainty of the funding arrangements over the past three years—they have been somewhat erratic. After the election, when the positions are reversed, the Conservatives will be bringing a greater stability to this funding so that people can plan ahead with greater certainty. I hope that the Minister will respond to that point about future funding, which was also made by some of my colleagues and tell us how the Government see the taxpayers' money being spent.

Mr. O'Neill: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that we should continue with level funding, that is to say probably 2.5 per cent. per year being sustained on the basis of the inflation target? Or is he saying that we should have stability and have an increase? Or is he saying we should have stability in the sense that we know how little we are going to get every year and it might well reduce?

There are three options, and the hon. Gentleman may wish to consult his colleagues before saying which of the three he prefers, and before making yet another spending pledge from a tax-cutting party. Those present would benefit from sharing the hon. Gentleman's thoughts.

Mr. Page: I am disappointed that, after all the nice things that I have said about him, the hon. Gentleman

[Mr. Page]

has asked me nasty questions about funding. I used the word "stability" and stability would mean that we would maintain spending at the level that it is, not allow it to keep dropping down as apparently has happened over the past three to four years and, in that period of time, we would obviously carry out a review. The hon. Gentleman will know about reviews, as he comes from the party where they are as thick on the ground as snow in the Antarctic.

I am looking for stability and some ability to plan ahead knowing that there will be funding, rather than people working up enthusiasms and having the disappointment of seeing all plans cancelled. I do not think that there will be any difficulty or harm in carrying out a review of the benefit of the taxpayers' investment in space and in it having a slightly wider remit. I say this because the soon-to-be-published DTI audit will consider only the consequences of reduced or stable expenditure.

The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire had to succumb to the temptation of mentioning the teflon frying pan; no debate on space would be complete without mentioning it, and I should like to take the matter a little further. I hope that, when the review takes place, it will be on a slightly wider basis. We have not looked right throughout the piece—for example, we have not looked to see how many meals have been saved because it is a teflon frying pan or how much food has not had to be thrown away because it was in a teflon frying pan. I do not want any hon. Member here to take me up on this too closely, as it could become a little difficult for me, but having been given the lead-in on teflon frying pans, I felt that I should just make the point that any review should be wider than the immediate consequences and benefits that appear to be flowing from whatever investment has taken place.

The DTI is conducting an assessment of civil spending in space programmes over the past decade. It is important for the House and the taxpayer to know the rate of return on that particular investment. I agree with the UK Industrial Space Committee that the value of return on the taxpayers' investment is far greater than the investment itself, because it sustains high-tech industries, that there is a spin-off of valuable property and environmental businesses, and that it is time that we were given a glimpse of what we as a nation are getting from this investment in space.

I mentioned the European Space Agency earlier and the EU, and the sense of nostalgia that things have not really got better, although there is a slight improvement. It is rather like one of these stately gavottes where there is a move, a counter-move and then another move, gradually getting closer together until, eventually, the two will start to realise that they need each other and it is just a matter of negotiating a secure and stable relationship. The implementation of the recently agreed joint European space strategy by the EU and the ESA is fundamental to achieving the full social, economic and technological benefits that flow from the space industry. Working together, we have something that will be for the benefit of everyone in the EU, and the quicker that they get together on that, the quicker the benefits will flow.

This joint strategy on applications must be seen in the context of overall benefit and the importance of space science. I just float a thought in all of this. Should we consider reforming the ESA, so that it can accept private funding as part of the natural financing of projects? It would have to be across the board and every country would have to be a player, but the introduction of private funding on a properly negotiated basis would be of benefit to everyone.

I am not going to repeat everything that is said in this report, or everything that is said generally, about earth observation, but there has been an extraordinarily slow take-up of the commercial services for such data. It has been disappointing, and the public market has clearly failed. Let us hope that the EU global system for environment and security programme will be a catalyst for driving that forward once more in improving and developing the public-user community. Although I am disappointed by progress so far, I know that earth observation is important, will still be important and will still need funding, and our earlier investment has put our industries in a good position to compete for work in the global monitoring for environment scrutiny programme.

The general difficulty is the difference between the US and ourselves. In the US, earth observation data are made available via the use of public funds, while in the UK, we think that it is better to create a commercial market for them, so people with a profit motive will try to sell them on.

That leads me to another of my concerns, on which the report touches slightly. Within the space industry, we do not pay enough attention to marketing and correctly calculating what might be the take-up of any service or of any data that might be provided. I put that failing down to our own centre, to ESA, the EU and, in many ways, to the industries themselves. Our industries make the case to the wider public and a proper marketing strategy, correctly worked out, would give greater guidance and greater confidence in progressing particular projects. I am concerned that Galileo may suffer from this lack of focus.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham has outlined some of the risks. In this report, the Committee makes a fundamental criticism that

"there is an apparent lack of leadership of the UK's participation in Galileo"

and says that there is a need for the BNSC

"to ensure joined-up thinking across Government, particularly between DTI and DETR, on the Galileo programme."

The question of whether that fundamental problem has been resolved will be asked repeatedly. I hope that the Minister can tell us that joined-up government, which we were told was always going to be the hallmark of this Administration, will, even after this length of time, suddenly emerge singing from that proverbial common hymn sheet.

In turn, have the Government, along with their EU and ESA partners, been able to reach agreement with the Americans over the future of the global positioning system, because there are implications over the potential size of revenues that the Galileo programme has been estimated to attract? If those figures do not stand up, one can see the difficulties and the expenses that will arise.

The Committee was fortunate enough to attract Antonio Robota, the Director General of ESA, to speak to it on 30 January 2001. Unfortunately, I did not find him totally convincing over the timing and progress of the Galileo programme and this is of obvious and considerable concern when we have the decision of the US Government to open their GPS. Again, I hope that the Minister will say a few words on that.

It makes it that much more important, given the UK's strengths and private-public partnerships, that the UK Government should take the lead in the proposed Galileo navigation programme to ensure that it is established on a sound, long-term basis. Taking the leading role in the ESA programme will be advantageous when ESA procures the early stages of Galileo, and failure to do so might mean UK industry being locked out from the downstream phases of the programme.

We have heard emotional pleas around the Chamber about launchers. Everyone likes to see a big firework: we light the fuse, stand back and whoosh, off it goes. It is all very sexy, but we have more launchers than we can shake a stick at. The old eastern bloc countries and China have launchers, as does the Ariane project; the Americans have theirs and now there are sea-launchers from oil rigs and other platforms. Unless a convincing argument is made, we should not go anywhere near that. It might pay us, however, to examine the horizontal take-off and landing project, now SKYLON, to find out whether a re-usable launcher and sub-space transport—travelling to Sydney in just a few hours—is feasible. Lord Sainsbury is worried about us getting sucked into that programme, but that need not be so. An evaluation could be made and a proof of concept taken. A sum of between £500,000 and £1 million would be enough for the evaluation, after which no commitment or obligation on either side would apply.

I agree with the call for a more regular debate on the subject of the space industry. I also endorse the call to evaluate what we can get out of space research—we should try to get out more in the future.

4.1 pm

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) on securing the debate on the Select Committee's excellent report, which has been rightly praised from all quarters. The report's first recommendation was for a parliamentary debate on the subject. The Government welcomed that suggestion—hence today's debate.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) can rightly take credit for instigating the previous debate on the topic, all those years ago when we were all so much younger. She mentioned that she would like an annual debate. That was not the Select Committee's recommendation, but it is a splendid idea. There are such things as Opposition days and I am sure that Conservative Members will for many years have many opportunities to use those days for debates on the subject.

I want to make the Government's intentions clear on the issues surrounding this important topic. Almost all the main points are in the report. I shall also respond to some of the questions from the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) that were outside the scope of the report, but germane to the issue. I am very much a space cadet and far too passive to answer the questions raised by the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor).

My noble Friend Lord Sainsbury's mix of aggression and charm has driven the agenda forward successfully over the past few years.

4.3 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.29 pm

On resuming—

Because of the quality of the contributions and the depth of experience on both sides of the Chamber on the issue, it is a great shame that Lord Sainsbury cannot respond to those points himself. It would take a major constitutional upheaval to allow that. He will be reading *Hansard* carefully, not least to ensure that I have made the right commitments and statements in my speech, so I had better stick fairly closely to my brief.

The Committee's inquiry has drawn attention to the valuable part which space, and more particularly satellite technologies, play today in the lives of people from all walks of life. The distribution of television channels is probably the most obvious application, but satellites are not just important to business and leisure; they are crucial to the well-being of society. It was in 1996 that the amount of money going into that industry from the private sector overtook Government investment. That was an important turning point.

I should like to illustrate the effects that new technologies are having with examples from the fishing industry, which is very important to my constituency in Hull. Before the fleet even leaves port, crews consult weather forecasts that have been compiled using satellite imagery and satellite wave measurements. Those will be updated and delivered by satellite while the ships are at sea. Earth observation satellites are used to guide the fleet to the most favourable catch locations, based on sea temperatures and, in future, actual radar sighting of the fish stocks. Other satellites may become the eyes of authorities policing the same fleets.

Fishermen now routinely enjoy the benefits of satellite navigation, satellite communications and, in times of distress, the use of satellites to relay calls to search and rescue services. Many of those services are provided commercially. Some may wonder whether it is important that any of them should be based around British technologies and supplied by British companies. The Government believe that it is and the Committee endorsed that view.

In August 1999, we set out in "UK Space Strategy 1999-2002: New Frontiers" the goals that we would pursue for the space sector. Briefly, those were to pursue scientific excellence in our space research and to deliver success in sectors with greatest commercial promise. Those objectives were fully in tune with the Government's broader aims of opening up new commercial opportunities in the knowledge-driven economy; increasing the quality of life through the application of new technologies and protection of the environment; and pursuing knowledge and enhancing

[Mr. Alan Johnson]

education through building on the strengths of the science and engineering base. In short, whereas formerly the policy may have been the pursuit of national glory, two criteria now drive policy: commercial success and scientific excellence.

Space is important because the annual global market for communication and navigation services is expected to catapult from $20 billion to $150 billion by the end of the decade. The UK needs to be a significant player in that market. It must run right through: from the development of satellites, ground hardware and software to the operation of satellites and their exploitation for service delivery. Those are knowledge-based businesses with high value-added aspects, particularly as one moves down the supply chain.

The UK has achieved some notable successes in the sector. The European space company ASTRIUM has selected Stevenage as the headquarters for its communications satellite manufacturing business. ASTRIUM secured orders for six satellites last year: that was more than 20 per cent. of the accessible commercial world market. All together, European satellite producers outperformed the United States suppliers in the market last year. Overall, the turnover of the UK space industry is considerably less reliant on Government expenditure than those in other European countries. That is the result of a bipartisan policy, which has avoided sinking vast sums of money into projects of national prestige.

Mr. Ian Taylor: I know that the Minister is keeping up to speed with developments in the sector, leaving Lord Sainsbury to lead it. Can he at least understand the frustration that the UK industry feels when contracts are let by the Ministry of Defence to American companies, which themselves have been driven forward by United States Department of Defense and NASA contracts? The technological breakthroughs that we would otherwise have in this country thereby go to American companies. That is a serious problem in looking after British and European industry.

Mr. Johnson: I take the point, but we have had tremendous success in that sector. We should continue to work with business to find opportunities and to ensure that we can win such contracts.

Hon. Members have made points about expenditure and the restrictions placed on British companies, which I shall try to answer in more detail at the end. In general, our approach is well respected throughout Europe. The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham secured the previous Adjournment debate on the subject in 1994—I know that she will remember her words well—and talked about our taking a lead in Europe. She will accept that great advances have been made. We have had a bipartisan policy and have avoided sinking vast sums into projects of national prestige. The British space industry is lean and competitive. It is important that Government policies keep it that way.

The UK is becoming a magnet for satellite operating companies. The international satellite operator for maritime services—INMARSAT—has been located in the UK since the early 1980s. It is being joined by several internationally mobile operators, notably the new commercial spin-offs from INMARSAT and INTELSAT. Even EuropeStar, which is a joint venture between French and United States space companies, has chosen London for its marketing operation. Clearly, the UK is a place where those companies want to do business.

We need to be able to influence the development of satellite systems at European level. They have strategic significance. The Trade and Industry Committee focused on one in particular—the Galileo global satellite navigation system. As well as exploiting the commercial opportunities that that system will present, we want to ensure that there is maximum value for European taxpayers' money. The case has not yet been made. There is further work to be done in that respect.

That goal will be achieved by involving the private sector in the programme at the earliest opportunity, but not merely as a contractor. The hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) touched on that point. The UK has pioneered the private sector's involvement in investment in space technology. As the Committee noted, that has not been without challenges. However, major infrastructure projects such as Galileo should go ahead only on the basis of a developing public-private partnership. Bringing in private sector disciplines and sharing risks flexibly will ensure a market-orientated programme. We do not live in a command economy. Early private sector involvement should ensure demand-led services.

I do not want to give the impression that space is only about big projects and big companies. The UK has a core of small and medium companies that display great innovation in developing sub-systems and components for spacecraft. Many are also active in the delivery of services and content by satellite.

We have one of the most competitive manufacturers of small satellites of less than 500 kg. Surrey Satellites Technology Ltd., which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Esher and Walton, is a world leader and supplies spacecraft to the United States and French militaries and to many developing countries. It has recently launched groundbreaking nanotechnology satellites. It is a small firm, integrated into the University of Surrey, and is a prime example of what can be achieved when academic and business principles are brought together in science and engineering.

That brings me back to the way in which the UK pursues world-class science through the space programme. We do that by looking up, through astronomy and interplanetary missions, and by looking down, through environmental monitoring of the earth and its atmosphere.

Mr. O'Neill: I raised the question of funding. I recognise that the partnership principle is, by and large, desirable, but there are occasions when it appears that the insistence that the ratio be 50:50 and that one size should fit all is unduly rigid. If the Minister cannot give me an answer, perhaps he could write to me on the point. There could be circumstances in which it may be more convenient for all concerned to make the ratio 70:30 or 60:40 in the early stages of a project, when the

Government's participation may be critical in pulling in private sector partners that have been a little uncertain, or cannot afford to make the commitment.

Mr. Johnson: That is a well made point. It will be considered and perhaps I will write separately to my hon. Friend. I will come to the whole area of finance and whether we spend enough in a separate part of my contribution.

We have a strong scientific community. It develops outstanding missions and commands the respect of its international peers. I can illustrate that with an example. The American spacecraft Cassini is on its way to Titan, one of Saturn's moons. It is a shame that the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire is representing the Opposition in the debate. I thought that the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) might be here. I gather that he understands the issue so well that he has written a book on Saturn. Titan carries the European Space Agency lander Huygens on a seven-year journey. Between them, those spacecraft carry a total of 18 experiments. That is related to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil made about the excitement of such endeavours. There are more of them, which I will come to later.

British scientists are the principal investigators for the surface science package on the lander, but such is the strength in depth of the science community that it is also involved in a further seven experiments. A total of 11 different research groups are involved from throughout the country.

It is perhaps inevitable that the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council is a victim of its own success in fostering that community. Several Committee recommendations were critical of the research council's inability to fund all the attractive space science projects at the time that they were presented to it. The Committee was particularly concerned that another exciting development, the Beagle 2 Mars lander, should be fully funded.

I am delighted to confirm that the project is firmly on course and fully financed. Since the Committee's report, the Government have negotiated additional support from the European Space Agency for the project. Lord Sainsbury told me last night that Blur, as opposed to Blair, has recorded a track to be taken in Beagle 2 to Mars. Damien Hirst has designed something. It is an exciting project, of which we should all be proud.

It must be for PPARC to judge competing priorities for finite funds. Most of those involve long-term commitments. The Cassini-Huygens mission is an extreme example of that. There is, inevitably, only limited flexibility in the research council's budget from year to year to accommodate even relatively small proposals for additional funding. Nevertheless, the research council and the research group on Beagle 2 have been innovative in their approach. That has allowed that exciting mission to go ahead. I am sure that, when Beagle 2 lands on Mars at around Christmas 2003, it will stimulate great excitement among students and school children throughout the UK, as well as delivering its demanding scientific objectives of establishing whether conditions have ever existed on Mars for life as we understand it.

That brings me to the Committee's recommendation that the next space strategy must take account of higher education needs and the supply of graduates to the industry. The Government recognise that space-related courses in science and engineering have the potential to attract young people. We agree that we should find ways of maximising the beacon effect that such courses can have. In that way, we will encourage more people into science and technology careers, both generally and in the space sector.

I remind hon. Members that the Government embarked on a major reinvestment in the science base. We have listened carefully to the consistent message from researchers that constantly declining budgets were beginning to damage the physical and intellectual capital of the nation. As a result, in 1998, we established the joint infrastructure fund, a groundbreaking £750 million public-private partnership with the Wellcome Trust to fund first-class research infrastructure projects. The fourth round of awards was announced in December providing £125 million of new investment. With the Wellcome Trust, we are investing £1 billion over three years in the science research investment fund, ensuring world-class facilities for world-class science, keeping Britain at the forefront of scientific advances.

We have announced a major package of Government investment in science that includes escalating increases to the science budget amounting to £725 million over the next three years. That represents an average year-on-year growth in real terms of 7 per cent. That will significantly improve our position in the science world and help our industry to compete internationally and to push back the boundaries of technology. We are proud of the long-term commitment to science and engineering that that represents.

Such was the task facing this Administration that it has been essential to prioritise even within those substantial sums. It has not proved possible to increase the £45 million or so that the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council invests in space research. The research council has, however, benefited from the new funding for ground-based astronomy and the new synchrotron.

As I said earlier, the scientific uses of satellites are no longer confined to looking outwards from our planet. Environmental science has benefited greatly from the ability of satellites to provide global information on the earth, its oceans and atmosphere. UK scientists have been the most successful in Europe in obtaining observing time on the European Space Agency satellites ERS 1 and ERS 2. That is a result of their high-quality research proposals.

In July this year, ENVISAT, the agency's environment satellite, will be launched. That is a highly complex satellite with some 10 different instruments, including the advanced along-track scanning radiometer. That is being funded by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions in order to provide a continuous long-term series of sea-surface temperatures. That will shed much-needed light on the issue of global warming.

The agency now has the support of its member states for a continuous programme of environmental research to follow on from those one-off missions. The UK has been highly influential in determining new ways of working in that programme. There will be considerable flexibility between missions of different costs and sizes.

[Mr. Johnson]

The researchers will work much more closely with the industrial teams developing the satellite, so that better cost-benefit trade-offs are made. We anticipate gains in both the effectiveness and efficiency of the mission.

The first mission to be selected under those new arrangements was a study of the ice sheets, another important element in understanding global warming. That was chosen in competition and the scientific proposals were led by a team from University College London. That is a further example of the excellence of British science in space.

I shall pick up some of the issues that have been raised in the debate. I have thought further about what my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil said about 50:50 funding, which is an important point. In addition to the letter, I can say to him now, as a result of very swift deliberation on my part, that in developing public-private partnerships—Galileo, for example—we will approach the issues flexibly. It is important to introduce private sector disciplines from the start, although exactly how to do this will vary between each project.

My hon. Friend also talked about military uses. I think that he described that as "throwing a grenade" into the debate. He will know that ESA is a civil space agency, funded for civil space purposes. However, civil defence synergy, especially in telecommunications and navigation, plus some other military links, should be considered. Obviously it would need to be considered in co-operation with other member states.

My hon. Friend, like other contributors to the debate, also mentioned launchers. On that subject I agree with the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire, as I do on many issues in this debate. There really seems to be a consensus on how to proceed. The question of launchers was fully discussed by the space community before the conclusions on the space strategy were reached in 1998, after extensive consultation. The problem is that those in the space community themselves were not convinced of the argument on launchers. It is important that those who wish to take the UK back into the launcher market recognise that they failed to persuade the space community when we had a very comprehensive debate on the issue. They failed to persuade the Government to reverse the decision of a decade earlier, and I do not think that that was the fault of the British National Space Centre; I simply think that the facts do not support the case.

Mr. Öpik: It is important to say that by the same token, the technology that has been available to the UK has at times been exceptional, and there are many of us who still feel that HOTOL was an enormous opportunity that was missed by the United Kingdom industry and Government.

Mr. Johnson: The hon. Gentleman makes that point for the record. We believe that the case has not been made. Several contributors have asked about funding, and whether we should spend more on space. As the hon. Member for Esher and Walton reminded the House, the UK chose not to be involved in the development of the international space station. Several Members have also pointed out that we have not invested significantly in the Ariane 5 programme. Between them, those programmes account for a large slice of European space expenditure. For other programmes—scientific and commercial satellites and so on—the UK budget is comparable with those of our international partners.

When the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire was speaking in response to a mischievous intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil—who has a degree in mischievous interventions—on spending pledges, he said that the Opposition would maintain current expenditure, and would not make the cuts that had been made previously. If one says that one will maintain current expenditure, one is accepting that expenditure has been brought to the right level. There has been a reduction, but one based on ensuring that we are getting value for money for the British taxpayer. For the future, we intend to keep to the present budget. In terms of this Government's record, that has been money well spent; the BNSC has given us value for money.

Mrs. Gillan: This is an important part of the Minister's speech. He is in effect saying that he rejects the recommendation of the Select Committee, which said:

"There will need to be an increase in the UK Government's expenditure on civil space over the next planning period."

I presume that what he says today also supersedes the Government's response, because I appreciate that that was produced last year, before the figures were available. I also presume that he is basing what he says on a new set of figures, which I would very much like to have set out, both for my benefit and for that of other hon. Members. Even in the evidence, John Haynes, who is the chairman of UKISC, said that there had been a decrease in funding in real terms. I need to reassure myself and the rest of the space industry that there will not be more decreases in funding, and the situation needs to be spelt out.

Mr. Johnson: We will stick to the response to the Select Committee, and we will review the issue. The hon. Lady has to recognise, for reasons mentioned by the hon. Member for Esher and Walton, who has some experience of these issues, that my noble Friend Lord Sainsbury fights hard to maintain the budget, and we will be looking to maintain it. As we said in our response to the report, there is a case for examining all the issues very carefully. In advance of that review, we believe, as has been reaffirmed by the Opposition spokesman, that the expenditure is about right at this moment, but we will take into account the important points that were made by the Select Committee.

Mr. Page: The Minister is giving a mixed message. One moment we are going to maintain the budget and the next moment we are going to fight hard to maintain it. Do those two statements have the same meaning? Is the Minister needlessly creating doubt?

Mr. Johnson: I am merely explaining what happens in every spending review. It is a fact of life, for reasons that have been set out. It is an important feature of the Select Committee's report and our response to it—and of the

debate—that they lift the profile of the issue and make clear the commercial advantages to Britain of further development in the area.

Mr. O'Neill: Perhaps my hon. Friend could clarify a point for me. I understand that we produced our report in July, that the Government responded in October and that the three-yearly public expenditure review has been published. All the contributing Departments know what resources they have. Is my hon. Friend telling us that the BNSC has conducted an assessment of what is to be spent, or is he saying that that is still going on, and that we do not yet know whether it will be in excess of the £181.19 million spent in the year 1999-2000? Is that figure still being negotiated? My hon. Friend has not made that clear to us.

Mr. Johnson: My understanding is that we are still reviewing all the points made by the Committee, some of which could lead to greater expenditure. We do not believe that there is a case for reducing the budget, but nor do we believe that the argument that we are not spending enough in this area is sustainable.

Mrs. Gillan: As we have plenty of time for debate, I hope that the Minister will not mind my pursuing another point. Perhaps he will seek inspiration before answering, because I appreciate that he is not the leading Minister on this subject—although he is doing a sterling job in replacing Lord Sainsbury. I hope that the day will come when we can bring Ministers who are in the House of Lords to this Chamber and question them directly. Can the Minister allay our fears by telling us how long the review process is, and when we can expect a final outcome? In their response to the Select Committee report, dated 24 October, the Government said that decisions had yet to be taken following the conclusion of the annual spending round, but that the evaluation would be completed later that year—that is, last year. That timetable seems to have been pushed out further. Can we have reassurances on that—if not verbal ones now, in writing later?

Mr. Johnson: I thank the hon. Lady for understanding the need for a little time to think about the issue. Spending plans for the next three years are not yet published and are therefore not finalised in detail. This debate and the other representations made to us have enabled us to consider the issue further. That is probably the best that I can say.

Mr. Page *rose—*

Mr. Johnson: If the hon. Member insists on intervening again, I will of course give way.

Mr. Page: I just want to make sure that I have summarised the Minister's position accurately. Am I correct in saying that he is committed to sustaining existing levels and will fight hard to do so, that there are no fixed spending plans agreed, and that the Government will consider the various recommendations for increased expenditure made by the Select Committee?

Mr. Johnson: If I can summarise the hon. Gentleman's point, the spending plans for the next three years have not yet been published, so we have not finalised the budget in detail.

I want to pick up the other point about the BNSC, which was the subject of one of the recommendations; my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil mentioned "ad hocery"—a term used in the Committee's recommendations—in that regard.

I think that the BNSC is an example of joined-up thinking, because if a separate agency were established, other Departments would have to be involved in a co-ordinating committee, whereas Departments actually work together in a single organisation. As far as I know, the BNSC offers a unique example of how such an arrangement can work. As the hon. Member for Esher and Walton said—I am sorry to keep mentioning him in this debate, but he does have considerable experience in the area—although there are problems, they are the problems of a system that is far better than an agency that would then have to co-ordinate different Government Departments. The present system encourages co-operation and breaks down artificial barriers. The success of our approach can be seen in our ability to influence the European debate over the past three years.

The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire has a great interest in this issue and made some important points, one of which was about near-earth objects—the subject of a debate that he instigated a couple of years ago. We have not made our full response to the task force on near-earth objects. We expect to announce our response to its recommendations before too long, and the hon. Gentleman has done a great service in drawing attention to the issue through the Adjournment debate that he secured.

The risk of collision is extremely low, but the consequences could be very significant on a global scale. I agree with him that such an event could happen either in the next second or in 17 million years' time. Like him too, I think that it will be somewhere in between. Action to increase the detection of near-earth objects with the potential to collide should therefore be addressed internationally. That is what the hon. Gentleman said, and we agree with him.

On manned space flight, space stations and life sciences, the Government are supporting several research groups who wish to conduct experiments in space. Astronauts undoubtedly attract public attention to space, but putting people into space is extremely expensive, harks back to the old criteria of obtaining national glory, and cannot be an end in itself. We keep an open mind on the commercial and scientific opportunities that the space station may offer.

The hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire talked about private funding for ESA. At the last Ministerial Council we encouraged the director general of ESA to come forward with proposals that would allow the agency to participate in public-private partnerships. Galileo and GMES—global monitoring for environment and security—are two programmes in which private funding may be involved. Public funding from other bodies is an alternative source; that is a relevant point, which we pursued as recently as December, I believe, when the last meeting took place.

[Mr. Johnson]

If I have not managed to respond to every point that was raised, I hope that I have at least managed to add to the gaiety of the nation in my response and covered most of the major points.

In summary, the Government found the Committee's report a valuable opportunity to move space up the political agenda, we have welcomed the constructive recommendations in the Committee's tenth report, we believe that the space programme is delivering excellence in science and that that is underpinning a vibrant and innovative commercial sector. We continue to achieve more for less from the programme as we introduce new management methods and attract new external sources of funding.

Mrs. Gillan: I may have missed a reference to it, but one of the responses to the Committee's recommendations was the annual publication of "UK Space Activities". Can the Minister give us an idea during which month in each of the years to come we can expect to read that great document?

Mr. Johnson: I am afraid I cannot, but I will drop a note to the hon. Lady when I have had the benefit of talking to Lord Sainsbury, so that she gets quality information rather than—*[Interruption.]* I have just remembered in a blinding flash of inspiration that that document will be published in March this year. I shall look forward to reading it as much as the hon. Lady will.

In conclusion, I believe that Members of the House would not expect anything less than the approach we are adopting to using public funds and getting good value for money. This has been an important debate, and has probably been more enlightening for me than for the other Members present. Again, I congratulate the Trade and Industry Select Committee on an excellent report.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes past Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 6 February 2001

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Hospices

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Jamieson.*]

9.30 am

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am delighted to be able to introduce this debate on the future of hospices. I do not intend to take more than my fair share of the time. It is good to see other hon. Members here and I am sure that the Minister will want the maximum time to respond to some of my questions. This is an important issue, which was covered, quite by chance, a couple of weeks ago on BBC television news. The way we treat very sick people is an important part of our health provision, our social care and our general humanity.

I should like to thank Jean-Luc Priez, the chief executive of my local hospice, Cotswold Care in Minchinhampton, and David Praill, the chief executive of Help the Hospices, for their help in preparing this speech. I do not want to spend long looking at the history of hospices, but it is important to put them into context. They have achieved greater prominence recently, but they have been with us for some considerable time. We can look back to the initiatives of the Duchess of Norfolk and the work of the different bodies that represent hospices, such as the National Council for Hospice and Specialist Palliative Care Services and the Independent Hospice Representative Committee, both of which are well known to the Minister.

I should like to make four key points. I shall consider the current position of the hospice movement and the problems that it faces, and perhaps come up with some solutions. I shall consider first the background to the hospice movement; secondly, Cotswold Care in my constituency, which is an exemplar of the best that the hospice movement can provide; thirdly, what the hospice movement has to offer more generally, and, finally, the problems that the hospice movement faces.

There are three types of hospice. There are the NHS hospices, of which Britain has about 20, and those organised and run by large national charities, such as Marie Curie Cancer Care and the Sue Ryder Care, both of which draw down a lot of money from the NHS. I wish to consider the third type of hospice, which is the voluntary or independent hospice. There are 200 such hospices in the country, 180 of which are independent charities in their own right. They receive much less largesse from the NHS and that is the root of their problems.

Independent hospices are essentially local, meeting local needs. They offer impressive care to their immediate community. For example, they provide 70 per cent. of all in-patient care, 87 per cent. of all day care and 44 per cent. of all home care. They are not some marginal group. In many respects they form the core of the hospice movement. The problem is that they tend to receive sporadic funding from the NHS. I am never sure whether it was a tablet-of-stone arrangement or one of those informal agreements, but the previous Government ended the 50:50 funding relationship between what the state tended to provide and voluntary or charitable donations back in October 1996. If my local hospice is anything to go by, there have been significant problems ever since.

The average funding from the NHS is about 30 per cent., but many hospices receive much less than that. That level of funding tends to be capped and has been declining over time. There is much evidence of differential funding from health authorities. The primary care trusts seem to be somewhat unclear on the position of hospices and certainly on how to fund them, if we are moving in that direction. I will deal with that later.

My local hospice; Cotswold Care, is amazingly successful and highly thought of in the community, with a high recognition factor. It opened about 12 years ago and is based on a good and well-organised site just outside Minchinhampton in my constituency. The workers, under Jean-Luc Priez, whether paid or voluntary, are very highly thought of in the community. They cope with about 15 patients a day on four days a week, providing them with all manner of support, such as counselling, therapy and so on. On the fifth day, there is specialist provision for people who suffer from particular diseases, such as multiple sclerosis. The hospice also has an out service to cater for patients who live in the community and the recently bereaved. The main social worker has a case load of about 60 patients.

As I said, the recognition factor is high. I have been involved in correspondence on the issue and was pleased to receive a reply from the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), in which she says that she

"greatly appreciates the valuable work undertaken by all hospices like Cotswold Care."

That is why I am using it as an exemplar of the very best in hospice care.

The health service increasingly uses hospices, whether it be the health authority or the primary health care teams that pay the money into them, and there are different referrals to those bodies. However, unless my local hospice is different from others, which I do not believe, the difficulty is that hospices are almost certainly working on an annual deficit. Cotswold Care has an annual budget of about £500,000 and runs, year on year, a deficit of about £60,000. The only way in which the hospice can do that is by drawing down its reserves, which have been good and of an order that has allowed it to maintain its service. However, those reserves will not exist for ever. The hospice is in the third year of an operational deficit and now has to consider whether to make cuts in its services. Given that 62 per cent. of its expenditure goes on direct patient care and that it must raise about £450,000 every year, it is obvious where cuts would have to be made, which everyone in the area would find reprehensible.

Last year, Cotswold Care received £48,000 from the NHS, which in effect represented no real increase in funding. It has been trying to obtain a service level agreement, but without success. It is reaching the stage at which it must think seriously about what it can afford and which part of the service it may have to withdraw.

[Mr. David Drew]

The staff consists of about 80 people, 22 of whom are formal members of staff while the rest are volunteers, which shows the high level of volunteering in the sector. People give hours of their time willingly and in different ways. They do not just drive people around, but contribute pretty high-level skills, such as counselling, to ensure that people receive the support service that they need.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Is it not also important to remember the work done by volunteers in their continuous fund raising? My hon. Friend has referred to the deficits and difficulties that hospices face. The Pendleside hospice for Burnley and Pendle could not survive but for the dedicated day-by-day work done by volunteers in raising funds every year.

Mr. Drew: I totally agree. The point is that hospices would inevitably close without voluntary fund raising, so we should in no way underestimate its importance. One problem in fund raising, which my hon. Friend has helpfully mentioned, is the competition with various other fund raising activities, whether in the charitable sector or in the NHS. I have corresponded with Ministers on behalf of Cotswold Care hospice, which feels done down. The NHS is trying to raise money in different ways—for example for cobalt units and chest campaigns—and that money must come from sources that the hospice would also seek to tap.

Legacies are another problem. They are not necessarily in decline, but are ferociously fought over, and cannot by themselves provide an answer. St. Peters in Bristol has done wonderful work in that area, but legacies are not necessarily the answer.

I invite the Minister to come to see the excellent work done by the Cotswold Care hospice, particularly some of its new work. It has recently taken on hospices at home, a genuine partnership with the NHS that, although better funded, is not fully funded, which brings out my underlying point about what we need to do.

Independent hospices have five key advantages: first, they save the NHS money, and we should not pretend otherwise. Without them, their work would almost certainly have to be picked up by the NHS or by some inferior service. Secondly, hospices are the epitome of care and caring. Thirdly, they provide ultimate professionalism, but they also use volunteers to bolster that professionalism. That is the best use of the voluntary sector, which is of interest to many of my hon. Friends.

Fourthly, hospices deal with a Cinderella area that has traditionally been, if not ignored, certainly underfunded and isolated. It would be tragic if we lost some hospices because of funding difficulties. Fifthly, and never to be underestimated, they support individual carers and families who have suffered bereavements. We need to build on their work, rather than see that area decline.

What problems face hospices? I will ask my hon. Friend some questions on that as I finish my speech. Clearly, we recognise and welcome the uplift in cancer and palliative service funding. However, hospices do not seem to fit easily into the system. Discussions have been held between the hospice movement and the Department of Health on the cancer strategy, but there has been no concordat. The Government have come to an understanding with the private sector, but not with hospices. By 2004, the NHS will have invested an extra £50 million in palliative care. It would be good to see how that will be spread among hospices. We accept that it is difficult to give each hospice the same relative funding, but we need some yardstick so that we can know how funding will be invested, and who will receive it.

Hospices face the same cost pressures as every other part of the health service, and increased pressures are arising, principally from wage costs. In addition, if we need to bring people back to the NHS, they can come from a limited number of sources, and one of those sources would be hospices. We still have an on-going battle with some general practitioners. Thankfully, we have turned the corner in my area, but some GPs need to be persuaded that hospices have a valuable part to play and that they should commission care accordingly. I would welcome any comments from my hon. Friend on whether that is one of the ways in which we can provide resources.

We must, at all costs, prevent downsizing, which, as I have said, would take resources directly from patient care. We need to understand where hospices will stand in relation to primary care trusts, not just as regards mainstream hospice provision, but concerning minority groups, whether ethnic or socially disadvantaged, who must always have access to a range of services. It would be tragic if we were hamstrung by the problems that I have mentioned.

I do not expect the Minister to answer my questions in detail, but hope that she will consider them. First, will she voice the Government's support for the hospice movement, whether through the cancer strategy, palliative care or any other initiative, and will she say how valuable the Government consider hospices to be? In particular, how will the cancer strategy be funded in order to support the hospice movement and give it its fair share? Is it possible to see a model of what local health authorities would be expected to provide and what would be a minimum level of the extra funding?

Will my hon. Friend consider other means by which funding could be provided, including, principally, the new opportunities fund of the lottery, which I must say, is both an opportunity and an uncertainty. Some money has been set aside, and it has been suggested that £23.5 million will come from the opportunities fund initiative, but independent hospices will not necessarily receive that money. It would good to know what can be done to engineer some more funds from that source.

If there is an additional funding requirement, how can we build on the services that hospices already operate? I have mentioned the new development of hospices at home, and it would be good to see whether counselling and bereavement services, which have a locus in the health service, could be run more in tandem with the hospice movement. What form of concordat can delivered that would be similar to that for private health, about which I have talked already?

Given the current funding problems, how will hospices be able to struggle on, and is there a short-term solution to those problems, in addition to whatever may

be developed in the medium to long term? Finally, will my hon. Friend spell out the role of hospices in the cancer strategy?

I have made a case for additional funding, and I make no apology for that. The debate is timely because of the problems that hospices will face in coming months as they make decisions on their budgets. I leave the Chamber with one thought: an adage always applied to hospices is that we should help them to help us, and it would be wonderful if that could provide the principle under which the Government applied funding to the movement.

9.46 am

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on securing a truly important debate. I first discovered the importance of the hospice movement when I became a Member of Parliament in 1997; I had no previous experience of it. I have benefited from advice and many meetings with members of the St. Nicholas' hospice in the centre of Bury St. Edmunds, particularly Mr. Bob Jones, the chief executive, and Mr. Roger Curtis, the fund raising director. I am here to speak today, not just because of their prompting and helpful advice, but because of the people of Bury St. Edmunds, who are responsible for an absolutely colossal achievement in terms of the amount of voluntary effort and financial support that they put in to running St. Nicholas'. I will later give some indication of the magnitude of that achievement.

The hospice movement is important to my constituency because of the palliative care that it delivers. The importance of that specialist care has undoubtedly increased over the past 10 years. Ten or 15 years ago, people who would have died quick deaths after diagnosis—typically, though not exclusively, of cancer—now live longer because of improved treatments and medication. But that involves a compromise. Living longer, perhaps in difficult circumstances, requires greater support in a range of areas, socially, psychologically and medically. Sometimes, it requires support in an in-patient setting at St. Nicolas' hospice, and at other times it means support in a day setting at home. What is clear is that demand for those services is rising, if not exponentially then certainly massively. Successive Governments have acknowledged that, and the cancer plan unveiled last year by the current Government goes a long way to acknowledging the experience that I have had in my constituency.

The cancer plan acknowledges that our hospices are among the best in the world. It goes on to acknowledge that not enough is being done to meet unmet demand by stating that:

"The care of all dying patients must improve to the level of the best."

It is perfectly clear from what the Government have said that there is unmet demand. The cancer plan goes on to say:

"For too long, the NHS has regarded special palliative care as an optional extra. The NHS has relied upon the good will and funding of charities".

In paragraph 7.24 it continues:

"Hospices have rightly argued that the NHS should invest more in palliative care services."

I acknowledge the Government's important statement in that part of the cancer plan.

Bob Jones, chief executive of the St. Nicholas' hospice in Bury St. Edmunds, wrote to me recently, saying:

"The contribution of hospices is now fully recognised, and clearly the Government wishes to involve them, the voluntary hospices, centrally in the development of cancer services and we applaud that. However, this must be on the basis of secure funding for the future. There cannot be reliance on ever increasing fundraising to meet the gap."

There is simply a limit to the amount of voluntary fund raising that can deliver sufficient funds to keep voluntary hospices such as St. Nicholas' going and doing the job that they want to do.

The importance of St. Nicholas' hospice is emphasised by some interesting statistics. The hospice runs five charity shops, which raise a net profit of £120,000 a year. The hospice's own lottery raises £120,000 a year, net profit. In addition, it holds many fund raising events and these, together with legacies, have brought in £500,000 a year. Those are colossal sums of money. Many local people have had members of their family or friends of friends receive care, assistance and—I do not think the word too strong—love at St. Nicholas' hospice.

Gifts also come, large and small. Of the 3,000 gifts received last year, including legacies and financial donations, 2,400 were of less than £100 and 600 were of more than £100. Some were significant bequests. St. Nicholas' hospice raises huge amounts of money. It receives 40 per cent. of what it needs from NHS grants, but it does magnificent work of its own. It serves a catchment area in south Norfolk and west Suffolk with 250,000 people. It has 160 volunteers, and I would endorse the comments of the hon. Member for Stroud. His experience is clearly the same as mine: there is a great deal of local support of a non-financial kind from volunteers. At St. Nicholas' hospice, we have a 10-bed in-patient unit, a 15-patient day hospice, a bereavement counselling service, and the Nicky's Way initiative, which is a separate bereavement counselling service for young children. The latter is an important innovation, and one of the first of its kind in the country. We have a team of six Macmillan nurses who undertake fine and dedicated work among local GPs and with terminal patients in their homes.

There is a great deal of ambition at the St. Nicholas' hospice. It moved into its current premises in 1993, but has wanted to grow. It had a new building project with a capital value of £920,000—it does not let the grass grow under its feet. The management and governing body are innovative, and received £350,000 from the National Lottery Charities Board. They are working hard to raise additional money above the hospice's annual running costs to extend the in-patient and day centre areas, and to construct a new building called the Ark, which will house new counselling and bereavement services that are innovative not just in East Anglia, but throughout the country.

A huge amount of money is required to satisfy the ambitions of a hospice that wants to grow, not stand still, and I shall outline some of the pressures faced by the hospice this year. There is expenditure of £92,000, due mainly to medical price inflation, but also to an increased pay award for nurses, the new deal for junior doctors and pension contribution increases, amounting to an increase of at least £50,000.

[Mr. David Ruffley]

This financial year the hospice received a grant from the Suffolk health authority of £642,000—a 4 per cent. increase. That grant is welcome, but the hospice lacks a clear statement of the future path of grant via the NHS in the county. It is difficult to plan for years, rather than for one year, ahead. That problem becomes especially acute when a hospice is as ambitious as the one in Bury St. Edmunds. As a result of cumulative pressures, the hospice is running a deficit for the first time in several years. The trainee GP post runs out within a year and it seems unlikely that it will continue. The Macmillan community specialist nursing team is the only one in the eastern region not to be 100 per cent. NHS funded. We want future resourcing to secure the full complement of the excellent Macmillan nurses at St. Nicholas' hospice.

In a spirit of co-operation, I want to ask the Minister some questions. I believe that the present Government, in common with the previous Government, are listening to the hospice movement and recognise its huge importance. I endorse the powerful and detailed points made by the hon. Member for Stroud. The NHS benefits from the voluntary activity of hospices in Bury St. Edmunds. The NHS is incomparably better off for the hospices, which deliver palliative care that mainstream hospitals are insufficiently specialist to deliver, so to what extent will the £50 million extra announced under the cancer plan be targeted to purely NHS hospices? Will there be favouritism? Will the two NHS hospices in East Anglia get the lion's share of the £50 million allocated to the area? I hope not.

Is it intended that the £50 million should plug the gap where provision for palliative care is almost non-existent? Only one third of health authorities have developed palliative care strategies, which is a surprisingly low figure. In my part of Suffolk, we benefit from good strategy, which includes good, co-operative relationships. Will success stories, such as St. Nicholas' hospice, be a victim of their own success because the areas without such good provision will get most of the new money? There is a new philosophy afoot in Whitehall and the Treasury in the public service agreements and the comprehensive spending review that suggests that the successful providers of public services might reap the reward of increased funding. It is hugely important that good performers such as St. Nicholas' hospice in Bury St. Edmunds should be encouraged by receiving increased funding; but under the Government's public spending regime, more money goes to plug the gaps in inadequate public service provision.

Areas such as Suffolk cannot draw down money from the new opportunities fund because, understandably and fairly, it is targeted at socially disadvantaged groups, especially those areas with large ethnic minorities where there is no tradition of palliative care. As west Suffolk has a very small ethnic minority population, it is unlikely that it will receive money from the new opportunities fund. Admirable though it is, the announcement about that fund will not help my constituency.

Does the Minister think that there should be a national funding agreement to take account of voluntary hospices' provision? Is she considering a concordat with the hospices, signed by the Government, similar to the agreement with the private sector for non-palliative services announced last year by the Secretary of State for Health? Does she think that the present regime, which leaves matters to local negotiation, is working satisfactorily? Does she believe that agreed service levels have been properly set and that there is adequate monitoring of service levels, taking into account the allocation of resources? Have she and her Dept measured the shortage of provision and compared it with funding shortages, and, if so, when will that work be published?

Finally, can the Minister give us some comfort about the allocation of the £50 million of national cancer plan money? This is a plea for the rural areas, which may not be economically disadvantaged or have a high concentration of ethnic minorities, but which nevertheless have great needs that are not being met. There is no reason why the demand for palliative care services should be overlooked merely because the area is rural.

I thank the Minister for taking copious notes on my speech, and I look forward to her response.

10.4 am

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on securing this important debate. I shall be brief, and shall echo the comments made by my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley).

I want to place on the record my admiration for all who work in the hospice movement. Like other hon. Members, my experience comes from my connections with my local hospice since the 1997 general election. St. Francis hospice, on the border of my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Mrs. Gordon), is held in the highest esteem by the community, and covers the Barking and Havering health authority area.

I want to concentrate on funding issues, which lie at the heart of this morning's debate. I visited the hospice recently to discuss funding, and wish to bring a few points to the Minister's attention. St. Francis hospice, with an annual budget of £3 million, is large in comparison with others. Out of that budget of £3 million, 38 per cent. of last year's income came from legacies, 6 per cent. from "in memory" donations, 10 per cent. from non-trading income from shops—there are 12 local St. Francis shops—18 per cent. from the local health authority, 3 per cent. from interest on other income, 8 per cent. from the Friends of St. Francis hospice, 14 per cent. from the development trust, and 3 per cent. from general donations. That highlights the uncertainty of that funding, which makes planning difficult.

Last year, the trust did well—in a manner of speaking—from legacies, one of which brought in more than £400,000, which was a tremendous boost to that year's funds. The budgets of previous years were exceeded, and there was even a spending deficit at a time when the hospice wants to develop services to meet the needs of the community, particularly in the innovative hospices at home sector, which has been supported by the community. The scheme not only provides important palliative care to the community, but does so where most people would like that care—at home. The service meets a popular demand, and we want to increase it, but to do so will require certainty of funding.

In addition to the uncertainty to which I have referred, there is uncertainty in other areas, such as charitable donations. The hospice is in competition with other charities in the area. For example, several children's hospices in our area rightly earn support, but at times when public support goes to the children's hospices, support for the adult hospice may decline.

In addition, with the introduction of the national lottery, when more giving went to lottery funds—rightly, given the good causes that the lottery supports—there was a dip in charitable donations. Charities throughout Britain have had to cope with that, and it has led to uncertainty. The hospice movement, which combines public and voluntary service, needs certainty.

I echo what hon. Members have already said in that regard. The NHS cancer plan, which most Members welcome, will provide an additional £50 million for the service up to 2004, but how much of that allocation will go to the voluntary sector? The independent movement throughout the country awaits an answer to that question. There is also the question of whether we want a more national framework in this area, and I am sure that that point will be discussed, which will help to clear up some of the uncertainty.

Will my hon. Friend comment on funding through the new opportunities fund? Clearly the concept of additionality runs through lottery funding. The question arises of how the voluntary sector fits into that concept and whether hospices need to take that into account. Guidelines would be helpful.

I conclude by congratulating all volunteers in the hospice movement, particularly those at St. Francis in my constituency, on their sterling work. The care that they give their fellow citizens is much appreciated and we could not deliver the level of service without them. I am sure that all those hundreds of thousands of volunteers throughout the country would welcome a positive move from the Government that encourages them to give more commitment to a worthwhile concept.

10.10 am

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): I draw the Minister's attention to a situation that has arisen in my constituency. In Beckenham we have St. Christopher's hospice, which was the first hospice created by Dame Cicely Saunders, the founder of the modern hospice movement. St. Christopher's is very important within the constituency and funding raised locally is key to its success—a matter to which all hon. Members who have spoken have referred. It is significant that there is such a measure of agreement across all political parties about the future of hospices. All 659 Members of Parliament probably give generously to hospices and will continue to do so.

On Saturday morning I went out campaigning for the Conservatives in West Wickham high street and spotted three yellow Liberal Democrat rosettes. I thought, "Oh good, I will meet my opposition challenger"—whom I have not met, having heard only the announcement of his selection. However, I discovered that those Liberal Democrats were seeking names for a petition to help the hospices. Hospices are completely non-party political and it concerns me that they could be hijacked by one political party. It would certainly not help their funding if they were seen to be the creatures of a particular political party. It is also not very clever for any political party to get tied up with such a non-party political organisation. I therefore wanted to warn colleagues and the hospice movement that difficulties could be created for them if they were seen to become the flavour of the month of any political party—no matter which one.

Mr. George Stevenson (in the Chair): Order. I understand the hon. Lady's point, but I am seized by her comment that we should not make this a party political issue. I am sure that she would not want to do that.

Mrs. Lait: You are right, Mr. Stevenson. I have no intention of making it a party political issue. I hope that the future of the hospices will be guaranteed by firing that warning shot across the bows of any political party that might be trying to hijack the hospices. I want to ensure that the future of hospices is guaranteed, not just by increasing Government funding from the 30 per cent. to the 35 per cent. that it was three years ago, but by encouraging the British population to continue to fund the hospices in the same generous way that it always has.

10.13 am

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I am glad that the debate is taking place. Around 1985 Jack Ashley and I set up the all-party hospice group, which is still going. With the Duchess of Norfolk, we had numerous meetings with the then Secretary of State my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley). Our concern at that stage was to get some regularity and evenness into funding for hospices. At the time, some hospices were in the independent sector—historically they had been almost totally funded by public money—and received no funding whatever from the NHS. There was no rhyme or reason as to who was funded or why they were funded in a particular way. The Government introduced a measure of underpinning, with the aim of ensuring that all hospices received some state funding. It will always be accepted that hospices are part of the voluntary movement. Rightly, a large proportion of their money comes from the voluntary sector. We have heard of considerable fund raising efforts. It is no different in north Oxfordshire, where many people support the excellent Katherine House hospice.

Hospices want just two things from the Government. First, they want to be able to predict what the funding arrangements will be, not just for one year, but for a number of years. They do not expect to be 100 per cent. funded. Indeed, they would not want to be, but they do want predictability. Secondly, hospices want certainty in their relationships with local NHS hospital trusts, primary care trusts and the Department. If the Minister can provide the hospice movement with predictability on the level of funding over a range of years and with certainty in its relationships with the rest of health care provision, it will get on and provide an excellent palliative care service.

Cancer is now a larger killer than heart disease. Ironically, advances in medical care mean that, inevitably, more of our constituents will require the help, support and care that the hospice movement provides. The movement is a great tribute to a huge

[Mr. Tony Baldry]

number of people. It will not require much for the Government to provide both predictability and certainty. I hope that the Minister can do that today.

10.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on raising this issue. It is clear from the contributions that it is important to many of us. I take the point of the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) that it is not a party political issue. I hope, therefore, that she will forgive me if I sometimes refer to the extra funding from the Labour Government. We know that we all support the hospices. I agree with the hon. Lady—it is questionable to campaign on the issue. People should be careful when they do their campaigning.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) rightly paid tribute not only to the work of volunteers, but to their fund raising. The issues in relation to hospices include our relationship with the voluntary sector. That is an important issue. Several hon. Members made the point about the concordat and the type of relationship that we have with the sector. I hope that most of the specific questions raised will be covered in the speech itself.

The hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) paid tribute to his own hospice. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill), most of us learned about hospices through the good work that is being done on our patch. It is therefore understandable that, when we return to our constituencies and see that good work, we will make the case for that particular institution. Although we welcome extra money to deal with the inadequacies in some areas, we do not want our own areas to be punished. We hope that a balance can be struck between dealing with areas where there is no provision and supporting existing provision. It is a balancing act; it is not a question of either/or. Both those things must be done at the same time. I congratulate the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) on having had the foresight all those years ago, with Lord Ashley, to set up the all-party hospice group.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud, I put on record my appreciation of the work by Cotswold Care. He has invited me to visit the hospice, and I am happy to accept that invitation, provided diary requirements can be met. I should like to come very soon.

The hospice movement in the United Kingdom is widely recognised as the world leader. It is committed to working with the voluntary sector. It delivers something extremely valuable in a very challenging area.

A Government's relationship with the voluntary sector should be complementary. We should work in partnership; one should not take over the other. It is widely recognised that the voluntary sector is often capable of doing things that the NHS could not do on its own. The sector has been the driving force for many innovations. It was determined to move into areas which the NHS had not covered. I would not want to lose that innovative drive.

We need partnership, but it is a two-way process. We need to ensure that health authorities have an agreed strategy in place and the voluntary sector needs to ensure that the service developments that they are planning are developed and agreed with the local health authority and meet the agreed priorities for the area. The concordat that we signed with the independent sector was of that nature—it established a strategic long-term relationship. I hope that some of the other arrangements that we have in place in the hospice sector will convince hon. Members that we wish to have a long-term sustainable strategic relationship with hospices.

Hospices have shown many of us how care for patients who are approaching the end of their life and how support for them and their families should be provided. That involves both adult and children's services.

I focus initially on what we are doing for adult services. For too long, the NHS has regarded palliative care as an optional extra. Hospices have suffered from a lack of long-term stability for too long. I know that some health authorities are aware of hospices facing particular financial pressures and have invested some short-term funding to ease current pressures. We also know that many hospices have only one-year, not three-year, agreements with health authorities. Two thirds of health authorities do not have an agreed palliative care strategy, despite guidance from the Department that states clearly their responsibilities in that area.

It is small wonder that the hospice movement feels that it has been taken for granted and has helped, as it puts it, to bail out the NHS by providing high-quality care at low cost. We do not think that that is good enough. We need and are determined to make rapid progress. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health is working to ensure that health authorities take action and meet the guidance set.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud said, funding is a real issue for hospices and some are facing financial difficulties. That is why we will invest an additional £50 million in adult hospices and specialist palliative care services to end the inequalities in access and to make a more realistic contribution to hospice costs.

The issue was raised as to whether some of the £50 million will go in preference to NHS hospices. It is a question of looking at the cancer networks, the strategic plans, who the providers are and how the provision fits in. Within that, I expect that significant amounts will go to the voluntary sector. It is a question not of the status of the organisation, but the care provided and the needs of the area. We have ensured that that is a priority within the NHS plan implementation project for 2001-02. We have asked the cancer networks to have costed, strategic plans for palliative care in partnership with the voluntary sector.

The £50 million invested in palliative care will ensure that the NHS makes a realistic contribution to the costs that hospices incur in providing agreed levels of service. Realistic funding must be based on a firm footing. That is why we need costed plans, benchmarking, performance indicators and standards. We will therefore monitor plans for palliative care strategic investment very closely. I am sure that all hon. Members will agree that, although we want partnerships, which we underpin by funding, it is not a question of taking control. We must ensure that minimum standards are met and that services fit in with the overall strategic provision.

A particular concern has been raised by the hospice movement relating to keeping pace with NHS inflation uplifts. The £50 million that is going into the system will help to deal with that. That will be performance managed through service and financial framework processes monitored quarterly.

As I have said, the NHS has relied on the good will of the voluntary sector for too long. With the launch of the NHS cancer plan came the announcement of additional funding for hospices and specialist palliative care services. That move has been warmly welcomed in some quarters, but I acknowledge that there have been cries of too little too late in others. The additional money, however, is only part of the solution. As I see it, the future for hospices and cancer networks is in working together to identify current specialist palliative care provision and in planning for future investment.

There are several ways of achieving that. Hospices should not only play a full role in cancer networks, but establish a firmer strategic footing with health authorities. Funding will also be provided through the new opportunities fund. A total of £23 million will fund a new programme of partnership schemes for community palliative care projects for adults and children, including respite care breaks. I take the point about access to new opportunities funding in some areas, but all the other things that are being done must be considered, too.

I urge hon. Members to be careful when they talk about ethnic minority needs. In my Birmingham constituency, by 2005, in educational terms, white working class estates will be classified as minority groups. Therefore, we should not make assumptions about minority group in a particular setting. Groups need to be supported wherever they are. It is not an urban versus rural areas issue. We must consider the networks and the level of provision.

Hospices contribute immense support, training and advice to colleagues in primary care. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud raised the issue of how the service fitted in with primary care. We are making £2 million available to support training district nurses in the general practice and principles of palliative care. We believe that that will enable more people to stay at home for longer.

It is worth mentioning the beacons programme for 2000-02, which supports eight palliative care beacons throughout the country. Those projects are examples of a partnership between the voluntary sector and the NHS and demonstrate good practice and innovation within particular aspects of palliative care services. The beacons are about sharing good practice. Although a lot of good work is being done throughout the country, we must ensure that the sectors learn from each other and share their experience.

Similarly, my hon. Friend will be aware that the forthcoming national service framework for older people will build on the supportive and palliative care strategy that was set out in the cancer plan. That will provide a framework for delivering further improvements in the care of older people

Children's services are often mentioned in such debates. Much of the driving force for improving those services—we have had little understanding of the needs of the children and their families—has been provided by the forceful work of the hospice movement. In future, the NHS will work with those families and provide quality support.

The movement to support children has grown considerably in recent years. Much of the driving force has come from painful personal experience, and I pay tribute to those concerned. New nurse-led teams have been established to care for children with life-threatening and limiting illnesses in the community. They are known as Diana community children's nursing teams. They commenced in March 1999 to fill gaps in the provision of care for children with life-threatening illnesses who were living in the community and to support their families.

That was a much-needed new provision. Those teams work in partnership with other statutory and voluntary agencies to provide holistic—physical, social and emotional—support to children and their families in their homes and in surroundings that are familiar to them, as an alternative to hospital-based care. It has long been recognised that children with such conditions often prefer to have care and support in the family home. The Diana teams offer a lot of help and are much valued by all parts of the NHS.

Provision has been made for funds for children's hospices to come from the NHS. I briefly mention the work done on health improvement programmes and the general funding that is available. Again, palliative care services and voluntary health care providers play an important part in the development of Himps. Further to that general provision, we are making available additional sources of funding from the new opportunities fund.

We all sign up to the principle of providing compassionate care and service for patients in the last few days or months of their lives. That is why all agencies must work together. We deeply appreciate the contribution of the hospice movement. We want a long-term strategic relationship that supports them and the NHS in the interests of the patients and their families wherever they may live.

NHS Cost of Living Supplement

10.30 am

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): I want to discuss an important and complex subject. It used often to be said that the national health service, with 1 million employees, was the largest organisation except for the Red army. I do not think that anyone knows these days how large the Red army is, but dealing with pay and the various other areas of the NHS is difficult and complex, and all Governments struggle with that.

Health authorities that have been given the cost of living supplement and additional money—£65 million from April—to supplement the pay of their staff, doubtless consider that good. However, those of us who fall below the line and do not get that benefit for our hard-working NHS staff feel a degree of difficulty and unfairness. At the moment, petitions are going around Poole and Bournemouth hospitals, because people feel that they should be entitled to the benefit and that the Government have got the formula wrong. The benefit, although worth perhaps 2.5 per cent.—somewhere between £400 and £600—is not to be sniffed at for many people in the NHS who are on not particularly high wages.

My hon. Friends in Dorset and I have written to the Secretary of State to make it clear that we are concerned about the implementation of the proposal. If one health authority or county is given the benefit, and the authority next door is not, there will be a knock-on effect. If London receives it, but Kent, Essex or Suffolk do not, there will be a knock-on effect. If Avon receives the benefit, but Somerset or Gloucestershire do not, there will be an effect on the neighbouring area. Indeed, we in Dorset see that Wiltshire and Hampshire will get the cost of living supplement, while we will not. That is a matter of great concern, particularly for the Royal College of Nursing, which has been responsible for some of the petitions.

There have been previous attempts to try to put cost of living supplements, or some market forces element, into NHS pay. I have reviewed the staff side evidence to the review body on cost of living supplements. In 1989, the Department of Health in England introduced pay supplements to address recruitment and retention problems for hard-to-fill posts. The scheme, according to the staff side, had little impact and did not impress the review body with its cost effectiveness. There were some industrial relations problems when it was introduced, and the review body ended it in 1992.

In 1995, the review body attempted to increase the pace of local pay through the X plus Y mechanism. That mechanism was pursued again in 1996, but once again, according to the staff side, it proved counter-productive to recruitment and retention. It had an impact on morale, increasing dissatisfaction with the NHS among nurses, midwives and health visitors. There is a positive side for those who receive the benefits, but a negative side for those who do not.

According to the staff side, the effect of the cost of living supplement on labour market behaviour cannot be predicted with any degree of accuracy. It remains to be seen what impact the supplement will have when it is implemented in April. However, the key issue is that, if shortages are a supply side problem, the cost of living supplement will simply move the shortages around the country. As the Government's NHS plan recognises, the health service has a real problem concerning human resources and the training of sufficiently qualified staff.

Nurses in areas with some of the highest vacancy rates will not qualify for the cost of living supplement. East Kent, for example, has one of the highest vacancy rates in the country, according to Department of Health statistics, and a number of hot spots in the west midlands do not qualify. There is a real problem. The Royal College of Nursing estimates that 22,000 nursing posts in the UK are vacant. If one starts with a fairly centralised pay structure and adds cost of living supplements that go to one county but not the next, it will have an impact on recruitment and retention in the neighbouring authority.

Equal pay for work of equal value has always been a principle in the NHS. There seems to be a move away from that. What is the Government's policy? Are they moving towards more regionalised pay as some in the nursing profession fear? Could the Minister explain the method on which the formula is based? The cut-off point seems to be 117 on the table. Those on or above that figure seem to get this benefit. How is the cost of living index calculated? What impact does housing have on that? What impact do vacancies have or the fact that staff in rural areas must travel and spend money on petrol? We need to know a lot more about how the Government arrived at those figures. Although it is obvious that Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster are the most expensive, other counties fall well below the line, including some near London where the cost of living is bound to be high.

In Dorset we have lived under one great disadvantage—the area cost adjustment, which means that we do not receive the same level of local government and police funds. It is perennial problem. This announcement from the NHS perhaps puts us at a further disadvantage in terms of how we will fund nurses' pay.One of my constituents, Mr. R. Bayldon MBE, TD, wrote to me. His wife works at Poole hospital. With the help of the internet, he compared the house prices in Poole and Southampton. Southampton is in Hampshire and so will receive the cost of living supplement, and Poole, being in Dorset, will not. It takes about half an hour to travel between the two by car, so they are within a relatively similar travel-to-work area.

According to the Land Registry figures for the period between April and June 2000, the average price for a detached house in Poole was £191,772. The average price in Southampton was £154,206. The average price for a semi-detached house was £100,781 in Poole and £91,307 in Southampton. The average price for a terraced house was £86,589 in Poole and £80,790 in Southampton. The average price for a flat or maisonette was £102,475 in Poole and £68,731 in Southampton.

When one aggregates those figures, and I rather suspect that there are rather more detached houses in my constituency than in Southampton, the average house sale price between April and June 2000 in Poole was £132,396 and only £89,588 in Southampton. House prices are about 40 per cent. higher in Poole than in Southampton. The problem is that nurses who are deciding where to work can look at Southampton and see that they will get cheaper housing and more pay

through the cost of living supplement. Staff are likely to be sucked out of the Poole and Bournemouth area and the quality of service that my constituents receive is in danger of deteriorating.

I therefore ask the Minister to reconsider the cost of living supplement and perhaps to review how the body has come to those figures because I fear that we will have an increased vacancy rate in Poole and a more difficult job retaining staff. The real value of the NHS lies in its staff and the quality of service it provides to my constituents, so a higher vacancy level will cause problems. There are currently 39 vacancies for fully trained, full-time nurses in Poole, and a further 24 vacancies for which job offers have been sent out, but currently await acceptance.

This small measure could be a step in the right direction. We need to recruit good, qualified staff who want to work in Poole, but housing and the cost of living there is expensive, so people—who obviously have to put themselves and their families first—often go elsewhere. The Salisbury area in Wiltshire and the Hampshire area receive the benefit, but Poole and south-east Dorset—also an expensive area—do not. The differential impact will be significant.

Will the Minister set out clearly how the formula has been applied? Will she give an assurance that further scrutiny will take place before we go down this particular road? It will cause difficulties for my constituents, many of whom believe that it is unfair and unjust. In the near future I expect to present a petition signed by nurses that expresses their concerns.

This is a difficult and complex subject. The Government's decision to start to implement cost of living supplements would no doubt be viewed as courageous by Sir Humphrey Appleby because it pleases some and displeases others. I am a Member of Parliament representing people in Dorset, making a case for good hard-working NHS staff in Dorset.

10.41 am

Mr. John Whittingdale (Maldon and East Chelmsford): I begin by putting on record the fact that my wife is a practice nurse who works in the national health service in North Essex. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) on securing the debate and setting out a powerful case. He has demonstrated that Dorset's failure to receive the cost of living supplement has caused serious problems for health care in the area.

My constituency in Essex is a long way from my hon. Friend's, but what he said applies equally to my area. Curiously, Essex has also been excluded from the list of health authorities eligible to receive the cost of living supplement. My first communication about the matter included a list of all authorities that the Government had decided were eligible for the supplement.

The 15 eligible health authorities outside London include Avon, Wiltshire, Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire. Those areas doubtless face additional cost of living pressures, but fewer than counties such as Essex, which borders London. Travelling to Cambridgeshire where the supplement applies requires going through Essex, which does not qualify.

I am here today to represent my constituents in mid-Essex, but areas such as Kent and East Sussex feel equally strongly that they have been excluded unfairly from the supplement and will face real problems on account of it. The issue has been taken up by the Royal College of Nursing, which first brought it to my attention and is now mounting a campaign on behalf of all the excluded authorities.

The supplement applies in one part of Essex. Just a few miles down the road from the Broomfield hospital, which serves the majority of my constituents, is Brentwood. Staff living in that area qualify for London weighting, which has created a huge disparity between the earnings of staff working in Brentwood and those working a short distance away in Chelmsford and Malden. There is no doubt that that is having an impact on the recruitment and retention of nursing staff.

My hon. Friend talked about house prices in Dorset, and the same problem applies in Essex. Not long ago, I saw figures showing that house prices in Chelmsford were rising faster than anywhere else in the country. If the supplement is genuinely intended to recognise the additional cost of living in areas of the south-east, Essex has a very strong case for inclusion. I find it bizarre that the county has not been included in the published list.

People do not enter the nursing profession because they expect great riches or rewards, but because it is a vocation. They are utterly dedicated to their jobs and provide a fantastic service to the people whose health they look after. Those staff also have to live, however, and there is no doubt that being a nurse is a pretty tough task. If people are not going to receive recognition of the additional costs that face them, their lives will be made considerably more difficult.

We can make comparisons with all public services, because there are problems of recruitment across the public services. We have had great difficulty in recruiting the number of nurses that we need, but there are equally great problems in recruiting police officers. Indeed, in a directly parallel case, an additional supplement is paid to police officers in the Metropolitan police area, but that supplement is not available in Essex. The effect is that people who would normally look to join the Essex police, are travelling quite a distance in order to join the Metropolitan police, because of the quite considerable financial benefit. I fear that the same may apply to nurses when they see what salaries are available not too far away as a result of the cost of living supplement.

My hon. Friend powerfully set out the disparities that will be created in the labour market if an apparently arbitrary method of allocating the supplement is proceeded with. Let me quote to the Minister a letter that I received from Mr. Clive Mortimer, branch secretary of the mid-Essex branch of the Royal College of Nursing, who is based at Broomfield hospital. He wrote to me about the problems that will be created as a result of this policy, saying:

> "In not receiving this supplement our already bad recruitment and retention problem will get even worse, a situation that the RCN locally does not wish to see, because of the many knock-on effects, staff shortages, high use of expensive agency nurses to cover the loss and the worst scenario, a potential for a decrease in patient care."

One must take seriously a warning of that kind from the Royal College of Nursing. I urge the Minister to reflect on the representations that she has received. I have sent a copy of the letter to the Secretary of State to ask him to reconsider his policy. There is no doubt that the reference to a potential decrease in patient care is serious.

[Mr. John Whittingdale]

Not long ago, my constituents were alarmed by the publication of a survey that showed mortality rates in various hospitals across the country. It stated that Broomfield hospital had the second worst rate in the country. I do not believe that the shortage of nursing is contributing to that, and I want to know a lot more about the figures because there are questions about how they were compiled. However, there is no doubt that they raised serious concerns for local people. Alongside those figures, the survey showed that Broomfield had a lower ratio of nursing staff than other hospitals. I do not suggest that that has contributed to the mortality rate. I believe that that is not the case, and much more investigation is needed, but people are anxious about the figures and know that there is difficulty recruiting sufficient doctors and nurses.

The Government have tried to tackle the problem by introducing a supplement in certain areas. However, I ask the Minister to look again at the map and to consider whether the case for a cost of living supplement is equally strong in areas such as Dorset, which my hon. Friend mentioned, and my constituency in Essex.

10.50 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I congratulate the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) on his success in the ballot for the debate. Before I respond to the hon. Gentleman, I shall clarify for the record a point made in the previous debate on hospices. The £23 million of the new opportunities fund is for adult services, including respite care.

An equally important matter is the NHS cost of living supplement. Every Member of Parliament whose constituency was not on the list responded with great passion, which provoked a heated debate. The supplement is not the only solution to labour shortages in some parts of the country and I shall therefore outline the thinking behind the proposal and the problem that it addresses. If Members would like me to do so, I shall later explain the precise way in which factors including market forces are calculated.

The NHS plan set out a strategy to give staff a better deal in their working lives. It is not a question of money but of capacity; we do not have enough doctors and nurses. Staff who commit themselves to a career in the NHS do not expect an easy life, but they are, nevertheless, entitled to expect their contribution to be valued and fairly rewarded. We must get that right; as the hon. Members for Poole and for Maldon and East Chelmsford (Mr. Whittingdale) recognised, it is crucial to the task of providing high-quality services that meet the needs of patients. That is the fundamental rationale behind our plans to increase staff numbers. By 2004, there will be 7,500 more consultants, 2,000 more general practitioners, 20,000 more nurses and 6,500 more therapists and other health professionals, and that will be achieved by a variety of means. Some short-term problems have long-term solutions, but in the meantime we have to consider the short-term solutions that work in tandem with them.

For a start, we will provide more training places; by 2004, more than 45,000 nurses and 13,000 therapists and other health professionals will have finished training. Hon. Members said that they are afraid that shortages will be moved from one part of the country to another, and that will be prevented only if there is more training. In addition, there will be year-on-year increases in the number of training places available, so that by 2004 an extra 5,500 nurses, midwives and health visitors will be trained each year.

We will expand the number of training places: there will be an extra 4,450 therapists and other key professionals, plus an extra 1,000 specialist registrars—the feeder grade for future consultants—and 450 more doctors in training for general practice. We will expand the number of new medical school places allowing for a 40 per cent. increase in the numbers of medical students since the Government took office in 1997. When we decided where the extra training places would go, regional factors were taken into account because people tend to stay in the areas where they trained, particularly in the medical profession. The presence of a medical school attracts high-quality staff. Hon. Members who represent constituencies in the south-west will be aware of the new Peninsula medical school, which will not only provide training for extra doctors, but encourage high-quality staff to want to work there.

We will improve pay through our plans to modernise the outdated pay system, which has failed to keep pace with the demands of the NHS. We have acted to ensure that midwives have better access to progression. The decision to introduce cost of living supplements is another example of our intention to design and put in place targeted solutions to specific problems that need a new approach. In this instance, we intend to use cost of living supplements to top up the pay of key staff groups where there are labour market shortages.

Such targeted actions are in addition to above-inflation pay rises for all NHS staff from 1 April 2001. The latest awards will be worth at least 3.7 per cent.—0.8 per cent. ahead of the most recently announced inflation figures—with more for senior nurses, staff in the professions allied to medicine, health visitors, midwives and staff working in pathology. We have recognised the essential contribution of senior nurses and PAMs to delivery of the NHS plan. We have also recognised the particular problems experienced in recruiting and retaining suitably qualified pathology staff and have therefore singled them out for special treatment, as we did last year for cytology screening staff. Again, it is a question of long-term solutions, but in the short term we will pick off specific problems and see whether we can offer solutions to them.

We will improve working lives by making the way in which employers treat their staff a part of core performance measures, linked to the financial resources that they receive. We hope that staff retention will be much improved. To receive financial resources, employers will need to show how they are investing in training and development, tackling discrimination and harassment, and improving diversity.

Employers will also need to show how they are applying a policy of zero tolerance of violence against staff. Given the increase in attacks on NHS staff, that is important because we need to ensure that people want to continue working in the NHS. Employers will have to demonstrate how they are reducing accidents in the workplace and sick absences by providing better

occupational health and counselling services, and conduct annual staff attitude surveys to obtain feedback on whether they are good employers.

By 2003, all employers will be assessed against the human resources performance framework and the new improving working lives standard, which will mean that they need to demonstrate their commitment to flexible working arrangements, providing for flexi-time, annual hours, child care support, flexible retirement, career breaks and a reduced hours option. Hon. Members have referred to the expense of hospitals having to use agency staff. One reason why staff in some areas have decided to work for agencies is that they allow people to work the flexible hours that they want. We need to ensure that hospitals take those real concerns on board.

We have invested some £9 million—£25,000 per trust—to improve the working environment for staff. In 2001-02 and beyond, money will be invested in the extension of occupational health services. By 2004, more than £30 million will be invested in better child care facilities for NHS staff, providing for subsidised nurseries in about 100 hospitals.

We are tackling entrenched and often long-standing problems, which are not amenable to quick-fix solutions. Many of the initiatives that I have outlined will need time to bear fruit. That is why we also feel the need for a more immediate approach where it can deliver results. For that reason, we are working to recruit additional suitably qualified staff from abroad where feasible and have recently appointed a director of international recruitment to drive that work forward. All that activity shows our determination to adopt and put in place a wide-ranging menu of initiatives and policies to tackle entrenched problems with recruitment and retention and to maximise the length of time that qualified staff work in the NHS. Staff at one of the London hospitals told me that turnover would be reduced if they could guarantee that every employee stayed an extra six months, so retention of staff is important.

Low levels of participation among qualified staff in some areas are part of the problem. The NHS needs more staff to do the job that we need it to do and it needs to hold on to its existing staff so that skills and expertise are not wasted. As I have said, we are taking action on a number of fronts to deal with that problem, combining short-term strategies with creating the right building blocks for the future. Part of the problem is that we experience much greater difficulty in recruiting and retaining nurses and other specialist staff in London and some parts of the south of England. That situation is worsened by relatively low levels of participation in the NHS where there are, nevertheless, a wide range of job opportunities available to qualified staff.

We know that pay is not necessarily the panacea. A range of factors affect our ability to recruit and retain staff and we are responding with a wide-ranging package of measures. The hon. Member for Poole referred to the size of the NHS as an employer. People who work within the NHS are extremely reluctant to leave that organisation. The Royal College of Nursing recently did a survey that showed that nurses find leaving the NHS a difficult decision to make; it is not something that they do lightly. Equally, I do not expect that staff who work in one hospital will look at a hospital 50 miles down the road and say, "I may get £400 extra, so I'll move there."

Mr. Syms: My concern is not the figures but whether that is the direction in which we are going. From day one, we are out and somewhere else is in. Will that be a trend?

Ms Stuart: As I said, this is a short, specific measure. It was an immediate response to an emerging immediate problem in some areas. We will see what happens as it develops.

An important unavoidable factor is that the cost of living in London and the south can be considerably higher than in other parts of the country. That has long been recognised for staff working in London and the fringe zone, who receive different scales of London weighting and fringe allowance to supplement their basic pay. That sometimes creates problems for employers trying to recruit staff in neighbouring areas where the cost of living is also relatively high but no London weighting or fringe allowance is available. I recognise the problem, outlined by the hon. Member for Maldon and East Chelmsford, that that affects not only the NHS but other public sector employers. The issue was raised when I recently visited Watford general hospital. Wherever we draw the boundaries there will be tensions but we need to keep a careful eye on how they play out.

As one of the ways of helping key staff in high-cost areas we have introduced a new cost of living supplement for London and parts of the south. As a brand new approach, it is bound to provoke interest and debate. We believe that it could make an important contribution to the raft of initiatives and make a real difference to our drive to increase the numbers of qualified staff in the key groups that I have identified. It will provide additional pay of between £600 and £1,000 per annum for qualified nurses, midwives, health visitors and PAMs in London health authorities and between £400 and £600 for equivalent staff in eligible health authorities outside London and the south of England.

We estimate that around 100,000 staff will benefit and have made £64 million available through allocations to health authorities. We accept that cliff edges are unhelpful and have done our best to minimise them in drawing up plans for the new supplements. However, it is difficult to get it right, given the vagaries of geography, travel-to-work zones and the choices that people make about where they live and work, and some staff and employers will find themselves on the wrong side of the line, wherever it is drawn, of the new allowance. We need to balance that against the need for a clear, transparent system.

The new allowance, by its nature, is perhaps the most precisely targeted of the range of new initiatives. We readily acknowledge that recruitment and retention problems exist beyond the areas eligible for cost of living supplements. That is why we will closely monitor the impact of the supplements on recruitment and retention rates and participation rates. We want to take an early view so as to be able to develop policy for the future. We shall announce details of additional funding that will be

[Ms Stuart]

made available for other recruitment and retention initiatives; it will be made available on the basis of bids to parts of the service that do not receive cost of living supplements and where there is scope for action.

Clearly, the hon. Member for Poole feels that the supplement should have applied to Dorset as well as to Hampshire and Wiltshire. The straightforward reason why it does not is that Dorset health authority does not meet the criteria set out in relation to the staff market forces factor. We set the qualifying level at a factor of 117. Hon. Members may like to know how the factor works. MFF, as it is called, consists of evaluating the elements that are given the highest weight in the overall index: it takes into account staff medical and dental costs, London weighting, non-pay issues and capital. The aim of the staff MFF is to reflect the geographical variations in staff costs that NHS employers incur. It is necessary, despite national pay arrangements, because the geographical variation in labour markets results in some NHS trusts facing higher hidden staff costs due to recruitment and retention difficulties, grade drift and the use of agency staff.

The staff MFF is based on the three latest years of the new earnings survey panel data set. The 2001-02 allocations are based on 1997, 1998 and 1999. The analysis uses individual earnings of full-time employees aged 16 to 70 in the private sector whose pay was not affected by absence: all others are stripped out. The annual sample is about 75,000. The hon. Member for Poole may wish that he had never asked, but I shall continue. The data is then aggregated into 78 zones based on London boroughs and the former metropolitan and shire counties. Each year's data is used in a regression analysis, which isolates the effect of geography and staff costs in each zone by accounting for the effect of other factors such as age, sex, industry and occupation. I would be happy to write to the hon. Gentleman if he would like further precise details.

Mr. Whittingdale: I am sure that the formula is excellent, but if it demonstrates that authorities in Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire face higher staff costs than the North Essex health authority, it may be flawed. I simply do not believe that that is the case.

Ms Stuart: It seems difficult to comprehend how the formula works, but I have been told by statisticians that the mechanism is well known and fully accepted. I would be pleased, as I said, to write to the hon. Gentleman with a more detailed analysis of the three authorities, explaining how the weightings were arrived at and establishing whether there were any flaws. I cannot deal with such statistical intricacies in this place. The qualifying level was set at a factor of 117, because it was the lowest score among London health authorities and represented the most natural break point. Dorset, in common with several other health authorities such as Bradford, Wakefield, Calderdale, Kirklees and Leicestershire, scored only 110. We recognise that Dorset has hot spots where the cost of living is high, but nearly 30 health authorities that do not meet the eligibility criteria overall score higher than Dorset.

Some may question whether the staff market forces factor was the right tool for setting the criteria. We reviewed the options and decided that it was the best available. It is not perfect, but the methodology is widely known and accepted in the NHS as a means of identifying high-cost areas and is continuously subject to rigorous academic review. As I said earlier, the cost of living supplement is not a panacea that will solve our problems. It is a small part of a much bigger jigsaw.

The survey is calculated from earnings survey data and average hourly earnings. We used those data as a proxy to provide the best basis to make decisions on eligibility. We certainly would not have thought it appropriate to use a formula based solely on vacancy rates, which are often as much a measure of good or indifferent human resources management as of genuine recruitment and retention difficulties. Striking a balance between addressing inadequate provision and services and rewarding success is important in all debates relating to the NHS, including the debate on hospices. If a hospital has a high staff turnover and bad retention rates, and finds it difficult to recruit, that is not necessarily a sign of specific problems of high costs, which more money would solve. The same would be true if a hospital used many agency staff. Such a hospital's human resources strategy would need close examination. That is why we did not use vacancy rates.

Poole hospital NHS trust is considering ethical international recruitment as an interim measure to address its problems. The hospital is also addressing longer-term solutions, such as administrative support for ward posts to take away some of the administrative tasks undertaken by nurses and free their time for nursing care. Poole hospital NHS trust is considering a range of policies to retain existing staff and attract new staff.

To achieve the qualified work force that we need for the future, we need to be able to attract and keep staff of the right calibre. We also need to make sure that the NHS is hanging on to the highest possible proportion of the people whom it trains. To do that, we need a multifaceted approach that tackles all aspects of the problems through a mix of immediate action, where we believe that it can make a difference, and more long-term change. Cost of living supplements for some key groups of qualified staff are part of an innovative package of measures. Our willingness to apply a previously untried solution is testament to our determination to solve entrenched problems of recruitment and retention once and for all.

I know that the hon. Member for Poole is concerned about the situation in Dorset, not least as it compares with Hampshire and Wiltshire, which are eligible for the supplement. I hope that he is satisfied that a range of other ways exists to deal with recruitment and retention difficulties, as his own hospitals are showing. The challenge is to find innovative local ways to keep key professionals in the NHS. Help with that is available through the regional offices and through various initiatives from which Dorset can benefit.

We do not foresee a sudden haemorrhaging of staff out of Dorset as a result of the introduction of cost of living supplements, and the hon. Gentleman recognised that staff would not suddenly leave his hospital over the next couple of months. However, he was concerned about the possible long-term knock-on effects. We

recognise that we need to keep an eye on that. There is no point robbing Peter to pay Paul, and we take the hon. Gentleman's point seriously.

I am sure that we all share the desire to resolve recruitment and retention problems in the NHS. However, we will not put all our eggs in one basket, and neither should the hon. Member for Poole. Pay is not the only answer, and using pay and the cost of living supplement is only one part of our response to a problem that we all need to approach with the widest possible perspective.

11.14 am

Sitting suspended.

Chile

11.30 am

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): I welcome the opportunity to debate our relations with Chile and the situation in that country. First, I should declare an interest, which is in the Register of Members' Interests and is therefore openly on the record: I visited Chile last December and my fare was paid by human rights campaigners for Chile in this country; I was very grateful to them for that assistance.

Like other hon. Members, I have raised the issue of Chile in many debates since I was first elected in 1983. I visited Chile for the first time in 1970 and was inspired by much of what I saw there. I shared the hopes that were aroused by the election of the Popular Unity Government and, like millions around the world, I was appalled by the events of 1973, when British planes were used to bomb the presidential palace, which resulted in the death of President Allende, the rounding up of large numbers of people into the national stadium, and a reign of terror, including the caravan of death.

Many Members of Parliament worked tirelessly to help Chilean asylum seekers in the early 1970s. It would be wrong not to pause for a moment to remember the wonderful work by Dame Judith Hart and many other Members of Parliament in supporting Chilean people who came to this country. We should also recognise the enormous contribution by members of the Chilean exiled community, who have lived in this country ever since, as well as the work by the Chile Committee for Human Rights and the Chile Solidarity Campaign in raising support for victims of torture and showing the world the brutality committed during the Pinochet regime and during the coup.

That brutality was almost unparalleled in Latin America. After the planes bombed the palace, the police and the army went around systematically rounding up anyone who was believed to be a supporter of the Allende Government. The caravan of death went from town to town with groups of officers picking up anyone who was thought to be part of the Allende Government, who was then either summarily executed, or taken away for torture and later executed.

The bodies of many of those people have still not been recovered. That reign of terror did not stop after a few weeks; it went on for years. It had a strong foreign policy element: the Pinochet regime helped to establish Operation Condor, a process by which the military regimes of Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay co-operated to round up their supposed opponents and to mete out unspeakable acts of torture against them.

The record of the west and other countries in relation to Chile is patchy. There was a United Nations programme to assist people to leave Chile to live in a place of safety. A number came to Britain and more went to Sweden, Mexico, Cuba and several other countries, where they contributed to the societies there. At the same time, the United States, which, through its multinational connections, was heavily involved in the 1973 coup—I look forward to reading the accurate memoirs of Henry Kissinger, when he finally gets around to publishing them—imposed on Chile an economic strategy known as the Chicago school. That highest form of monetarism led to massive

[Mr. Jeremy Corbyn]

unemployment, vast privatisation and the development of a yawning gap between rich and poor, which persists in Chile to this day.

The British contribution in the mid-1970s was to support human rights campaigners in Chile, but with the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979, British arms sales to Chile resumed. The Thatcher Government enjoyed close links with the Pinochet regime, as was amply demonstrated by visits to Pinochet while he was under house arrest in this country by Margaret Thatcher and Norman Lamont—and, indeed, by an hon. Member who is present today—and the Pinochet Foundation's presentation to Norman Lamont of a medal, which I am sure he is proud to wear.

Pinochet corrupted much of what went on throughout Latin America. For example, there was an interesting article in *The Observer* in December about the sale of drugs by the Pinochet regime. It stated:

"Twelve tons of the drug, with a street value of several billion pounds left Chile in 1986 and 1987 alone. The drugs, destined for Europe, have often been flown to Spanish territory by aircraft carrying Chilean-made arms for Iraq and Iran. Distribution to Britain and other European countries has been controlled by secret missions stationed in Chilean embassies in Stockholm and Madrid."

Such issues require examination because of the suggestion that the Pinochet regime, while in receipt of British military aid or arms, was involved in the international drugs trade.

It should be remembered that, throughout the time of the caravan of death and all its horrors, many people in Chile bravely stood up and campaigned for human rights to defend others from being imprisoned and tortured. I shall quote from a poem sent to me recently by a Chilean man, Tito Tricot—I shall not read it all as Mr. Tricot is quite loquacious and the poem is very long. It gives some idea of the feelings of people in Chile towards Pinochet and the caravan of death. It states:

"General Pinochet will be tried in relation to the massacre of 75 Chileans when a special army task force, known as 'Caravan of Death', toured the country executing prisoners. They all died a painful and slow death; their bodies were mutilated, their eyes carved up with knives, their limbs torn apart. How can a human being be capable of such horror? How could they inflict such pain on defenceless people? How could Pinochet and his henchmen transform the entire country into a Caravan of Death?"

The change of Government in 1990 came about not by accident, but because of international pressure following the campaign of the people in Chile and because of the sheer horror at what went on there. That led to the plebiscite in 1988 and, finally, to the election in 1990 of President Aylwin, whose inauguration I attended. It was a moving event, held in the national stadium. There was talk of reconciliation, of those things never again happening in Chile and of opening the history books, but the constitution that Pinochet bequeathed to the people of Chile protected him and his henchmen, gave them priority positions in the Senate and in the supreme court and granted them a high degree of immunity.

Although the Rettig commission did a lot of work and named a lot of people who had gone missing, there were few, if any, successful prosecutions as a result. Indeed, very little happened abroad other than the prosecution for the death in Washington of Orlando Letelier in 1976. The problem for the people of Chile after 1990 was not that they had got rid of Pinochet, but that there was a collective attempt to forget what had happened.

Some people, however, were not prepared to forget and recognised that justice could come about only by revealing the truth. In that sense, credit must be given to Baltazar Garzon and others in Spain for their efforts to have Pinochet extradited when he arrived in this country.

I remember 16 October 1998 as a day of enormous significance, when news came that Pinochet had been arrested by the Metropolitan police under extradition law on the basis of a warrant issued by a Spanish court. Pinochet was subsequently held in this country for 503 days. In December, I visited the Agrupacion de los Desaparecidos, the family centre for those who disappeared, which displays a large poster saying "503 days". Those 503 days were crucial to the history of Chile because they enabled people to campaign for legal and constitutional change and to bring about the real justice that had been denied for so long.

The arrest of Pinochet had obvious reverberations around the world. The right of a state, in this case Britain, to arrest a former head of state was confirmed. Pinochet claimed first that he had diplomatic immunity and then that he had immunity as a former head of state. Both those claims were overturned by the House of Lords. Even after the House of Lords reheard the case once Judge Hoffmann had been removed from the initial panel of judges, Pinochet still was not granted immunity. Although he was indicted on charges of torture after 1988, he was nevertheless indicted both as a former head of state and head of the armed forces. The role played by the judiciary in this country in the process of international law against dictators, torturers and murderers was extremely significant.

Those who campaigned ceaselessly in Britain to ensure that the world knew about that deserve a huge amount of praise. They helped the world to know that Pinochet, the man who claimed that nothing moved in Chile without his permission, was finally brought down. It was a humbling sight to see him being taken away from Belmarsh magistrates court under a blanket. He was allowed to return to Chile on the basis of medical evidence that had been prepared at the request of the Chilean embassy here. Many of us strongly questioned both the purpose of the medical examinations and the conclusions that were drawn from them. The pictures of Pinochet getting off the plane in Chile and suddenly, Lazarus-like, being able to walk, talk, smile and wave, were a great surprise to many people.

I ask the Home Office and the Foreign Office to look again at the medical evidence on which Pinochet was allowed to go. A military hospital in Chile has now adjudged that he is fit to face trial and competent to understand the case against him. We should think carefully about the medical evidence that we were offered. It was not released initially. It was made public only after the Belgian Government continued with the case in the British courts.

I should also like the Minister to comment on the pressure under which the British Government were placed and the discussions that took place between the representatives of the British, United States, Spanish

and Chilean Governments during 1999. I understand that requests were made to find some form of words to allow Pinochet to return to Chile. Many of us were campaigning for a judicial process to take place against Pinochet in Europe, under extradition law to Spain, because we thought it unlikely at that stage that he would be tried in Chile. When the books are opened, it will be nice to know who put pressure on whom to ensure that Pinochet was allowed to leave these shores without going through the due judicial process.

When Pinochet returned to Chile, Judge Guzman and others who had worked hard during the intervening 10 years and more to uncover the bodies from the caravan of death began to assemble a massive case against him and the other military personnel. There is something deeply moving about talking to people who have been exhuming bodies from unmarked graves. Many of those bodies are now stored in the morgue in Santiago while the painful process of DNA testing to match bodies with relatives continues. Imagine the pain of people whose relatives disappeared after the coup in 1973 who still do not know their fate. Occasionally, someone goes along to the national memorial in the cemetery in Santiago and engraves another name, as another body is found and finally identified as yet another person who disappeared during the dictatorship.

During my visit, I went to the national stadium, the centre of torture to which many people were taken. I also went to the velodrome, where the worst torture took place. We walked around the velodrome, with victims of torture and others, and were struck by the stupidity, the horror and the arbitrariness of it. We stood on a concrete cycling track with beautiful mountains in the background, listening to a man talking about how he was tortured there. That man was just an attendant, a messenger, at the Chilean department of education, but someone—some fevered brain in the police or military—decided that he was central to some communist plot to subvert the whole of South America. He was unspeakably tortured, and he spoke about it with tears in his eyes, explaining what had been done to him and so many others.

I also attended international human rights day at Villa Grimaldi, in Santiago, the centre of interrogation and torture. It was a very moving event: more than 1,000 people took part to bear witness. I went to the national cemetery, and saw the names of the victims carved on the memorial—the brilliant, the famous and the almost unknown died equally. The name of Victor Jara was alongside those of less well known people.

At that time, there were high hopes in Chile that Pinochet would be put on trial. Unfortunately, the following day in the High Court, a writ for habeas corpus was successful, and Pinochet was de-arrested. Subsequently Judge Guzman and others managed to have a large number of other cases registered in the court in Chile. The medical examination has taken place, and Pinochet has been re-arrested and indicted. We have almost reached the point at which a legal process can begin against him.

Other issues are at stake. It must be obvious that a trial of Pinochet is not a trial of one individual. He did not act alone. He seized power in a conspiracy with other officers, supported by the military and by a number of multinational companies who had been waging economic warfare against Chile for years to destabilise the country and create chaos in which they could seize power with all the brutality that they displayed. We need to know what those pressures were, who said what and who did what.

The United States of America was clearly involved. The Central Intelligence Agency had a large station in Chile. Henry Kissinger was personally involved. That much we know. Various companies were involved, not just in Chile but in the economic warfare against Chile. Thanks to brilliant work in the United States, many thousands of documents have been released by the State Department, and they are now held in the national archives at the national library in Santiago. Some documents have been doctored by the CIA—I was there on the day when they were presented, and some pages have literally been blanked out. They were obviously CIA documents, and it will now be hard to understand what was in them, but many others were very revealing. The USA's freedom of information law allows us that kind of information.

I ask again the question, which I have asked in the House and have raised in early-day motions—why cannot the same information be released in this country? The documents for 1970, which have been released under the 30-year rule, raise interesting points. They reveal a proposal from the United States and some other sources, that Britain should take part in some form of pre-emptive strike—a coup—to prevent the election as President of Chile of Salvador Allende, the Popular Unity candidate. That plot would have destabilised Allende's Government before they had even taken office. Records of meetings show that Sir Alec Douglas-Home, who became Foreign Secretary after the June 1970 general election, was put under pressure in this respect. Those papers give us a soupçon, a taster of what may be in other documents.

The United Kingdom is an important trading partner with Chile. We were an important arms seller to Chile, and we received a great deal of military co-operation secretly from Chile during the Falklands war. I ask the Minister to explain clearly why documents can be released in the United States, such as those relating to Operation Condor in Buenos Aires, in Montevideo and in Asuncion, which are now held at the high court in Asuncion, but not here. What is so special about Britain that we cannot reveal the secrets that we hold?

When the trial of Pinochet and his military officers takes place, we will need to know the truth, and those documents will help to uncover the truth of how torture and murder took place. I ask the Minister, with the greatest respect, to look again at this issue. Although there is no international legal process against Pinochet and his generals in the same way that there is in the case of Rwanda or former Yugoslavia, or that there was in the case of former Nazi Germany, it is likely that a big case will be held in Chile, and those documents could provide an important part of it and could encourage other countries to release documents.

The cases of two British nationals and one American national could be included in the process. I will deal first with the American national. Charles Horman, a young American living in Chile in the 1970s, was taken away, tortured and killed. His story became the subject of the absolutely brilliant film "Missing", which demonstrated the arbitrary nature of military power and its vileness and brutality. Charlie Horman's widow came to this

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country to bear witness when the House of Lords case was going on, and I met her then. She also went to Chile and took part in a symbolic cleansing process of part of the national stadium. She has since issued an appeal, from which I will briefly quote:

"Charles' mother Elizabeth, now 96, and I thank you for your support of our efforts to get at the truth concerning the death of Charles Horman in Chile in 1973— in which we firmly believe, the United States played a shameful part. Your help will enable us to shed light on one of the darkest chapters in the history of Latin America and our own country and will contribute to ending the practice of impunity for crimes against humanity, which characterised so much of the last century."

Joyce Horman is asking for international help to ensure that her husband's case is taken through the Chilean courts, and she has already ensured that case is registered.

Two British nationals also died in Chile. William Beausire died in 1975 and Father Michael Woodward two years later. Both were tortured and killed for no good reason. Their families still grieve for them and are still in a very distressed state because of them.

I have constantly raised questions about these cases and there are two particular aspects that I would like to emphasise. First, when we had the opportunity to allow a private criminal case to take place against General Pinochet while he was being held in Britain, the then Attorney-General refused permission for that case to be deposited in the British courts. That was despite the fact that the Metropolitan police were undertaking an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of William Beausire, and despite the fact that a vast amount of evidence had been deposited with the Metropolitan police at that time by me and others. I asked the Solicitor-General about this at Question Time last week and the last part of his answer was:

"Under the Criminal Justice (International Co-operation) Act 1990, it is possible for authorities in this country to assist prosecution in Chile, and that might well happen." – [*Official Report*, 1 February 2001; Vol. 362, c. 442.]

I have also received a letter from the Minister concerning that matter and the case of Father Michael Woodward. The Minister is aware of Father Woodward's case, having met his sister and spoken with his family. Indeed, he raised the case when he went to the inauguration of President Lagos in Chile last year. I hope, therefore, that the Minister will be able to offer us some hope that, as with the case of Charles Horman, whose case has now been deposited in the courts in Chile, the British authorities will give all assistance they possibly can to uncover the truth of who was guilty of the murders of Beausire and Woodward, and that all Foreign Office documents relating to their disappearance and death, including cables and reports that came from the embassy at the time, will be revealed. Statements made at the time by the Foreign Secretary, David Owen, suggest that a great deal of knowledge should to be brought to light.

The process that has taken place in Chile can bring about justice. It cannot bring back the dead, turn the clock back or take the torches away, but it can indict the people who seized power and who destroyed so much of that country, murdered so many people and set such a terrible example around the world. It can and, I hope, will hasten the inauguration of the International Criminal Court that will mean the Pinochets of tomorrow will face justice more quickly and simply.

We have had more than 10 years of pursuit of Pinochet since he ceased to be president and he still has not faced justice. He offered no justice to his people but he has been offered every possible avenue of justice. We have a role to play. As a country, we played a role. I ask the Minister to ensure that we play our part in giving all the support we can to the people who are prosecuting in Chile. I ask him to open the books, to release the information to support the families of Beausire and Woodward, to tell us the truth about what happened and what the British arms sold to Chile were used for in the 1980s. Do we too, through our arms trade, have blood on our hands because of what happened in Chile?

I hope that that process can be a lesson for all of us about the dangers of the economic madness that went on in Chile after Pinochet seized power and the unbridled power of multinational capital, which was used to promote that coup and all the horrors that went with it, so that the world never again sees the likes of General Pinochet, Operation Condor and so many other things.

11.56 am

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): We owe a debt of gratitude to the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) for introducing this important debate on Britain's relations with Chile. We all recognise his long and deep interest in the country. My own interest does not go back quite as far as his, but I have been going to Chile every year since the mid 1980s for family reasons. My last visit was during the Christmas recess, when I spent a significant amount of time in the south of Chile and in the capital, Santiago.

I have tried to keep up to date and have the privilege of serving under the hon. Gentleman as vice-chairman of the British-Chile all-party group, which I founded when Chile regained a democracy. We try in the House to foster good relations with Chile. That is easy in the sense that Chile is an exemplary democracy: it scored a commendable success in effecting a difficult transition from a period of enforced military rule. The last presidential elections, closely fought, brought the socialist president Ricardo Lagos to power by an extremely narrow margin over Mr. Lavin. The campaign was peaceful and the institution of the new Administration was successful in every way.

The interesting thing is that although the hon. Gentleman criticises the Chicago school of economic reforms that were instituted at the time of the military government, those reforms have been largely maintained. Other Latin American economies have benefited from using these reforms as a model. Chile is a reasonably prosperous country: according to "Whitaker's Almanac" it has an unemployment rate of some 7 per cent. and an inflation rate of some 5 per cent, figures that compare favourably with many countries in the European Union. It has a diverse economy which is modernising rapidly.

As far as the United Kingdom is concerned Chile is, and always has been, an important trading partner. The United Kingdom was active at the time of Chile's liberation from the Spanish empire. The commander in

chief of the Chilean navy at that time, Admiral Cochrane, was instrumental in the liberation of Chile. Moreover, through his assistance by seaborne interventions in the campaign of San Martin in Peru, he helped to liberate that country as well.

The first President of Chile, Bernardo O'Higgins, who was the bastard son of the viceroy of Peru, spent formative years at Richmond upon Thames. Those personal connections, reinforced by the Canning doctrine, whereby it was held that the new world was called into existence to redress the balance of the old, meant that the United Kingdom had an important relationship with the Chilean state from its beginning and throughout the 19th century, particularly in shipping, the development of Chile's railways, mining and the exploitation of the important nitrate deposits in the north.

As a consequence, there has been a significant Anglo-Chilean community in Chile. President Aylwin, the Christian Democrat who followed General Pinochet as head of state, can trace his roots back to the UK and has family connections, I believe, in Sussex. Such connections are not unusual among a large number of Chileans, which was brought home to me when I visited The Grange, a famous secondary school, where a plaque on the wall commemorated the casualties of the second world war. A large number of pupils had gone back to England to fight in the British armed forces, particularly as airmen; there were many names of those who perished on our behalf while fighting in the Royal Air Force.

In the post-war period, the trading relationship declined somewhat, but it has reasserted itself to the extent that the UK is the third biggest investor in Chile after the United States and Spain. Therefore, we have an important stake in Chile. Visible trade is also significant to us, although our trade is not in balance: the Chileans sell much more to us than we sell to them. Customs and Excise statistics show that UK exports to Chile in the first 11 months of last year were worth £106 million, whereas Chilean exports to the UK were worth £436 million. That is a remarkable achievement by the Chileans and shows how important it is for UK exporters to be even more active in the Chilean market. Only recently, there was a seminar in Santiago, which was attended by the Minister for Housing and Planning and European Union Commissioner Chris Patten. We are doing our best through the Latin American trade advisory group—which comes under the new trading arrangements instituted by Her Majesty's Government—and are hopeful that trade will grow and expand.

As I have said, Chilean democratic credentials are excellent, as is its tradition of the rule of law. The hon. Member for Islington, North referred to the case of Senator Pinochet, which is being dealt with in the Chilean courts. It is entirely appropriate that Chileans decide for themselves how they deal with citizens such as Senator Pinochet against whom serious allegations are levelled. It is often alleged that Chile has an imperfect democracy because of the appointed senators, of whom Pinochet is one. However, 38 of the senators are elected and only nine are appointed, whereas we have no directly elected members of the Upper House and a much larger number of appointed peers than those who remain in the Upper House by virtue of the indirect election. Chile has 120 deputies, who are elected for a four-year term. The presidential term is a single term of only six years, which is the maximum allowed under the Chilean constitution, whereas in this country one can be re-elected as Prime Minister for several terms. I do not think that the Chileans' democratic credentials are in question, nor is their adherence to the rule of law.

It is true and tragic that there was a period, dating from the assumption of power by the junta in 1973, when Chile was under military rule, but one must remember that the people of Chile largely urged the military to intervene: the Congress of Chile did so, as did the supreme court and the auditor general of Chile. Many more people were killed in Peru in that period, during the Sendero Luminoso terrorist campaign. Many more people were killed in the insurgencies in Colombia—we hope that the guerrilla problem there will be solved by President Pastrana's peace process. The same is true of the bitter civil wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, which were largely fostered and stoked up by the intervention of the Cubans. At least the intervention of the armed forces in Chile in 1973 ensured that Marxist influence was checked in Latin America. It was a turning point in the cold war, like the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the assumption of power in Egypt by Anwar Sadat.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): I believe passionately that a crucial distinction ought to be made in respect of some of the examples that the hon. Gentleman has given. If I recall rightly, President Allende was democratically elected—that is a vital difference.

Mr. Wilkinson: I have mentioned the fact that democratic institutions were being subverted in Chile at the time of Popular Unity Government of Salvador Allende. That was the tragedy of the situation.

No one understood the tragedy better than the Chilean people themselves. The economic position of the country was utterly disastrous, with an inflation rate of 500 per cent and acute shortages in the shops. Eventually, there were even attempts to generate mutinies in the armed forces, especially the Chilean navy. It was the attempt to engender mutiny in the Chilean navy that brought about the call by the commander in chief of the Chilean navy for the Chilean armed forces to intervene. It was not not something that people did lightly.

Now, the people of Chile, rightly, want to put all that behind them. They have had, as I have explained, a successful transition period and they wonder why, when people talk about Chile, they focus on such a relatively small period in that country's history. In 1988, there was referendum in which 44 per cent. voted for Senator Pinochet to stay in power—not a majority vote, but the same proportion of the electorate as the present Prime Minister in this country got at the last election. It was not a majority vote and General Pinochet relinquished power.

As I have explained, the transition was—thank God—exemplary and the Chileans rejoice in that fact. They want to move forward, to develop their economy and their institutions, improve social provision, eliminate poverty, improve the health services and do all

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the other things that a normal democratic Government would do. They deserve support and encouragement in this process, which is, by and large, going well.

Mr. Corbyn: Will the hon. Gentleman estimate how many people died or disappeared and how many were tortured in what he describes as a relatively minor period in Chilean history? Is he seriously suggesting that somehow the military was forced by a wave of public opinion to lock up people in the national stadium, institute the caravan of death and everything else? He is offering us a ludicrous perversion of history.

Mr. Wilkinson: I wish that it were a perversion of history. The hon. Gentleman referred to the documents that have been published by American sources. If those are read and studied, they reveal a catalogue of foreign involvement in Chile. The outgoing president, Salvador Allende, who was murdered, was toting a machine gun that he was given by Fidel Castro, his closest ally, who had provided a great many Cuban experts. There were floods of illegal arms into Chile; many members of the security forces were killed and the country was descending into anarchy. In those circumstances, the armed forces felt that they had to intervene. I stress again that those are aspects of the cold war: there was an intense ideological division, not only in Chile, but elsewhere in the world. Thank goodness that we have put that period of history behind us.

I have stressed that the Chilean economy is, broadly speaking, well run and diverse. Chile has good trading relations with the UK and with other countries—for example, it has trading agreements with the European Union and Mexico and is a member of Mercosur. Chile's is a liberal, open economy from which its people have benefited. Now, they want to use the increased prosperity that the reforms have produced to improve the standard of living of the people as a whole. Such an objective merits merits every encouragement from the United Kingdom and other countries that have always had a friendly relationship with Chile.

The hon. Member for Islington, North mentioned arms sales. In that respect, the pattern of purchases from Chile is broadly based: the latest submarines are Franco-Spanish Scorpènes submarines, which replace British Oberon submarines. The army is buying Leopard 1 tanks from Germany; and in the wake of the United States Government's more liberal policy towards arms sales to Latin America, the air force is closely examining the F16, although there could be a problem over the armaments. No one could suggest that we are interested in Chile only because of arms sales. Britain's investments in Chile are much more broadly based, in industries such as mining, agriculture, salmon farming, transportation and much else besides. This is all to the good. As I explained, we are the third biggest investor in that country.

I hope that the House recognises that Chile is a liberal democracy with rule of law and democratic institutions that have the full support of the Chilean people. The people hope that the good relations with the UK that have always been beneficial to both countries will be maintained. I am sure that Her Majesty's Government want that and that most hon. Members want it, too.

12.13 pm

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute) *rose—*

Mr. Bill Olner (in the Chair): Order. So that the Minister has time to reply to this important debate, I ask the hon. Lady to keep her comments brief.

Mrs. Michie: Thank you, Mr. Olner. I will be as swift as I can.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) on having secured the debate. I welcome the opportunity to raise briefly a matter which, given the tenor of the debate, may surprise the Minister and hon. Members. I hope that, although the issue that I raise is entirely different, the hon. Member for Islington, North will understand that that does not mean that I do not acknowledge and appreciate the remarks he made with knowledge and sincerity about human rights in Chile. However, I believe that it is necessary to draw attention to our trading relations with that country, and I am trying to do that under the heading of UK relations with Chile.

One matter in particular could cause a deterioration in our relations and the loss of significant exports, worth many hundreds of thousands of pounds. When talking about our history of trade and investment in Chile, the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) mentioned salmon farming and, in so doing, foreshadowed the matters that I wish to discuss.

I have in my constituency a company, Land Catch Salmon Hatchery, which has been exporting high-quality, disease-free salmon eggs to Chile since 1988. The company has established an enviable reputation and track record in many years of trading with Chile. I had the pleasure of opening the salmon breeding and research unit in 1988. The problem is the regulations introduced in December by the Chilean department of fisheries, apparently because of infectious salmon anaemia, commonly known as ISA. No ISA has been diagnosed in Scotland for two years. By banning the imports of salmon eggs originating from Scotland because of concerns about ISA, Chile is unilaterally treating the whole of Scotland as a controlled zone for ISA. It is not. Ormsary in my constituency has never had any ISA. It is in an ISA-free zone. The Scottish Executive Rural Affairs Department has established ISA-free zones to standards exceeding those recommended by international organisations and has made that clear, as has the company on numerous occasions to the Chilean authorities.

The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood also talked about our investment in Chile. There are customers in Chile who want to invest and who have built the required facilities. They need to know immediately that they can import land-catch eggs as normal but the new quarantine regulations make that difficult.

Mr. Bill Olner (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Lady draw her comments to a conclusion so that the Minister may reply?

Mrs. Michie: The company is a highly regarded breeding stock catchery with stringent health and environmental regulations. The impasse has existed since the end of August. We are likely to lose another

£500,000. I do not expect the Minister to be able to answer me in detail today but I should like advice about what I should do because the situation is critical.

12.16 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) on winning the debate in the ballot and I thank him for raising the topic. He has conducted a sustained campaign for human rights internationally, and has stood up for human rights in Chile for many years—certainly for as long as I have known him.

My hon. Friend declared an interest and said that he had visited Chile. I hope that he did not declare that with any chagrin because I welcome the fact that he visits Chile. I would encourage other hon. Members and Ministers to do so as often as they can. We are building good relations with President Lagos's Government. Maybe I too should declare an interest retrospectively. I vividly remember the accounts of what happened in the Santiago football stadium in the early 1970s and I was involved in supporting the Chile Solidarity Campaign. Chileans came to my home city of Leeds where we made them warmly welcome and campaigned with them. Some of them remain good friends to this day, including some who, thankfully, have been able to return to Chile—some to high office in the Chilean Government, which is encouraging.

Those who commit atrocities should be brought to justice internationally and locally and we should campaign for that. I visited Chile just a few days after Pinochet's return—I went with some fear and trepidation, although I did not quite go out on the same plane as he did—to attend the inauguration of President Lagos. When I got there, I expected and received two reactions. One was from Chileans who felt that they wanted to "sort him out" themselves and bring him to justice, and the other was from those who felt that we should not even have challenged him because he had done such a great job.

Our relations with the new Government are now on an excellent footing and will be developed on that basis. We can work together on those matters and on trade relations. The episode of General Pinochet staying in Britain is not a barrier between us and is not holding back our relations politically, socially, culturally or commercially.

I welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) about trade. We have good trade relations. The Minister for Housing and Planning visited Chile in November, the Minister for Trade did so in December, and there have been meetings with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister also had a positive meeting with President Lagos in New York in September last year. Our trade relations are going well. We are encouraging and strengthening our ties commercially, politically and economically.

The arguments of the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood were surprising. Would he have justified a coup in Britain against Mrs. Thatcher at the time of the poll tax? That would make an interesting debate, but I shall not go down that road.

I can tell the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) that we are concerned that Chile is imposing controls on the import of salmon eggs from Scotland. All countries have the right to regulate imports on health grounds, but the production of salmon eggs in Scotland is subject to one of the strictest health regimes in the world. We are urging, and will continue to urge, the Chilean authorities to remove their import controls. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising the issue on behalf of her constituents. The Government intend to help.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North raised human rights issues. Dealing with the legacy of the Pinochet Government remains an immense challenge for the present Chilean Government and for the Chilean people. The National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation, set up under President Aylwin, examined the human rights record of the military and its report identified more than 3,000 deaths and disappearances between 1973 and 1990.

Since 1990, more than 300 prosecutions for human rights abuses committed under the Pinochet regime have taken place in Chile—including the prosecution of the former head of the Chilean intelligence service under Pinochet. Some progress has been made since 1990—and since the restoration of democracy under Presidents Aylwin, Frei and Lagos. The fates of most of the 1,009 disappeared remain unknown, but information and the truth will come out eventually.

On January 5 this year, the armed forces handed over to President Lagos a report containing information gathered over the previous six months about the fate of some 200 of the disappeared. That information is now in the hands of investigating judges, who must try to establish what happened. The difference between the Executive and the judiciary is important: it is the judiciary who must process the allegations and bring those responsible to book.

As a direct result of the information provided by the armed forces in their round table report, established in August 1999, human remains have now been discovered in a disused copper mine on the Santiago hillside of Cuesta Barriga. The outcome of the round table leaves many cases yet unresolved, but it is a breakthrough. I gain the clear impression, on the basis of our relations with President Lagos and his Administration, that the Chilean Government intend to call people to account and ensure that justice is done.

Mr. Corbyn: Is my hon. Friend the Minister able to discuss with the Chilean Government, the Department of Health and human rights groups in Chile whether we could provide any forensic DNA-type support to help to identify the remains?

Mr. Battle: That is a practical and positive suggestion. I am prepared to make that offer: there is no reason why Chile cannot use the best of our scientific techniques.

The commander of the army's division in the northern region of Antofagasta where the caravan of death took place gave a surprise TV interview on 25 January, firmly blaming Pinochet for the military regime's human rights violations. General Lagos's comments were prompted by Pinochet's statement to Judge Guzman that the regional commanders, not he, were to blame for failing to investigate human rights abuses in those zones. General Lagos's graphic descriptions of the victims who had been tortured before being murdered unsurprisingly

[Mr. Battle]

shocked the nation and the international community. A Government spokesperson described the interview as shattering and General Lagos's accusations prompted the usual reactions. They will be followed through.

On 31 January, Judge Guzman formally charged Pinochet as the co-author of 57 deaths and 18 kidnappings on that caravan of death case. His written decision details how the medical tests concluded that Pinochet had some mental impairment and was physically frail but was not incapable of facing trial. He rejected the defence's arguments that he should not face house arrest or trial for health reasons, but left open the possibility of Pinochet's poor health being a mitigating factor if and when sentence was passed. I simply draw my hon. Friend's attention to that because the UK medical decision is in the Library. It is important to emphasise that we let due process take place in all these matters. There was no collusion or collaboration and we were not leaned on by the Chilean authorities when Pinochet was here. I underline that.

Official reactions in Chile have been cautious. President Lagos was on holiday when the formal charges were placed, but Vice-President Insulza reiterated the Government's line of not commenting on judicial decisions. He recognised the significance of the ruling and welcomed the demonstration of the free and fair working of Chile's institutions, but he also noted that this was not the end of the line. The legal process has some way to run and there are several other processes to go through before there is a prospect of a trial. If appeals go badly for Pinochet, there could be movements towards that trial. The due processes of law are taking place in Chile.

I turn now to the other cases to which my hon. Friend referred. We have raised the case of William Beausire with the Chilean Government on a number of occasions and it was raised by previous Administrations in 1976 and 1979. The case was formally submitted to an ad hoc working group of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and our embassy in Santiago has also made numerous representations. As my hon. Friend acknowledged, I met Michael Woodward's sister, Pat Bennetts, on 10 February last year. Following that meeting I asked our embassy in Santiago to raise Father Woodward's case with the Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The embassy called on the ministry in March last year and it accepted that, although the case was detailed in the Rettig report, it did not establish who had been responsible for the torture and death of Father Woodward. It maintained that the Government had investigated the case as far as they could, but Mrs. Bennetts could take the matter forward only through the Chilean courts.

When I visited Santiago for the inauguration I raised the case again with our ambassador and asked the embassy to proceed through the diplomatic channels to make sure that the case was kept in the forefront of the Chilean authorities' minds. Mr. and Mrs. Bennetts had a meeting at our embassy in Santiago on 12 January. Mrs. Bennetts informed the embassy of her intention to present a law suit on her brother's case. Mr. Bennetts also expressed concern about the comments made by the commander in chief of the Chilean navy and the Chilean ambassador to Canada to the effect that torture had never taken place on the Esmeralda. The embassy had raised that with the Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 19 January and it has acknowledged that those remarks caused concern in the Chilean Government and that that ambassador has been admonished. I give my hon. Friend my personal assurance that I will continue to press this case. We will draw to the attention of the Chilean authorities any information and evidence that comes our way.

My hon. Friend referred at length to the release of documents. The release of documents is governed by the Public Records Acts of 1958 and 1967. There are provisions for the release of documents earlier than 30 years after their creation, although the Foreign Office does not usually release records unless there is a compelling case for so doing. As my hon. Friend acknowledged, there are implications for bilateral relations with Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay if records relating to most of the 1970s and 1980s are released. Nevertheless, it would be a massive task to review all those files before they could be released, and it is a statutory obligation on all Departments to screen them for sensitivity.

My hon. Friend makes a serious and fair point about evidence that might help the Chilean authorities to bring people to account for their crimes. In this debate, however, I can only give him a commitment to look again at those records and see if there is anyway we can assist in bringing people to account. The International Criminal Court may be of help in that matter.

Policing (East Anglia)

12.30 pm.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce this debate. I am also grateful to the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), for being here to respond.

Two weeks ago in Risby, near where I live in Suffolk, there was a raid on the small post office, which is part of an antiques centre. The raiders wore balaclavas and carried coshes. They screamed and shouted at the sub-postmistress, saying that they were going to kill her. They smashed the glass to ensure that the robbery was speeded up. It was a deeply shocking and traumatising experience for all involved. Just last week, across the border in Cambridgeshire in the village of Bassingbourne, a similar robbery took place. Masked robbers with baseball bats went into the post office and held it up. I have here an article from the *Cambridge Evening News* that proves the extent of the anxiety in the local community. The article points out that the robbery rapidly followed similar raids in Grantchester and Great Abington. Late last year, again in my constituency, the post office at Kedington was held up, on that occasion at gun point. That occurred shortly after a raid on the small post office at Stoke-by-Clare.

Let me make clear to the Minister something of which he will already be aware as a Member who represents an East Anglian constituency: such events are deeply traumatising to small communities. They have a ripple effect that sends out fear and anxiety in the locality. When a small shop or village post office is held up, the community's sense of well-being is greatly disturbed. The truth is that in the past two years in my constituency, in addition to the places I have already mentioned, hold-ups have taken place in Lakenheath, Dalham, Worlington, Horringer, Barton Mills, West Row and Newmarket. Even that is not a complete list. I have had hundreds of letters from people who are sick to death of the huge rise in violent crime in our region.

I focused on the problem in a newsletter that I put out just before Christmas. I pointed out that it was a source of considerable anxiety to people in my constituency and asked whether the concern was justified. The truth is that, since the general election, there have been 40 fewer police officers in the Suffolk constabulary and crime has risen by 20 per cent. Since April 1998, when the measurement of violent crime changed, crimes of violence in Suffolk have risen by 59 per cent.—twice the rate of other English counties. Given that, in the 12 months preceding April 1998, crimes of violence increased by 21.2 per cent, the figure of 59 per cent. over the four-year period of which I am speaking is certainly an underestimate. That is a shocking statistic. Such violence profoundly undermines the fabric of rural life.

To be frank, the problem arises from chronically inadequate police numbers. The pressures on Suffolk constabulary and surrounding constabularies are greater than ever and the effect on police officers' morale is devastating. A letter to me from Mrs. Butcher of Brandon reveals the problem. She states:

"In my young days, there were always two policemen on foot every night patrolling the town, even though we had a population of 2,000. Those were the days."

I refer to the results published in my "West Suffolk Westminster Report" after I invited people to put their views on crime and policing in my constituency. I asked 10 questions, of which the following are three with the responses. When asked, "Do you think that there are enough policemen and women on the streets?" only 1 per cent. replied yes and 98 per cent. no. The question "Do you feel that crime is on the increase in our local area?" elicited a yes from 84.1 per cent. and a no from 5.6 per cent. At the risk of straying into party politics, I also asked "Do you feel that the Government have met their pledge to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime?" to which 2 per cent. replied yes and 97 per cent. no.

The impact on local communities is reflected in the way in which the local media deal with the issue. They respond to the anxieties of people who live in the local community and who are extremely worried about the lack of police coverage. No one could describe the local newspapers in East Anglia as being remotely sensational. For example, on 17 January, the front-page headline of the *Thetford & Watton Times*, the local paper in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard), stated: "Stand up to yobs on estate call". The article stated:

"A Thetford housing estate is being held to ransom by a group of marauding youths because residents are too scared to report incidents to the police."

The article refers not to a sink estate in an inner-city area in which alienation and despair might be rife, but to Norfolk, in East Anglia. Only a few days ago, a headline in the *Cambridge Evening News* read "Time to halt violent tide". The *Newmarket Weekly News* headline on 1 February was "Stern warning for criminals", and the following article stated that although the detection rate in Newmarket had gone up, which is welcome, crimes of violence in the preceding nine months had increased from 110 to 150. Thus the pattern continues.

I shall read the Minister an extract from a letter that truly disturbed me, from four 12-year-old girls who live in Newmarket—Catherine Snell, Elizabeth Lennie, Charlotte Telford and Corrine Marston. They said:

"We are concerned because there is a lot of vandalism, young smokers, alcoholism and drug abuse. We are also concerned because sometimes it is worrying to walk through the town where there are a lot of gangs of teenagers hanging around because they don't have anything to do."

That was reported in the *Newmarket Journal* and in the *Soham and Newmarket Standard*, which also carried two stories on—guess what—a baseball-bat thug in Mildenhall and an armed raider who was twice thwarted in the high street in Newmarket. Such things are deeply disturbing to the balance of communities, and the media are fully entitled to report them.

In Brandon—a police catchment area of about 20,000 people including those living in surrounding villages—there is sometimes only one police officer on duty. In Haverhill, with a catchment area of 33,000, there are sometimes only two police officers on duty, although I pay tribute to the success of Haverhill's police in reducing crime in the town. In Newmarket, too, the number of police officers has fallen in the past few years, in spite of Newmarket having become the nightclub capital of East Anglia. The pressures on the police are enormous. We have had staggeringly huge increases in

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crime, yet the number of police officers has fallen. The chief constable of Suffolk spelled out the problem when he talked of his his constabulary being stretched to the limit and of the absolute need for 100 additional police officers. His views are summed up in a comment made to me by Mr. C A Bailey of Mildenhall, another constituent of mine, who said:

"My wife and I recently retired and we no longer feel able to walk safely in our local area in the evenings. Where are the police these days?"

I hear that cry every weekend when I am down in my constituency. I was given another letter from a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley), a gentleman called David Barker, who is a distinguished former chairman of the National Farmers Union in Suffolk and who is very plugged in to his community. Mr. Barker writes :

"Although we have 1,100 in the Suffolk Police force many do not actually patrol. The Elmswell area has 35 villages and normally three police officers by day. At night there is virtually no cover because Elmswell and Eye, an area of 90 villages, has just one car on patrol. To travel from say Hoxne to West Suffolk to say Chadacre takes almost an hour. This is totally inadequate. We also have the problem of Life Science at Occold drawing away precious resources. This combined area, I am told, has 40 officers for one sixth of Suffolk."

Mr. Barker makes a further point:

"Rural people are being ignored and under protected in favour of the urban areas. Standard New Labour policy. I think the police force needs a good objective assessment to target police in the areas of real need."

There is widespread anxiety throughout my constituency, Suffolk and the rest of East Anglia. I would like to make two specific suggestions to the Minister, the first of which rests on the fact that much crime, particularly violent crime, has to do with youth crime. I have some pride in my involvement in setting up a drugs taskforce in Newmarket which has been replicated elsewhere, but I shall refer to a project that I saw while on a parliamentary visit to north America, one that dealt specifically with drugs and young people. I applaud many constabularies in different parts of the UK who have tried to connect to young people through specific projects—perhaps during the summer or school holidays--but the project I have in mind was a permanent one. It was in Ottawa in a truly run-down housing estate with every possible social problem—high crime, drug-taking, alienation, a very large immigrant community and many people who traditionally disliked each other. It was an almost impossible area for the police to deal with. What the police did was to identify something very simple about young people, which is that they have natural aggression. The police took over a building and turned into a sports centre run by police officers who had a good sporting track record and liked dealing with young people. Those officers started to build up a relationship with the young people and, crucially, acted as role models.

I allude to that idea having seen its success and because we need the Home Office to encourage and sponsor such projects, not only as the one-off schemes that exist now—although I repeat that I applaud them—but as projects to reach young people through sport and physical education.The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who must hold the world parliamentary record for taskforces and reviews, announced the other day—though I think it curious that it took nearly four years of Labour Government—that there would be a review of sport and physical education in schools. Physical education in this country is in rapid decline, and the level of fitness and sports participation among young people is not good. I hope that the Home Office will link up with the Department for Culture Media and Sport and have some input into the review. It is very important that we reach out to young people and that we make the police role models in their local communities. We have an opportunity to resolve a problem that exists in our schools; through the co-operation of the two Departments, the situation could be improved significantly. I applaud what is happening in Newmarket, where PC Greenwood is setting up a drop-in centre, which will be opening up to young people to encourage them to meet the police in a positive atmosphere. Not only are young people who participate in sport, less prone to criminal activity, they also perform better at school.

I would also like to make a very specific suggestion. The management of the Post Office have been down to my constituency, visiting the post offices that have been held-up and raided with the terrible consequences I already described. Running a small rural post office is expensive: it is difficult to build up the business, it is hard work, and the business is not very profitable. As a result, record numbers of rural post offices have been closing—there are 450 post offices for sale at this moment. I urge the Minister to talk to the Post Office about security in a proactive and positive way. I have repeatedly had meetings with the managers and they must be made to understand, that if there is inadequate security provision in rural post offices and if the police are not there to help when a problem arises, the ripple effect started by closure is exacerbated, encompassing all the problems that that brings for local communities. I urge the Minister to engage in high-level discussions with the Post Office on specific measures to address the issue.

It is a characteristic of the present Government that they like to target things—they have challenge funds and other sums that can be accessed for different purposes. I fully accept and acknowledge that there has been an increase in funding to the Suffolk constabulary, but the Minister should bear in mind—because it is a culture prevalent throughout Government Departments—that to secure those funds requires a very high level of bureaucratic activity on the part of the constabulary, and we know that the bureaucratic pressures on the police are already high. I hope that the ability of chief constables to organise policing in their areas is not being further impaired by the amount of bureaucratic activity that such funding requires.

At the heart of the issue is the absolute necessity to redress the reduction in police numbers that has happened in areas such as Suffolk. Indeed, we must add to those numbers. We must be tough on crime and on the causes of crime: in an area like East Anglia—where the causes of crime do not bear comparison with those in many other urban parts of England—there is no excuse. To be tough on crime requires transparency in sentencing and it requires that local criminal justice systems be supported so that magistrates understand about problem families in their local communities.

There is a crisis of violent criminality in East Anglia, in Suffolk in particular, and in my constituency. Enough is enough.

12.47 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring) on securing this debate, although I found some of his language a little extravagant. The debate provides a useful opportunity to air some of the concerns that have been raised about policing in East Anglia and it allows me accurately to set out the overall situation and put it into context.

East Anglia is relatively a very safe place to live. In all major categories of crime, offences per 1,000 of the population are well below the national average. In fact, the Audit Commission report on police performance for 1999-2000 published in January—the sort of good objective assessment to which the hon. Gentleman referred—shows that his local area of Suffolk, has the fourth lowest crime rate in England and one of the highest detection rates. I understand from the chief constable of Suffolk that house burglary in the force area is the lowest in the country in terms of number of offences and of repeat victims. The below-average trends for crime per 1,000 of the population are repeated in the other East Anglian counties of Cambridgeshire and Norfolk, to which I shall refer during the course of this debate. I shall leave north Essex out for the time being and stick to the three county areas that make up what might be called "real" East Anglia.

Overall crime in East Anglia increased by 6 per cent. between April 1996 and September 2000, and in the 12 months to September 2000, offences in Suffolk increased by 10.8 per cent., according to recently published figures. In Cambridgeshire, however, crime fell by 2.9 per cent. and in Norfolk by nearly 1 per cent. There was an overall decrease in crime over the population as a whole, but crime is still too high and all our policies and strategies are directed to bringing crime levels down.

In respect of funding, in recent years East Anglian forces have consistently set budgets that are above the national average: in the past two years, budgets have been increased by between 4.5 per cent. and 5.8 per cent., whereas the national average increase was 3.1 per cent. in 1999-2000 and 3.6 per cent in 2000-01. For 2001-02, forces in East Anglia will receive Government-supported funding increases of 5.6 per cent. across the range; Suffolk will receive 5.8 per cent., Norfolk 5.8 per cent. and Cambridgeshire 5.4 per cent. Those figures compare with the national average of 4.9 per cent., so each force and East Anglia as a whole will receive significantly more than the average overall increase. In addition, East Anglian forces will receive £4.626 million from the rural policing fund, which was specifically established by the Government to deal with some of the problems of crime in rural areas to which the hon. Gentleman referred. The settlement has been a good one for forces in East Anglia and I am sure that chief constables and their police authorities will use it to best effect.

It is common ground across the House that police numbers are important, but only as part of a comprehensive package of measures to ensure a modern and efficient police service. The public, rightly, feel reassured by the visible presence of police officers on the streets; that helps to reduce the fear of crime and increases the possibility of gathering intelligence in order to address crime issues as they arise. That is why we established the crimefighting fund. At the end of September 2000, East Anglia had 3,768 police officers; I am glad to say that that reflected an increase on 31 March 2000. For the first time since 1993, police numbers are beginning to increase. It is also important to note that the number of civilian staff increased in the same period by 54 to 1,786 as of 30 September 2000. The hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that many of the extra civilian support staff will have been used to free police officers from paperwork and other jobs that can be as effectively undertaken by civilians. Thus, police officers will have been freed to spend more time on operational work. In Suffolk constabulary, that meant that the operational presence of police officers increased from 66 per cent. in 1988-89 to 70 per cent.—well above the national average of 53 per cent. In my own force area, the figure was 43 per cent, which is below average, but in Suffolk there was above average operational capacity.

There is further good news in the hon. Gentleman's local force area. Although his force had 31 fewer police officers on 30 September 2000 than on 31 March 2000, the force has projected that there will be 1,152 officers by 31 March this year, which is six more than there were 12 months before. Police forces in East Anglia have genuinely reversed the trend under which wastage exceeded recruitment. Our published police manpower statistics for 1999-2000 show that 83 officers were recruited and 167 left forces in East Anglia in that year. However, in the first six months of 2000-01 alone, 121 new officers were recruited and 89 left, meaning that 32 more officers joined the three forces than left them. Overall, the numbers are improving and we are determined that they will continue to improve by means of the crimefighting fund that the Government have established. I pay tribute to the three chief constables of Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Norfolk for their committed efforts to improve the situation. They lead strong and committed forces in areas of relatively low crime nationally and they seek to make a major difference to the communities that they serve. The position on police numbers is a strong one. There were 78,000 responses to our national recruitment campaign and a large number of expressions of interest, many of which have been passed on to forces in East Anglia.

I mentioned rural policing issues, which I will not go through in detail, except to say that £4.6 million—15 per cent. of the total available—has gone to East Anglia: Suffolk got £1.4 million, Norfolk £2.08 million and Cambridgeshire £1.1 million. The forces are spending money to support a wide variety of imaginative initiatives, including the development of intelligence-led patrols, the use of mobile police stations, additional police officers and overtime in rural areas, improving rural police stations, accelerating civilianisation of some police work to increase police officers' operational presence as I have described, the installation of new communications technology and the development of community safety partnerships in rural areas. The situation has improved significantly and will continue to do so in future.

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

On performance, I pay tribute to the East Anglian forces, which are doing well at maintaining a high standard of service, as shown in the Audit Commission report to which I referred. Their primary detection rates exceed the national average of 12.22 per officer. The figure was 13.3 in Suffolk, 13.1 in Norfolk and 13.8 in Cambridgeshire, which is a tribute to the way in which those forces are managed. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would associate himself with that comment. Responses to calls requiring an immediate response exceeded local targets. The figure was more than 88 per cent. in Suffolk and more than 79 per cent in Cambridgeshire and Norfolk. Overall, more than 89 per cent. of 999 calls were answered within the target; the figure was 89.9 per cent. in Cambridgeshire, 93 per cent. in Norfolk and an impressive 95 per cent. in Suffolk. Our partnership schemes have received large resources—£4.2 million in total—from the crime reduction programme, focused on targeted policing, reducing burglary and a range of other initiatives. Bids for neighbourhood wardens and closed circuit television are under consideration by the Government. There is a substantial range of achievements.

The hon. Gentleman made two particular points. On the first, I commend the work that he described on youth crime in Ottowa. I am sure that many police forces in this country, including Suffolk and my own, have had specific schemes and approaches based on involvement in sport. In Norfolk, we have a motorbike club for young people precisely to address those issues, especially as they involve aggressive young men. It is simply not true to say that we are not making sport a priority. He will be glad to know that my Department is in touch with the Youth Sport Trust, which is a highly effective organisation, to develop and roll out the sports initiative that he described under our crime reduction programme and to put resources into those areas. From my time as an Education Minister dealing with youth sport, I know that there is simply no correlation between the picture that the hon. Gentleman painted and reality. Sports education is increasing and will continue to do so. On his second point, I confirm that through our retail crime reduction group we are discussing with the Post Office what steps we can take to address such issues more effectively.

I am delighted to have had a chance to respond to the debate, although I rather regret the pre-election atmosphere. In a more relaxed and open environment, and in his heart of hearts, the hon. Member for West Suffolk might concede that real progress is being made in policing in Suffolk and elsewhere in East Anglia. The Government certainly intend to continue making the kinds of changes necessary for us to be able to do that.

Economic Regeneration (Plymouth)

1 pm

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): Plymouth is the largest city on the south coast, and the second largest in the south-west. The city's population is 250,000, but its influence spreads further. Some 330,000 people live in Plymouth's travel-to-work area. Plymouth's shopping catchment area includes more than 400,000 people. Its economic health and well-being are therefore important to a substantial number of people.

Economic regeneration is being led by the 2020 partnership. Founded in 1993 as the Plymouth 2000 partnership, the Plymouth 2020 partnership promotes regeneration, social inclusion and economic development across the city. It is made up of representatives from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors, and is jointly chaired by a senior elected council member and a nominee from Plymouth chamber of commerce and industry. It provides the overall lead and direction for the pathfinder initiative, and co-ordinates other partnership work in the city, including employment, education and health action zones, the single regeneration budget programme, and links to environmental and community safety partnerships.

Historically, Plymouth has been greatly dependent on employment in defence-related industries, particularly the dockyard. Some 15,000 people worked in the dockyard in 1981, but that figure had dropped to 3,500 by 1997. Despite growth in some sectors over the 10 years to 1996, a net 4,000 jobs were lost to the city. As a consequence, Plymouth saw a sharp rise in unemployment and poverty, and a fall in incomes. The response of the city was to diversify while seeking successfully to consolidate naval and other Ministry of Defence activities.

Plymouth has been fairly successful with inward investment. Some 25 major foreign-owned manufacturing companies in Plymouth employ more than 12,000 people. Tourism employs a similar number, and call centres are a recent, fast-developing sector, which now employs over 4,000. The city has important health and higher education sectors, with some key centres of excellence. High-tech firms, such as JDS—manufacturers of fibre optic cable who moved to the city last year—and existing employment, such as BAE Systems, need access to skilled and well-trained people, which our university, with its traditions of science and engineering, is well placed to develop.

The recent go-ahead given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for the development of the Langage energy park on the outskirts of Plymouth by Wainstones is hugely important. The investment of more £600 million—twice the value of objective 1 to Cornwall—has the potential to increase the Devon population's GDP by nearly £180 per person each year. I am sure that my hon. Friend will be surprised to learn that some leading local Conservatives have been lukewarm in their encouragement of that investment, and in some cases downright hostile. The extension of the high-pressure gas pipeline, which is part of the project, will bring opportunities for combined heat and power generation in other parts of the far south-west peninsula. All four

Labour Members of Parliament in Devon and Cornwall, including my hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton), were enthusiastic and active in their support for that important investment.

A significant dimension to Plymouth's regeneration is the release of MOD property. Work on the site of the Seaton barracks in the constituency of my neighbour, and hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson) is well under way. We hope that other major developments will follow the announcement last summer that the Phoenix trust, headed by the Prince of Wales, is to develop an important part of the Royal William yard site. I am currently making representations to the MOD that large parts of the dockyard wall, which run along the south yard of Devonport dockyard, should be knocked down.

Access to some land and buildings, especially some of the historic parts such as the old market and the ropery, are needed for community economic regeneration. That is important for the new deal for communities project, "Devonport people's dreams". There was a time when someone from every house in every street of a 4,000-strong community was employed in the dockyard. Few are now so employed, so it is important that they should have the best chance of using the £30 million investment from the new deal for communities to build new opportunities on their doorstep, where the unemployment rate is one of the highest in the city.

Unemployment in Plymouth has fallen, which is one of the key success stories for partnership working. Led by the Employment Service, Plymouth has made the most of various new deal programmes. Long-term adult unemployment has plummeted by more than 60 per cent. since May 1997, and youth employment by a staggering 90 per cent. Unemployment is below the national average for the first time in 20 years. The quality of our partnership approach to regeneration has ensured that Plymouth has seen some of the most significant improvements in employment in the country.

We are fortunate that our local *Evening Herald* supports the new deal programmes. Under the leadership of editor Rachel Campey, the paper has featured success stories of what young people, lone parents, and, more recently, older people have achieved through the new deal. The paper has played a key part in helping Plymouth people to see their city as a can-do place, in which the success stories of individuals add up to something better for everyone. Such positive reporting has not done the paper's circulation any harm—perhaps because a more prosperous city buys more newspapers.

Plymouth, however, still tells a tale of two cities. In May 1997, unemployment in the poorest inner-city wards was six times greater than in the affluent suburbs of Plympton. In seven wards, 25 per cent. of the community lives in poverty. There is a 700 per cent. variation in coronary heart disease across the city. The legacy left by my Tory predecessor included the poorest ward in England.

Many of Plymouth's housing issues are linked with wider problems of deprivation: the sale of council housing has left the authority with a stock of which half are flats, although most people would prefer a house. In the more deprived areas, the choice of housing type is severely restricted and the turnover high. More than 20 per cent. of the privately rented stock is unfit, as are 10 per cent. of owner-occupied homes—twice the national average. Tackling fuel poverty is important to how we improve housing stock.

The range of issues that need tackling in the city has attracted six rounds of single regeneration budget support, largely focused on 90,000 residents living in the most deprived waterfront communities. At long last, in SRB round six, Prince Rock and Cattedown are getting attention. Alongside employment, leisure and healthy living projects, improvements to housing stock will be an important part of the east end renewal project that residents are working hard to develop.

The new commitment to regeneration is a Local Government Association initiative, developed with other public, private and voluntary sector partners, which has the full backing of the Government. In July 1998, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions announced that Plymouth unitary authority was to be one of 20 pathfinder local authorities that would lead the initiative.

Some £1 billion of public money is spent in Plymouth. Of course, we would like more money, but we welcome what comes our way. Health service expenditure at Plymouth Derriford hospital trust is set to increase by 30 per cent. in real terms during the next three years. Expenditure at the trust has already increased by one third since Labour took office. The new Peninsula medical school will train more than 100 new doctors as part of the Government's nationwide investment in 1,000 extra doctors, and we are campaigning vigorously for a new £50 million planned health care centre.

Those developments will have wider significance in Plymouth's regeneration, as will investment in 41 extra police officers in Plymouth, made possible by additions to the Devon and Cornwall police authority budget. Health, education and employment action zones have brought several million pounds in extra income to the city's coffers each year. An above-inflation standard spending assessment has been boosted by £2 million more than the Tory-invented formula would have given the city. Little thanks has been forthcoming from the Tories, but I hope that the Minister will convey my thanks and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport to the Secretary of State for responding to our representations and those from other parts of the country. The floor that he introduced protects Plymouth from the full impact of growing prosperity, as reflected in the new earnings survey which affects how the local government finance cake is divided. The city has had an inflation-busting 14 per cent. increase in funds for education and social services, a doubling of the proposed neighbourhood renewal allocation for the coming year, and the biggest local transport settlement in recent memory with the go-ahead for an £8 million investment in the northern corridor, which will allow for the all-important protection and development of the city airport.

My hon. Friend the Minister may be surprised to learn that the Conservative leader of Plymouth city council repeatedly says that Plymouth is always at the bottom of the pile. This year, the council claims that there is a £20 million shortfall in its budget. That, of course, is a fantasy figure that can quickly be reduced to a more manageable proportion of the city's £250 million

[Mrs. Linda Gilroy]

budget; my hon. Friend will be familiar with such claims. In Plymouth's case the Minister may find those claims surprising, considering the special attention given to the city.

Granting zones status to Plymouth and giving it special pots of money was intended to ensure that public money was spent to achieve value and effectiveness across the normal public service boundaries. Those involved in the partnership working, including the city council, can claim considerable success in respect of the employment outcomes to which I referred, and in matters such as the recent reported success of the health action zones in stopping people smoking. If sustained, that will help to tackle the terrible coronary heart disease figures that I mentioned earlier. The added value is evident from the first year's activity of the education action zone on standards in schools, and in the joint tackling by health and social services of pressures on bed blocking in hospitals by ensuring that adequate support is available for people coming out of hospital.

With her experience in local government finance, the Minister will recognise the challenges and choices that councils throughout the land have to make. She may also share my view that it is a bit rich of a Tory council to say that it cannot manage on Labour's above-inflation settlement after year-on-year cuts in expenditure by Tory Governments. She may consider, as I do, that axing car parking charges at a full-year cost to the council's budget of £800,000 might not be the right priority for a council so challenged. She may consider, as I do, that cutting £1 million from the housing budget in the SRB east end renewal project to finance swimming pools, which may be expensive to build and to run in future years, is not the right priority. She may consider, as I do, that precipitate proposals to cut money from the highly successful welfare rights unit are inappropriate, when that unit has brought more than £500,000 to some of the most vulnerable people in the city.

The Minister may share my anger and fear that such priorities place question marks over the council's understanding of and support for our successful partnership work. Alarm bells ring; I hope that such foolish proposals are born of inexperience. Perhaps the council will realise that wrongful penny-pinching can mean thousands of pounds down the drain and misery for people at Granby and Torybrook when the homes in which they thought they would end their days are threatened with closure without proper examination of whether and how that could be avoided. When one resident is approaching 100, one might think that someone, somewhere, should have asked those questions first, but no one did, so callow inexperience becomes callous indifference to people who deserve better.

It is not the Minister's place to determine the detail and priorities of local council budgets—if it were, there would be no point in having local councils. There are, however, challenges in sustaining Plymouth's partnership work that fall within the remit of the Minister's Department and which I want to flag up for her attention. The 2020 partnership is preparing plans to be among the first communities to have approval as a local strategic partnership. Sustaining partnership is an instant challenge for the public, private and voluntary sectors. To support and participate in initiatives such as "Devonport people's dreams" and the east end renewal project, means that, city-wide, the community-based partnership work needs constant motivation, refreshment and resourcing. I hope that the Minister will share her observations on how to maintain the momentum. What scope is there for bringing some focus to the plethora of area-based and city-wide initiatives, particularly on funding?

My hon. Friend the Minister will be aware that some good projects continually lose out in the competitive bidding process. I recognise the merits of bidding—the most project-ready groups secure what will always be scarce resources—but some groups miss the boat time and again, sometimes right in the heart of the most deprived areas. Will local strategic partnerships have the tools to take important decisions about resourcing and identifying gaps? Can some separate funding streams be joined up to complement the joined-up thinking and action exemplified by the partnership projects?

Finally, what links will there be between local strategic projects and regional development agencies regarding such important matters as transport? I refer not just to air but rail links, which have been in the news so often in recent weeks. My hon. Friend the Minister will know that outrage has been expressed the length and breadth of the peninsula in response to the proposal to use 40-year-old rolling stock on intercity links to benefit services in Wales. Keeping the air link to Gatwick is vital, and it would be good to restore some links to Heathrow, if only one or two per week. That would be important to businesses such as Gleason's, Kawasaki and Toshiba, which have far-eastern links.

I pay tribute to the Minister and her colleagues for the Department's work on regeneration. In our short debate, I have left out many initiatives—the urban and rural White Papers, the 10-year transport plan, the regional development agency, the housing Green Paper and much else. My hon. Friend will forgive me and know that I did that because I wanted to highlight local hopes and fears and celebrate some important successes. I thank her for recognising our needs, our challenges and our ability to respond positively to the opportunities that come our way.

1.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) on securing the debate and on her comprehensive and informed speech about the importance of partnership in her area. I hope that my short reply can do justice to it. My hon. Friend's speech demonstrated her commitment to her area, and I acknowledge her important role as a local Member of Parliament. She has been an assiduous campaigner, working with Ministers to secure the best for Plymouth. The catalogue of benefits gained since 1997 is as much a testimony to my hon. Friend's highlighting of Plymouth's needs as it is to the Government's commitment to such areas.

My hon. Friend outlined Plymouth's strengths and weaknesses. She spoke about the city's ability to respond to economic change and to diversify. She spoke, too, of the skills and experience of Plymouth's people,

and the city's resource strengths, including its industrial and economic base, excellent training facilities and transport. Those factors help to position Plymouth now and in the future. My hon. Friend also rightly identified key problems and highlighted areas of Plymouth that suffered more than most from long years of neglect under the previous Government. She drew attention to pockets of significant disadvantage, which must be tackled.

I was pleased that my hon. Friend referred to the Government's various commitments to Plymouth—partly through the RDA, but also more directly as the city has benefited from a number of Government initiatives. Certainly the RDA is working closely with local partners and the community in Plymouth, and RDA investment commitments are approximately £18 million currently. These include expansion of the hugely successful Tamar science park, which the Prime Minister opened last year, and several other important initiatives for economic development.

My hon. Friend touched on Government support in several areas. Time does not allow us to go through them individually, but some important direct assistance from Government is provided through the single regeneration budget. Plymouth won nearly £24 million in SRB funding in recent rounds, helping some of the most deprived communities in the area. It was also successful in securing continued objective 2 status within the south-west programme, which is worth a total of £108 million in European grant over the period.

However, my hon. Friend also identified area-based initiatives that have been a hallmark of what the Government have tried to do on regeneration. Plymouth is one of a small number of areas across the country that has secured a "full house" in terms of employment, education and health action zones. There are sure start and new start programmes too, and I am delighted to be able to tell my hon. Friend—she probably already knows—that Plymouth is one of the 66 areas recently invited by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to bid in round 4 of sure start 2, something for which she has campaigned for some time.

We look forward to receiving, next month, a full delivery plan for the local new deal for communities, which the partnership has been putting together. That could bring up to £50 million of funding to the area for regeneration, again tackling some of the areas that most need help. My hon. Friend mentioned the new deal, and I think that it has had tremendous success in Plymouth. It has helped more than 2,150 people aged between 18 and 24 into work, and has, very importantly, a retention rate of approximately 70 per cent. That has made an important contribution to the fall in unemployment, particularly among young people.

Last October, we announced the neighbourhood renewal fund. Among areas with a multiplicity of difficult issues to tackle, Plymouth became one of four areas in the south-west that will benefit from neighbourhood renewal funding. That will help to improve housing, raise school standards, reduce crime and improve health in some of the most deprived communities. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced in January an increase in Plymouth's funding under the neighbourhood renewal fund to £4.8 million over three years. Clearly the NRF will play a key role in the Government's wider strategy to improve prosperity, tackle poverty and create opportunities for all.

As my hon. Friend has said, a great deal has already gone into Plymouth, and rightly so. Further regeneration opportunities will continue to come from the Government, but it is gratifying to see that we are already able to demonstrate—and my hon. Friend is able to talk about—the effects of what we have done so far. The Employment Service in Plymouth has placed more than 6,800 people in work since April, of whom 2,500 were long-term unemployed.

That incredible achievement will make a lasting difference to the vitality of the economy of Plymouth, not just helping individual families, though that is important, but maintaining stimulation of the local economy, which will benefit everyone. I am delighted that unemployment in Plymouth has fallen to 3.2 per cent., a reduction of nearly 30 per cent. over the past 12 months. The rate is now below the national average for the first time in many years in Plymouth. Real measurable improvements in performance are having an impact on people's lives and on the local economy.

My hon. Friend touched on the importance of partnership in stimulating and sustaining that kind of progress, and I agree with her on the importance of partnership between central and local government and the strengths of local partnerships. I welcome my hon. Friend's eagerness for Plymouth to be at the forefront of developments in partnership. On the neighbourhood renewal fund, the requirement to have a local strategic partnership to administer the fund is an important step. Local strategic partnerships should build on existing good practice to rationalise existing partnerships, to improve on working practices and to cut down on bureaucracy.

We expect local strategic partnerships to rationalise some current processes and to create savings in the work involved in sustaining a number of partnerships. They will have scope to join up funding in creative ways and to decide priorities, so long as they meet targets on four big issues: crime, housing, health and jobs. It will be up to the local strategic partnership to decide the priorities for how that money is spent. It is implicit in what my hon. Friend says, and I agree that we need mature local authorities to fulfil the strategic roles that we have given them in leading and nurturing effective partnerships, both locally and between the local area and central government.

I want to refer to funding, which my hon. Friend raised. Plymouth has received funding through the local government settlement, and I am disappointed by erroneous accounts that have appeared in the local press. Plymouth will receive more than £5.5 million more in general grant this year than it did last year. That position has been protected by the introduction of the floor. In addition, there will be a 12 per cent. increase for education and nearly 21 per cent. more for social services, giving a total increase in ring-fenced grants of 4.5 per cent., which is twice the rate of inflation. That should give substantial assistance to the council.

[Ms Beverley Hughes]

I cannot comment on the council's priorities; I do not have the total picture. I think that my hon. Friend was right to question some of those priorities. There may be a case for doing so, in certain circumstances.

Mrs. Gilroy: Does my hon. Friend agree that, in addition to the substantial above-inflation increase that she has mentioned, the other pots of money for the health action zone, the education action zone, the employment action zone and winter pressures in the NHS are also relevant?

Ms Hughes: Of course, all those things provide additional funding, which Plymouth would not have received if the present Government were not in control. Those funds are additional to what was already a generous local government settlement. My hon. Friend is quite right to point that out.

In terms of priorities, my hon. Friend was right to question whether it is a good idea to forego £800,000 of income to cut parking charges. There may be an economic case for that; I do not know. In another of the examples she pointed out, however, it is rarely economic to cut welfare benefits advice services. We know that, across the UK, money invested in that advice increases the amount that people receive in benefits. Many people are unaware of what they can claim, and welfare benefits advice can help them to receive what they are entitled to. Again, there is an economic case for welfare benefits advice, and I suspect that it is short-sighted to cut the service.

I repeat that we need mature local authorities that are willing to put aside political issues, about which they may feel strongly, to work with the Government and local partners to benefit the community. I hope that the ruling group on Plymouth council will not use these issues as a political football but will, as my hon. Friend suggests, work with others to benefit her constituency.

In conclusion, the Government are committed to working in partnership with the council and communities in Plymouth. The debate demonstrates the enormous progress that the partnership and the additional resources have already achieved in my hon. Friend's constituency. I look forward to that continuing with the support of my hon. Friend and the local partners.

Miners' Compensation Scheme

1.30 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I welcome the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe to the debate and to his new post. I believe that he will do his utmost to put right the shambles and the great injustice done to the miners of the United Kingdom, especially those for whom I speak today—the miners of Wales. I remember arguing with a Minister during an Adjournment debate about a set of temporary traffic lights. Those temporary traffic lights had been in place for 23 years; it took 10 months to have them replaced. I hope that the same success will follow today's important debate.

The Minister is on record as saying that the Government's handling of the claims is a chaotic shambles. I do not disagree. Today's *Western Mail* carries a long article by the Minister, which I welcome, although it includes one or two misconceptions that need to be corrected. First, non-smokers have always been discriminated against; they received less money than others because that fact was built into the settlement. Secondly, he said that widows are to be given top priority. With respect—I do not aim this at him personally—that is hypocrisy. The Department of Trade and Industry has just issued a new legal challenge to reduce widows' compensation. I feel sure that the Minister was not aware of that. We need to stop such legal challenges, not to mount fresh ones and thus deny people what is rightfully theirs.

In 1988, the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers—NACODS—began to investigate the links between dust and bronchitis, emphysema and so on. Shortly afterwards, it appointed solicitors and an epic legal battle followed between one of the smallest trade unions in the country and the Government. The case commenced in the High Court registry in Cardiff in October 1996 and culminated in September 1997 in the High Court in London. It was the longest injury trial in British legal history.

The complaints that the miners suffered were, as the Minister will know from knowledge of his own constituency, absolutely awful. I was in the Rhondda three weeks ago speaking with a gentleman who is unable to leave the house or speak to anyone. He uses four bottles of oxygen a day and can hardly move. He is relatively young, getting on for 60, but is absolutely crippled. The Minister will be familiar with the comment he made: with half a smile, that man said that he believed that the Government were waiting for him to die so that they would not have to pay out.

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mr. Peter Hain) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Llwyd: I quote the man's remark. It is not what I said, but what he said to me. I do not know what that man's politics are, nor was it of any interest to me in my investigation.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): In my constituency, a Mr. Stripp is suffering from vibration

white finger. His claim started four years ago and still is not resolved. It is time that such bureaucratic nonsense was tackled head on.

Mr. Llwyd: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. In the union case, judgment was not handed down until 23 January 1998.

Several serious problems need to be addressed today. The first is about medical staff. At the beginning of 1999, the Department of Trade and Industry stated that it would be completing full medical assessments at the rate of 2,500 a month by March 1999, and 4,000 per month by the summer of 2000. However, by the end of 2000, not even 2,000 per month were being carried out. Almost 133,000 claims are waiting to be completed, more than 27,000 of which are in Wales. In the week commencing January 2001, only 455 full medical assessments were completed; in the same week, nearly 2,000 new claims were made. The Government must ensure that more medical staff are employed so that the targets that they set so long ago can be reached. It is no use opening more testing centres if there are no more staff to do the work. The doctors will simply be playing musical chairs between one centre and another.

I pay tribute to all those who stood up for what was clearly right, and pursued their claims with tenacity and spirit. Those men were sick with a disease that was crippling and killing many of them. It was distasteful in the extreme that such an obviously worthy and excellent cause had to be fully litigated in the High Court. I pay tribute to the solicitors concerned, Hugh James Jenkins of Merthyr Tydfil, who took on the mammoth task with enthusiasm. Many tens of thousands of people will want to express their deep gratitude to the person who above everyone else made everything possible: Bleddyn Hancock, the general secretary of NACODS. He played a vital part in making legal history. He has been tireless in his pursuit of justice for miners and he will carry on until the fight has been won. Despite several knocks, he has never fallen down, but has carried on, driven by the aim of ensuring fair play for the mining community.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): May I point out that the unions in the mining industry have been pursuing the matter for a long time? They want the disease prescribed and to be able to proceed with a scheme at the same time. The issue is of long standing.

Mr. Llwyd: The hon. Gentleman is right. More than one union was involved, but only one took the matter to court. Let us remember that the Government had to be dragged into court kicking and screaming before any compensation could be paid.

Mr. Hain *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Llwyd: No compensation was considered until the High Court judgment was delivered. I shall come to the question of agreeing liability in a moment, as it is a separate issue.

The Minister has been busy in the press saying that Plaid Cymru Members do not have constituency interests in this subject. I do not represent a mining area, but that does not prevent me from raising my voice on behalf of people in mining communities. If we are to play that silly game, I remind the Minister that my party has constituency interests through National Assembly Members in the Rhondda, Carmarthen, Llanelli, Islwyn and in the north-east and south-east of Wales. Our two Members of the European Parliament represent the whole of Wales. I hope that that issue will not come up today. The main point is to ensure that we fight for and achieve justice for the miners.

I respectfully remind the Minister that even the previous Government saw fit to exempt people suffering from pneumoconiosis from the clawback now being enforced so unfairly against the miners. I sincerely believe that we must bring the matter to a head. It is insulting, adds insult to injury and only strengthens our resolve to put matters right. Perhaps the Minister will reply on that point in due course. To deflect blame, the Government claimed that the High Court settlement was cumbersome.

Mr. Hain *indicated assent.*

Mr. Llwyd: I see that the Minister agrees. The Government also alleged that the judgment was difficult to put into practice. In these days of the culture of BSE—blame someone else—it was inevitable that the Government would attempt to put some blame on the solicitors negotiating individual settlements for claimants; it has been suggested to me several times that a large proportion of the blame for the delay rests with solicitors. However, in an unprecedented move, Mr. Justice Turner, the High Court judge who decided the case recently, sent out a public memorandum in which he specified:

"That there is no evidence to suggest...that solicitors are in general dragging their feet in processing claims".

He also said:

"The fund out of which compensation is to be paid is not diminished by the costs of the legal advisers".

That is from the horse's mouth, as it were. Another attempt at BSE was to say that there were insufficient doctors of a senior grade to do the work. That is also wrong. If the Government have the will to sort the problem out—I believe that the Minister is sincere and has the will to do so—registrars will be brought in and paid properly for their work, and taken off elective surgery if necessary. The problem is huge and urgent. Waiting for it to sort itself out will clearly not do, as that will not happen. As the Minister mentions in his article, the Government are speaking about a priority system. I hope that more of the sick and elderly will be brought in far quicker than they have been hitherto. The Minister has given that assurance, and I have no reason to doubt that he will do his utmost to ensure that it happens.

I referred to people kicking and screaming through the courts. I accept that there was an acceptance of liability at the very last moment, but that brings me to a thorny issue. In 1989, the previous Government brought in a recovery of benefits provision that allowed the state to recover moneys paid in benefit to those who were eventually compensated for their injuries. However, it did not apply to those for whom the onset of disease started before 1989. In practice, therefore, nearly all miners with chest disease were exempted. Against that

[Mr. Llwyd]

backcloth—that Government were hardly the workers' friends—in September 1997 and within weeks of an indication by the High Court that it would find for the claimants, the Government tabled the Social Security (Recovery of Benefits) Regulations 1997. They did so while the House was in recess, thereby bringing in the regulations surreptitiously, before the full judgment was given at the end of January 1998. Never before has there been such underhandedness and sleight of hand. The Conservatives had exempted pneumoconiosis sufferers from the clawback, but new Labour effectively acted against the miners.

I shall highlight some cases that prove how ridiculous the clawback is. The Government demanded £21,707 from a man in Treorci in the Rhondda. That was reduced to £8,540 on appeal; the appeal was then reviewed by solicitors, and in the end only £6.38 was payable. In another case, a man from Pontypridd received a demand for £19,924. That man died before receiving compensation; on appeal, the sum was reduced to £4,170, and a further appeal by the widow reduced it to £22.02. Those are stunning errors. They are disgraceful and immoral, and they represent a waste of the Government's time and money. Even bearing in mind the stance of the previous Government, whatever the situation and regardless of whether a substantial sum might be recovered it is immoral to expend so much money and time to recover only £6.38.

The miners are a special case. Theirs was a huge class action and a legal landmark. When I met the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), a few weeks ago, he said that the miners were not a special case, adding that some of his constituents suffer from asbestosis contracted when they were working for British Rail. I said to the hon. Gentleman that I was not there to plead for his constituents, but for the miners; I told him that pleading for his constituents was his job and that if he did it properly, they, too, might be a special case. That sort of attitude is becoming more common. At a meeting in Betws near Ammanford, a Labour, councillor said how pleased he was that I had kept the matter non-political. He went on to ask why the miners should be treated as a special case and then gave examples of why that should not be so. I could not believe that a Labour councillor in a Labour ward could decry the miners' cause and make them out not to be a special case. To add insult to injury, the Government line is that the miners are not a special case and that the benefits will have to be clawed back, despite the decades of suffering, hard work, loss of health—and, in many cases, life—that were endured on our behalf.

The miners are now being told that they are not a special case and they should get to the back of the queue because they are just like everyone else. That is abhorrent and disgraceful. I do not care what the Minister says, such a claim cannot be substantiated. Does the Minister agree with the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security who said that the miners' injuries are no different from a nurse putting her back out in a hospital? There is a great difference, because the nurse, thank God, will not die and will not be incapable of working again. To add insult to injury, the Treasury is clawing back money from the pension fund.

We are in a terrible situation—a chaotic one, as the Minister acknowledges. It is now up to him and others to sort it out. Over the past few months I have met many miners and miners' widows. We owe them our respect and gratitude for what they have gone through, but most of all, we owe them justice. We in Plaid Cymru, the party of Wales, will continue to fight for justice, as will Labour Back Benchers. The Government are blind to all this. There will be consequences for them politically, but there will be more consequences for them socially, if they ignore those people.

1.45 pm

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mr. Peter Hain): This is the first debate that I have answered as Minister for Energy. I enjoy the job enormously and am relishing the opportunity to get stuck in and sort out the problems that have bedevilled this scheme over recent years. I do not question the integrity with which the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) has pursued the matter, but I feel that it is important to bear in mind that the Labour Government is delivering for miners while Plaid Cymru is screaming from the sidelines. The hon. Gentleman should be working with us to deliver a better system and ensure that the improvements are put in place.

Mr. Llwyd: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Mr. Hain: No.

Like many hon. Members, I represent a mining constituency and, in taking up my new responsibilities, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me a chance to set out the Government's position on the vital issue of compensation for retired miners and their widows. In doing so I worked very closely with my hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr. Hanson), my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales and others across Britain.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that miners are a special case. That is why we have introduced the biggest compensation scheme of its kind in the history of Britain and probably the world. I want to immediately correct one of the many falsities that he presented by way of argument. The scheme is not designed to penny-pinch and save money; it is the biggest scheme of its kind. Some £2 billion and more is already available and there is no capping of that figure. As the claims are settled, they will be paid according to the rules agreed on both sides and in keeping with the court's judgment. There is no attempt to deny miners or their widows the justice that we as a Government are delivering. The matter is a top priority for my Department and me and I welcome the opportunity to tackle it. Bringing justice to both miners and their widows is my mission. I shall do everything I can and I shall work with all those who share the same objective.

As hon. Members will know, there are two major schemes on coal health claims resulting from successful 1996 litigation against the British Coal Corporation and the last Conservative Government. The hon. Gentleman made it seem as though the Labour Government caused the case to come to court. It began under the Conservatives: they were dragged kicking and screaming into court and we have had to cope with the

consequences of that. We were elected on a pledge to bring justice to miners and their widows and we have never at any point questioned the court's decision. The hon. Gentleman should be more even-handed and objective.

In addition to 131,000 claims for respiratory diseases, 28,000 of which are in Wales, the Department has received over 116,000 claims for vibration white finger—VWF—nearly 16,000 of which are in Wales. Progress has been good on VWF: to date the Department has settled nearly 20,000 claims, 3,700 of which are in Wales, and has made a further 22,650 interim payments, 2,480 of which are in Wales. In total, we have paid nearly £215 million in compensation, of which £28.4 million has been paid in Wales to 6,204 people. In the village of Seven Sisters in my constituency, £410,644 has already been paid to 64 people. Many such examples could be cited from right across south and north-east Wales. In Neath the total paid is £781,729 to 167 people, and in Gwent £9.1 million to 1,330 people.

Mr. Livsey: I acknowledge that that constitutes progress, but does the Minister acknowledge that even after two years solicitors are still dealing with questions from the Department to which the answers are already known? For example, an ex-miner obtained a correct diagnosis from a doctor; two years later he had received no compensation and was asked how many operations he had had. Such nonsense must stop.

Mr. Hain: I agree. Progress on lung disease has been much slower. It has been much more difficult to deal with the claims as speedily as we would want, as the legal and medical issues that flow not from Government policy but from the High Court judgment to which NACODS among others was a party are far more complex than those relating to vibration-related diseases.

Mr. Clapham: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new position. I am sure that with his background in a mining constituency he will bring great energy to sorting out the issue that we are considering.

The Minister's predecessor, our right hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell), set up a monitoring group of which I am a member. One of our tasks was to begin turning the legal formula, of which my hon. Friend is aware, into a practicable formula that could be applied to bring compensation into miners' pockets. As of this month, £1 million a day is being paid to miners for chronic bronchitis and emphysema and for vibration white finger.

Mr. Hain: I welcome my hon. Friend's point of information, which contributes to the balanced outlook that I am trying to develop. It is far from the sneering view that Plaid Cymru continually adopts. Incidentally, a Welsh monitoring group is meeting on Monday and I shall attend.

The number of claimants continues to rise at the rate of 1,000 a week, making this the biggest compensation claim in Britain's history. Payments are now beginning to flow. In total, £108 million has been paid in respiratory compensation, with £27.1 million being paid in Wales. Including compensation for vibration-related diseases, in recent weeks we have been paying about £1 million a day. For chest diseases, for example, more than £1 million has been paid in my constituency of Neath. In the former pit village of Seven Sisters, £400,000 has been paid to 80 people and in my own village, the former pit village of Resolven—I am wearing the local rugby club tie today—£98,258 has been paid to 24 people. It is not true that no money is being distributed; in Wales alone last week a total £1 million was paid out.

However, that is not good enough. More needs to be done. The mechanism must be better and speedier and the Government are working urgently on that. In the past 10 days I have been considering ways to accelerate the process. As part of that undertaking I want to satisfy myself that we have done all that we can. I want to hear the first-hand experience of hon. Members who represent mining constituencies. I know that many changes have been made in the past six months, but I have identified several categories in which I believe that fast-track offers can be made to bring quick relief to thousands more ex-miners and miners' widows—perhaps as many as 18,000. I am taking legal and medical advice to ensure that the new initiatives can be carried out quickly.

In addition, I want solicitors, Healthcall and the claims handlers IRISC to ensure that three groups are given priority: the oldest, those who are most ill and widows. That will probably mean that younger and fitter men's appointments will be rescheduled, but I am sure that they will agree that men in their 70s and 80s who can hardly breathe or move should go ahead to take the earliest opportunities. At the end of September, my predecessor announced new fast-track proposals to generate thousands of new and revised expedited offers by Christmas to those whose initial screening tests suggested likely disability. I am pleased that we have now made more than 15,200 offers, totalling £74 million, of which 2,200, totalling £10.5 million, were in Wales. Of those, 1,200 have been accepted, leading to payments totalling £4.3 million.

I remain troubled by delays in medical assessment procedures. We are presently completing around 500 medical assessments a week, and last week the figure was 570. We need to increase that figure significantly. The lack of sufficient numbers of respiratory consultants to perform the medical assessment process, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, is the key bottleneck. We are working hard to try to solve that problem. First, we are urgently trying to recruit more respiratory consultants and we are considering how doctors are used and paid to ensure that we attract as many of them as possible. We must also ensure that we use the doctors we have flexibly and efficiently and use our resources more efficiently; therefore, secondly, we seek to streamline the medical assessment process: for example, we are thinking about using nurses to flag entries relevant to lung diseases in the extensive medical records currently examined by the consultant, which will help to free up additional time for the consultants to examine claimants. In addition, Healthcall, the contractor carrying out the medical assessments, is opening two new test centres in south Wales, in Ystrad Mynach and Ammanford.

[Mr. Hain]

In every way that we can, we continue to try to reduce delays for widows. That requires the co-operation of all involved, to ensure that claimants are kept in touch and provided with the necessary information.

Mr. Llwyd: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hain: I am afraid that I do not have time.

We are also prioritising widows claiming on behalf of their late husbands. The Department has made more than 4,650 bereavement awards, totalling nearly £39 million, of which 1,030 have been in Wales, totalling nearly £8.5 million. Those are big figures. The largest such payment in south Wales was £140,000. The next largest was £94,000.

Mr. Llwyd: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hain: No. I have taken several interventions.

Mr. Llwyd: None from me.

Mr. Hain: I have been as generous as I can. The hon. Gentleman had a lot of time to make his point.

On compensation, my motto is maximum compensation, minimum benefits reduction. The hon. Gentleman's points were simply inaccurate. The pneumoconiosis scheme was a no-fault scheme negotiated between the solicitors and British Coal. The levels of compensation took into account benefit received, so the exemption applied.

On the matter of smoking and damages, plenty of personal injury case law in other industries shows that courts consider smoking when fixing damages for lung injury. For example, awards have been reduced in cases of byssinosis in cotton workers and lung injury caused by exposure to toxic chemicals in marine workers. I am passionate about resolving the problems that have bedevilled the compensation scheme, whether caused by legal wrangling, Healthcall or the claim handlers, IRISC. Labour came into office in 1997 determined to bring justice to former miners and their widows, who had been so shabbily treated by the Tories for many years. Instead of being able to get moving, we faced a year-long delay in the court process triggered under the Tories. Then, there were 18 months of wrangling over a handling agreement, with the result that, according to a court judgment, every major improvement that we wanted to introduce required agreement between solicitors. In addition, records are often hard to trace: the archives at Cannock contain 30 miles of files of old records, many not indexed.

Those are not excuses, merely a plea for understanding. Members of the House who have worked hard on the matter include the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office. Everyone has been at fault, including the Government, for not driving through a better system quicker. I give a warning, however, and it may be directed at the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy: I shall be tough in exposing any individual, whether claiming to be a miners' leader or not, and any Opposition party that plays politics with people's suffering. There has been far too much of that already. Equally, I welcome constructive criticism—the hon. Gentleman offered some—and practical suggestions for improvements from all quarters. It is important that we all work together, as has been said by the main north Wales paper, the *Daily Post*, and in the south of Wales by the *South Wales Argus*. The complaints and wrangling must stop, and everyone must pull together. We have a debt to pay to the men who have worked in this country's coal mining industry, as the Government have freely acknowledged. After years of obstruction by British Coal and the previous Tory Government, I will ensure that that debt is paid as speedily and fairly as possible. With the full co-operation of all parties involved, we will succeed.

I emphasise that payments are going out week by week. I can list all the payments made in south Wales, the north-east and Yorkshire during the past few weeks. Huge sums are paid to many, but I fully acknowledge that more needs to be done. I urge everyone to work with us.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 7 February 2001

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Steel Industry

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Touhig.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): I am pleased to have been granted a debate on the future of the steel industry and thank my hon. Friends for their support.

The date 1 February 2001 will go down in history as the day of the devastating announcement that more than 6,000 jobs in the steel industry were to be lost: about 3,000 in Wales and 3,000 in England. In Llanwern, near my constituency, 1,340 jobs will be lost and heavy steel production is planned to finish by the end of the year. In Shotton, 319 jobs will be lost. In Ebbw Vale, the entire production will be closed down with the loss of 780 jobs. Another 127 jobs will be lost in Bryngwyn, near Gorseinon in Swansea. In Port Talbot—whose port receives the iron ore for Port Talbot and Llanwern—jobs will be lost in central services. In Teesside, 234 jobs will be lost.

The south Wales steel industry has played an important part in my political consciousness. I was brought up in the London Welsh community, but we travelled regularly to our family home town of Neath. I well remember my sense of pride as the train passed from Port Talbot to Neath, alongside the mustard-coloured works, and I read the sign, "The Steel Company of Wales", above the red dragon. I also remember the sense of desolation when one of my uncles, John Williams, was killed in a blast furnace explosion at the Port Talbot steelworks in 1968.

I remember the development of the Llanwern steelworks, near Newport, built by the then nationalised British Steel Corporation in the 1960s. That massive steelworks, which I have visited twice, lies just outside my constituency, in that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Newport, East (Mr. Howarth), and some of the Llanwern work force live in my constituency. When it opened, Llanwern attracted many workers to Chepstow; the Bulwark estate was developed to house the influx of steelworkers from the valleys, other parts of Wales and beyond. The industry gave its employees good wages and security, and it brought great economic benefits for the south Wales economy.

Many of those who came to work in Llanwern are now retired, but they give the border town of Chepstow a distinct Welsh identity. Many workers took early retirement and others faced redundancy, but they all contributed to the reputation of Llanwern as a premier steel plant. They contributed to the productivity gains that Llanwern achieved. Now, as pensioners, they have seen their British Steel pension fund raided by the present company.

On the day of the announcement, the statement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry argued that the move demonstrated the short-term approach that Corus had taken. Corus had failed to discuss its plans with the Government, relevant information had not been disclosed and it had resisted any meaningful dialogue. Offers of assistance from the Department of Trade and Industry and the National Assembly for Wales were met with a total lack of co-operation.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): Like my hon. Friend, I was involved in the meeting with Sir Brian Moffat before the terrible announcement was made, and felt that there was no real dialogue between the company and the Government. I would like to contrast that with the approach of the multinational Ford motor company. It has announced a £245 million investment in my constituency that will create more than 600 jobs. Effective consultation between the Government and the unions, and particularly between the management and the work force in Bridgend, brought that about. Should not Corus take note of that example and recognise that productive relationships with its work force and the Government can achieve a successful outcome.

Mr. Edwards: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. He represents a constituency where tremendous investment from both America and Japan has been achieved through dialogue and co-operation. That is in marked contrast to what the Corus announcement represents. In recent weeks, Toyota and Nissan have taken positive decisions on future production and we have had further welcome news about manufacturing growth in Wales, with additional orders for Airbus at BAE Systems in Broughton, in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones).

The Welsh economy has been growing recently. It is in better condition now than it has been since the 1950s and 1960s, and British production is at its best level since 1994. That is the economic context in which Corus has taken its short-term view. Only last August, Corus claimed that it would invest £35 million in relining the No. 3 blast furnace at Llanwern. Nick Cragg, the managing director of Corus Strip Products, said:

"The decision to proceed with the relining is a positive step forward and provides a real opportunity for Llanwern ... despite difficult trading conditions."

The headlines at the time read "Llanwern rescued". I wrote to Mr. Cragg to congratulate Corus on its investment. I suggested that we might make representations to the Government, the National Assembly for Wales and the European Commission about the challenges that the company faced, given that there were difficult trading conditions and that some unemployment would be inevitable. I received no reply. The decision to reline that blast furnace has been rescinded, and the investment has been cancelled. John Bryant, a chief executive at that time, was considered by the unions to be someone who was committed to the UK steel industry and who saw a future at Llanwern. He was sacked in December. Another chief executive, Mr. Fokko van Duyne, was also sacked.

Predictably, people were aghast at the Corus announcement. The Archbishop of Wales, formerly the Bishop of Monmouth, reacted by saying:

"Many people feel that Corus' failure to implement any kind of consultation suggests that they do not trust their own workforce and that they do not take the lives of those people seriously."

[Mr. Edwards]

I discussed the situation with the Archbishop only last Friday. I agree with his view that the announcement pinpoints problems about the methods and standards of management and the lack of consultation in this country.

It is widely acknowledged that steel production in Britain has faced difficult trading conditions. The general strength of the economy has resulted in a high sterling value in relation to the euro, although in recent weeks the pound has weakened by about 10 per cent., thus reducing Corus's losses by about £150 million. The failure by Corus to take a long-term view stimulated the union, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, to propose a buy-out that would allow the Llanwern steelworks to retain heavy steel production, given the strengthening euro and better prospects for the economy as a whole.

Tower colliery at Hirwaun in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) provides a famous model. The miners were determined to prove the viability of the colliery when the previous Government were closing all the coal mines in Wales. That determination led to success at Tower, which is now the only deep mine left in Wales. Another example is Rover, following the appalling decision by BMW.

The union's offer for Llanwern was refused. Sir Brian Moffat, the chairman of Corus, stated that it would "lead to competition". Better to make 1,200 people redundant than to risk competition, as far as Sir Brian Moffat is concerned. Better to close the Ebbw Vale steelworks, putting 760 people out of work, than risk competition. That is an example of the ruthlessness of a chairman who once stated that his company was in business to make money, not steel. He is known as the silent assassin. He is cold, calculating and detached from the human impact of his business decisions—a manager who has built his reputation on managing decline. Yet he was knighted under the previous Government. Was that for services to the steel industry? His ruthlessness reminds me of Victorian mill owners. In the 19th century, captains of industry could get away with a great deal, before we had state intervention, decent standards of employment and trade union protection. Such behaviour is not acceptable in the 21st century, and would not be acceptable in other European countries. In fact, Lord Wedderburn said, in his statement on the announcement in the other place, that it may be illegal. I ask the Minister to consider that.

Sir Brian Moffat was invited to a meeting called by Welsh Labour Members last week—the Monday before the announcement. I am currently chairman of the Welsh Labour Members and I distinctly remember that Sir Brian said that no decisions had been made on any plants. If he was telling the truth, it implies that all decisions on the plant were taken in just two days, and confirms the short-termism of the announcement. If he was not telling the truth, it confirms that he has treated the Government, the work force and hon. Members with deceit and contempt.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): My hon. Friend fights hard for his people. We admire that in him, as do the people of Newport and Ebbw Vale. Can he recall such cynical and brutal treatment of a magnificent work force anywhere in the western world? Does he realise that the company is unilaterally downscaling British steel production by 4 million tonnes a year? There is no evidence of any blood, job losses or downscaling of production on the Dutch side. It is a terrible way to treat a magnificent work force.

Mr. Edwards: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point, which he has made on many occasions. It is widely felt that the British steel industry is being sacrificed for the Dutch steel industry. However, I am sure that he will acknowledge that trade unions in Holland have refused the work that has been transferred from England and Wales. We should put on record our gratitude to the Dutch trade unions for their stance.

Given what we heard from Sir Brian Moffat, we can understand why Peter Law, the Welsh Assembly Member for Blaenau Gwent said:

"They lied about the blast furnace at Llanwern. They lied to the workers at Ebbw Vale."

That was why other colleagues and I suggested that Sir Brian Moffat and other members of Corus should be required to give formal evidence to the Welsh Affairs Committee—of which I am a member—so that the views on and background to the saga can be heard. I understand that arrangements for that are being made.

To their credit, the Government have repeatedly attempted to work with Corus to discuss an alternative to the proposed massive job losses. Ministers have been rebuffed at every turn. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan), First Minister of the National Assembly for Wales, Deputy First Minister Mike German and others in the Assembly on their efforts to find a resolution to the crisis. The Llanwern taskforce consists of representatives from Newport borough council and the National Assembly and it is working hard to find an alternative.

The trade unions, too, have been rebuffed at every turn. Every promise that they have made to Corus has been kept, yet every promise made by the company to the work force has been broken. It is widely acknowledged that Corus's fundamental problem is mismanagement, not trading conditions, the pound or other minor issues raised by the official Opposition. The mismanagement starts at the top with the chairman, Sir Brian Moffat. My message to him is that he cannot treat his work force and our communities like this. My message to the Government is that nobody should be allowed to treat any work force or community like this.

Corus's announcement has been ruthless, and it has treated its work force with contempt. The UK steel industry must be retained; it is not in the interests of the work force, shareholders or the country to allow 6,000 jobs to be lost. We ask the company to reconsider, to minimise the impact of the job losses, to consult the trade unions and to co-operate with the Government to find an alternative that will maintain the capacity of the UK steel industry. That would preserve steel production as a strategic industry for economic and security reasons. Every effort must be made to save as many of the 6,000 jobs in Llanwern and other UK plants as possible.

9.44 am

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards). He has shown passion and sheer determination in identifying the serious problems created by Corus's announcement, for not only our work forces but our communities. Many people see this blow as an attempt to close their communities, never mind the steelworks.

I believe that the announcement made by Corus last week, which amounts to more than 3,000 job cuts with a further 3,000 anticipated, is not only thoroughly unprincipled, but an act of short-term accountancy that will achieve little in restructuring the industry and will not secure an active future for steel production. My area, Teesside, faces the closure of a coil mill and of Steel house, the company's head office. Steel house was an important signal to the whole of Teesside that British Steel, which is now Corus, meant to stay there and was good for the community; now it will be closed and we are told that the administration will be taken to Scunthorpe.

This is not just about the job losses and the closure of two important parts of steel production. It is unpalatable that a company should behave in such an unprincipled way and not tell us what more we are to suffer. A further 1,000 job losses are anticipated, and we are told that there are more cuts to come. That has made many people in my community anxious about their future and that of their families.

If we consider how Corus has marketed itself recently, we can reach only one conclusion. The short-term nature of the announcement is clear, given the profits previously made from steel. In the year to March 1998, British Steel made a profit of about £315 million; in the year to March 1999, it made a loss of £142 million. I am skilled at scrutinising company finances but I am amazed that, by December 2000, it claimed an estimated operating loss of more than £1 billion. We see a four-year track of profit, small loss and then significant loss. Corus pointed to the high value of the pound as a problem, but the value of the pound was relatively static throughout that period, so that cannot be the answer.

The company also stated that the figure is an estimated operating loss. If the costs associated with the recent restructuring are stripped out, one sees that the estimated operating loss was only £23 million. I suggest that Corus is playing with money and finance, and ruining our communities to boot. It is not prepared honestly and faithfully to put its problems on the table and allow the Government to respond.

By stating those figures, I want to make the point that Corus is managing a marginal decline in demand for steel by closure and redundancy. It is not looking, as Ford did, for new markets and products, or to improve efficiency. It simply wants to close things down. My hon. Friend suggested that it is moving the company to Holland. That is strikingly obvious to many of us, and we will fight it.

Corus has stated that demand has not been great and that it is concerned about that. Naturally and inevitably, we are all concerned, but the statistics for Britain and Europe together show that there has been an increase in demand, not a decline. When some parts of the steel industry are examined minutely, declines can be seen, but that does not apply across the board. Consumption of finished steel products in the UK has fallen by 1.2 million tonnes, and the figure for the rest of Europe is marginally lower. I say again to Corus that if there is a marginal fall in consumption, a marginal impact on the company could have been anticipated; but the savage way in which Corus has brutalised our steel industry is unacceptable. The company should present us with an honest factual picture so that we can see its problems and how best to help.

It is interesting to note that it is estimated that, between 2001 and 2005, demand for steel in Europe will increase from 144.8 million to 150 million tonnes. The world picture is even more revealing: global demand is set to rise by some 60 million tonnes.

The British steel industry is equipped with the best technology and an incredibly good work force who are competent, capable and flexible and prepared to negotiate. They have accepted being pared down to make the company efficient, and are acknowledged to be 10 per cent. more efficient than any other steelworkers. Given the projected increase in European and global demand, are we seriously saying that we are going to slaughter the industry in this way? That is unacceptable.

Hon. Members have not been given a true picture of what is happening. We are witnessing the destruction of our communities and our companies, and we are not prepared to accept it. Corus had better come to terms with that fact quickly.

The productivity of British steelworkers is astounding. It is claimed that German and French workers have the highest productivity, but the figures reveal that our workers are the best: a UK steelworker can produce more than 571 million tonnes a year, whereas German steelworkers produce 543 million, and the French only 534 million.

European companies also face cuts, but France and Germany face cuts nothing like as savage as ours, and the Spanish steel industry is even growing. That makes us extremely uncomfortable. We believe that there could be chains of supply from eastern Europe. No hon. Member would speak more determinedly than I would in favour of the growth of the eastern European economy, but I am not prepared to accept that it should thrive while my economy on the Tees declines and dies.

We have entered a consultation period, and we need to be spoken to as adults so that we can negotiate fairly and squarely. I want to believe that Corus is treating it as a real consultation period. I want to believe that our steel group will have a proper meeting tomorrow with Sir Brian Moffat in which we take each other seriously and speak about the reality of the situation.

Mr. Win Griffiths: I want to contrast again the ways in which Ford and Corus manage their affairs. The Corus workers have been given only 14 days' notice, virtually as an afterthought to the announcements made by the company. In the United States, although it is under no legal obligation to do so, Ford gives the work force 90 days' notice before final decisions are made about major changes in employment at its plants, or about major investments, such as the one at Bridgend. My intelligence from America is that it managed to reach a deal with the workers in Cleveland simply because of the way in which such investment decisions are handled.

Ms Taylor: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, which demonstrates that there are

[Ms Taylor]

models of good industrial relations that define the best practice not only for our work force but for companies. We live in an era in which partnership is writ large. If companies do not work in partnership with a loyal work force and, in this case, with a Government, we shall see the end of what has been, and should be, a vibrant industry.

The consultation period is set. We have been told that Corus is going through a strategic restructuring. One fact has been made very clear: the company is concerned primarily with the accounts—how the books are balanced and how the shareholders are paid. It is trying to achieve that by savage and seemingly random cuts. That is not an effective model of management; it is management in the most scrambled, opportunist and unprincipled manner.

Corus has told us that it will make no further investment in the UK. That is a serious statement. There are still 22,000 people employed directly in our steel industry. That is no way to treat 22,000 people and, I would submit, a further 90,000 and their communities who rely on this source of employment and who have given their lives to it. Many of my people have worked for 20 or 30 years in the industry, a lot of them alongside their fathers and their children. That is the extent of their commitment and their loyalty. We have a Government offering help. My plea to Corus is to adopt a different approach. There is time for it to do so, to think this problem through and to achieve a resolution that we can all live with. By opening a meaningful dialogue with the Government and the trade unions, Corus can save jobs and communities.

On behalf of a very large community of steelworkers—in particular the 6,000 who know that there is a heavy hatchet over their heads—their families and their communities, I urge Corus to think again and to work with the Government to achieve a resolution, ensuring that, as demand for steel increases, the UK can respond efficiently and effectively as one of the best steel producers in the world.

9.59 am

Mr. Martin Caton (Gower): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) on having secured this debate, and on the power of his opening argument. In the circumstances, it is not a pleasure to participate, but I am grateful for the opportunity to do so. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) on the powerful case that she has made.

The loss of 130 jobs at the Bryngwyn plant in my constituency is, on the face of it, not in the same league as the proposed job losses of 1,300 at Llanwern and 780 at Ebbw Vale, but it is part of the same blow, which has hit Wales hard. For the village of Gorseinon, it is a second shock in less than 10 days. A week before the Corus announcement, we learned that the French company Valeo intends to close its factory at Gorseinon, which makes car heating and air conditioning systems, with a loss of 330 jobs. A fairly small community faces a possible total of 460 job losses, which would have many consequences for the local economy and even for the social fabric of the area.

Although Valeo and Bryngwyn have very different processes and products, their recent histories show a remarkable similarity. Both sites were named, just a few months ago, as centres of excellence in their industries, and their work forces were lauded, yet after no consultation or information sharing, those workers have now been told that they will all be out of a job by the end of July.

The double whammy leaves the Gorseinon community reeling. The Corus workers at Bryngwyn, victims of restructuring proposals, are bewildered and angry. At the weekend, the Welsh Assembly Member for Gower, Edwina Hart, and I met shop stewards of the Transport and General Workers Union and the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union at Bryngwyn. They told us of more than seven years of full order books for Bryngwyn's colour-coded product. Last April, Corus managers had shown them production and profitability charts and told them that Bryngwyn was leading the way and should keep up the good work. Nine months later, they have been told that that good work is to be stopped, that no productivity or new orders in the period up to July can change that, and that their members will receive only the basic redundancy package.

The situation is summed up by the telephone call that a Corus representative made to tell me, as the local Member of Parliament, of the devastating decision about Bryngwyn. After hearing the plans, I asked whether there would be a meaningful consultation period, and was told, "Yes, all the people who are being made redundant will receive counselling." Clearly, it is not only Sir Brian Moffat who fails to understand the meaning of the word "consultation". It has been deleted from the whole company's vocabulary. That is shameful.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South hopes that there will be meaningful negotiations. I share those hopes, but so far we have precious little evidence on which to base them. I am going to the Bryngwyn works tomorrow to discuss the local campaign to save the jobs. I hope that the possibility of a local buy-out will be mentioned, which would allow the team there to carry on its successful work. My hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth mentioned the attitude that Corus had to that option when the ISTC mooted it for Llanwern, but the people of Gorseinon will be looking to the Government to make every effort to shift Corus's thinking on the matter.

We must tell Corus that it cannot have it both ways. If the south Wales plants are long-term loss makers, then why should it fear a management-work force takeover? What competition does a lame duckling offer to the restructured, reinvigorated swan that Corus is supposed to be becoming—unless the duckling is not quite so lame, and the swan not really rejuvenated? Unless Corus is prepared to change direction, steel needs to be partly outside its monopolistic control if it is to have a future in our country.

10.4 am

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Mr. Caton), who is a defender of his community. When my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (Mr.

Edwards) referred to Shotton steelworks, he reminded me of those far-off days when I was working at No. 2 blast furnace at Shotton. It was one of the best jobs that I have ever had. I was given a crowbar, a pick and a shovel, a wheelbarrow and some moulding sand and told to get on with it, so I did. It was a tough job, but it was easy. I did not have to think. I did as I was told. My father had worked at that steelworks, as had my two grandfathers. At the time, it was a mighty, thriving 14,000-strong integrated steelworks. I am making these remarks to put into context the raw, powerful feelings that we all have about our communities now being put at risk by a cynical, brutal, thoughtless, profit-mad company—no more, no less.

I am also reminded of the former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, Peter Walker, who in 1972 brought forth a White Paper. His aim was to restructure the then nationalised industry. Because his proposals meant the loss of jobs in my steelworks, I took a deputation to the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), who was very courteous, accessible and accommodating. I took steelworkers from my constituency to the Cabinet Room and sat opposite the then Prime Minister, now the Father of the House. Above him was a painting of Walpole, the first Prime Minister. The workers and councillors spoke up well. It seemed that the Prime Minister wanted to be of help, but that was not possible.

As a result of that, more than 3,000 people arrived in London on three special trains and marched to this honourable House. Our bass drum was arrested on Vauxhall bridge and taken to Cannon Row police station. There were so many people in the area that the whole of Millbank was closed. Thereafter, security in the House of Commons and its surrounding environment was changed. We made a valiant effort to stop the loss of thousands of jobs, but after looking at the papers in 1980, the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, Sir Keith Joseph, said that steelmaking had to end. We lost 8,000 direct steel jobs overnight and at least 10,000 others were lost as a consequence. Hundreds of people from the estates in my constituency were out of work. Between 1980 and 1982, I think that male unemployment increased officially to 25 per cent.

Mr. Edwards: The Tory years.

Mr. Jones: Yes, they were the years of a Conservative Administration.

I emphasise the importance of this debate. When those redundancies rained down on my constituency, its social fabric could not take the strain. Unhappiness and unemployment were terrible wounds on the Deeside community. I do not want that for the constituencies in Wales or the rest of the United Kingdom. What is being proposed is unjust. If it comes about, it will not be good for our country, for our constituencies or for the steelworker constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth and their families.

At present, my steelworks has fewer than 1,000 employees, yet we have been told that we are to lose 319 jobs. What reward is that? The work force are magnificent and, over the years, have collaborated with the board of Corus and its predecessor in de-manning. Each time, the works leadership was told that if it de-manned, stepped up productivity and became more competitive, more successful and more profitable, it would be able to survive into the new century and retain what was left of the works; but that has not proved true. What Corus told my constituents at Shotton steelworks was not correct. Our people gave everything to the board and have received nothing in return but a kick in the teeth. They believe that they are being sacrificed on an altar that represents profit, and that their interests and those of the great industry come behind those of the shareholders.

Mr. Win Griffiths: My right hon. Friend's reference to workers in his constituency and throughout the steel industry in the United Kingdom being sacrificed on the altar of profit reminds me of the fact that when Corus was created, British Steel was cash rich. It had money in the bank, and it used nearly £700 million of that money as a sweetener in special dividends to shareholders to approve the merger. If British Steel had planned properly, it could have had that money available for the rainy day of the past year or so, and our workers would not have been sacrificed for the sake of a sweetener.

Mr. Jones: A week ago, my hon. Friend made that point to the chairman of Corus. Yards from this Chamber, the chairman and chief executive of Corus met Welsh Members of Parliament. It was an unique and historic meeting, and he made that point powerfully. However, my point was that if our country is divested of its steel capability on the colossal scale now proposed by the company, that will be a cut for ever. We will not be able to bring back that productivity. I seriously warn the company about that.

We maintain a large standing Army. We have a seaborne nuclear deterrent. We have ambitions as a middle-rank, modern nation state in Europe. We are a world leader, and we want to retain our influence. It will not be possible to do that if the nation is divested of a steel industry—and that is what is happening. We can now see the future, in which Sir Brian Moffat's board is planning by stealth to end steelmaking in Britain and concentrate it in another country across the channel. That cannot be right for Britain, for Wales or for Deeside and Shotton in my constituency.

We are discussing nationhood and the future of Britain. It is not possible to have a future or a nation without a steel industry. A steel industry is a foundation industry. There is nothing without it. It is incredible that a board of anonymous men and women hidden away can make a decision unilaterally, without consulting anyone or telling the British Government, the British Prime Minister or the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. They are not telling us what they are about—but we know what they are about, and they will bring on our communities unhappiness, unemployment and hopelessness. I have seen it before. That is a terrible, searing thing to do to communities, and I hope that, even at this late stage, Corus will think again. I do not believe that it is equal to the task.

My right hon. and hon. Friends have behaved magnificently in trying to defend steelworkers in their constituencies, and I pay tribute to union convenors, such as Robert Butt of the transport workers, Jim Mullins of the steelworkers, Mike Parkinson of the

[Mr. Jones]

engineers and Arthur Watson of the GMB, who are magnificent in doing what they are trying to do, and do not deserve the injustice that is being visited on them. All my Welsh colleagues know that what Corus is doing in Wales is wrong and unjust. The board must think again and come to the Prime Minister and offer to revisit the subject; it should stand back; it should think again; it should not do this to my steelworks.

10.14 am

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): May I say how privileged I am to be able to speak in this debate, in which several hon. Members representing steel areas in Wales have spoken so eloquently about the devastating blow that was struck at the heart of their communities when Corus announced that 3,000 jobs in Wales were to be lost in south Wales, at Llanwern, Ebbw Vale and Bryngwyn, and in the north in Shotton? Those are jobs in areas where, over the years, unemployment has had a devastating effect—that is especially true of Ebbw Vale. We have heard from the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) about the destruction of the steel industry in his area decades ago.

Over the past week or so, I have heard many eloquent speeches both here and in the National Assembly about the effect that the job losses are having. What underlies those speeches is a recognition that those working in the steel industry in Wales have made such a massive contribution to the economy of Wales, the United Kingdom and the rest of the world. What is also true is that those were good-quality jobs of the kind that attract incomes that we cannot afford to lose in Wales.

The loss of those jobs has a massive effect on the communities that I have mentioned, and it comes on top of other job losses. We have heard from the hon. Member for Gower (Mr. Caton) about the job losses at Valeo in Gorseinon, but we have also heard about job losses at Sony, Panasonic, Dewhurst and Gossard. Those are jobs in manufacturing—clearly not on the scale of the steel industry, but jobs that we can ill afford to lose in Wales.

I shall come to the decision by Corus in a moment, but alongside that, we must consider the Government's economic policy. How can it be right that Wales, with its heavier reliance on manufacturing, should suffer that haemorrhage of jobs without the Government's being prepared to countenance any change in economic policy to protect the future of our manufacturing industry? I appeal to the Minister to address that issue.

Mr. Win Griffiths: We all deplore what Corus are doing—there is a huge case against it, and it should be in the dock today—but when we look at manufacturing in Wales overall, there is also evidence of good news. The Bridgend plant will get more than 600 new jobs and the unions there confidently expect there to be more. That will also pave the way for the development of a new business park, in which, over a five-year period, there could easily be 1,000 new jobs. We need to look at all those issues in the round, and the Government worked well with Ford to enable that investment to be announced.

Mr. Jones: I applaud the fact that Ford have made that announcement to bring further jobs to Bridgend—of course that is excellent news—but we also have to remember the underlying trend in manufacturing in Wales. Our heavy reliance on manufacturing, which provides 27 per cent. of our jobs, compared with 20 per cent. in other parts of the United Kingdom, means that when there are job losses in manufacturing, we must take economic policy, and particularly the high value of the pound, into account. Many of those who have announced those job losses have cited that as one of the reasons why they are now uncompetitive against other plants in the rest of the European Union. I am not saying that Corus is blameless.

Mr. Griffiths: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jones: No, I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman.

The economic policy must also be examined. As hon. Members from all parts of the political spectrum in Wales have said, Corus's behaviour has been totally inexcusable. Its failure to consult the Government, the trade unions, the relevant agencies—such as the Welsh Development Agency—and the local authorities has, rightly, been condemned. Of course Corus should have consulted them. Corus should have told the Government what its plans were, so that stringent efforts could have been made to save jobs. Of course that is true.

We must also remember that in other European member states Corus could not have acted as it did, because employment laws in place in Germany and the Netherlands prevent such companies from throwing their workers out of work. That is the truth. I call on the Government to tell us that such a company will never again be allowed to throw workers on to the scrapheap. We should have employment laws equal to those in Germany and the Netherlands. We want statutory rights of consultation that would not have allowed Corus to say to the Government, "I'm sorry, but we're not prepared to talk." It should have had to talk to the Government. The Government must examine that issue.

Mr. Barry Jones: Is not the hon. Gentleman pushing his luck? He wants a separate independent Wales. We would not have a steel industry at all if he was in office.

Mr. Jones: What is remarkable about that intervention is that the right hon. Gentleman clearly did not disagree with the fundamental point that I was making. None of those who have spoken would disagree with that point. If employment laws were in place, Corus would have been prevented from acting as it did. He himself said that jobs were not being lost in the Netherlands. I can tell him why: if Corus had been planning to lose jobs in the Netherlands, it would have had to go through a consultation procedure that would have lasted up to two years. It was not prepared to do that. It is essential that employment laws are put in place in the United Kingdom. No one can deny the force of that argument.

I also want an assurance that, when the Government are talking to Corus, all options for saving jobs will be discussed. We must re-examine the trade union

proposal, not only in relation to Llanwern, but to see whether similar proposals may be applied in other plants.

The first tack is to try to persuade Corus not to go ahead with the redundancies. We all support that plea and want to see it succeed. We want to see the Prime Minister, the First Minister and all the relevant Welsh and UK Ministers coming together to ensure that jobs can be protected. If that fails, we must look at ways in which we can assist the workers through proposals such as those of the trade unions. Clearly, we must also have contingency plans. What contingency plans will be put in place if all the pleading fails and the jobs are lost? No firm figure has been established yet, but it is estimated that between £50 million and £100 million will be necessary for the communities to rebuild the economies of the areas devastated by job losses.

Where will that money come from? I would like the Minister to tell us, categorically, that if it is necessary to provide those resources, the Treasury will provide them above the Welsh block. We do not want the National Assembly to have to raid its own budget to provide the necessary resources to rebuild the economy of those areas. Will she assure us that, if the worst comes to the worst and those resources are needed, the Treasury will be prepared to give that money to the Assembly so that we can begin that work of rebuilding?

The communities are facing desperate times and immense problems. A community such as Ebbw Vale has high social deprivation. It will be a huge task to rebuild those economies, so I hope that the Government will show today that they stand shoulder to shoulder with those communities.

10.25 am

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): I join my friends from every political party in condemning the loss of jobs at Corus and the way in which the company has gone about it. Last Saturday at Cardiff Arms Park, I saw a graphic illustration of how it has been done. I have sat next to the same person for the past 10 years—a young lad in his early 30s. The Welsh team was losing to the best English side I have seen in the past 50 years. At half-time he looked a bit depressed, and I said to him, "We're going to lose this match, aren't we?" He said, "It's worse than that: I work in the steel plant in Llanwern and I've been given my redundancy this week." There he is, a 34-year-old with a couple of kids—what future does he have? He is a skilled person, but as things stand, he does not really have a future.

We should bring the subject down to the human scale. We can talk about macro-economies and so on, but what matters are the individuals and families who are seriously hurt by Corus's disgraceful decision. Mr. Moffat is a butcher; most butchers retire eventually, and I understand that he is to retire within the next 12 months. When butchers retire, they sell their assets at the best possible price—in this case, the price on the stock markets. Corus in Holland is recruiting workers, but Corus in the United Kingdom is sacking them. The euro valuation in relation to the pound means that there is a loss on every tonne of steel produced, and exported steel in particular. No protection law exists to prevent the employees from being sacked.

It will be death by a thousand cuts. Unless this huge basic industry—the foundation of manufacturing industry in the United Kingdom—is allowed to compete properly in the marketplace, the remaining plants will also be in danger. I hope that that will not happen, but it seems possible. Corus has ruled out capital investment in its United Kingdom plants, which represents a death sentence for steel production here. We must act now—not in one or two or three years' time—to save the UK steel industry. It is a basic industry in Wales, and a vital part of the economy.

The announcement last week of the loss of 6,000 jobs in England and Wales is primarily the result of a decision by Corus to chop 3 million tonnes of production in the UK, which represents most of the export market. Most of it is going to Europe, and the industry is being downsized. Corus wants to keep spending to a minimum and will not invest for five years—we have that on good authority. Further cuts could be inevitable unless we take action. Mr. Moffat blames world overcapacity, low prices, falling UK demand and a strong pound. He may be right, but the way in which he has responded to that situation is absolutely atrocious.

That is the problem, but what do we have as a solution? Wales may receive £50 million from Whitehall, but one must set that against the cyclical nature of the steel industry. In 1996, British Steel made taxed profits of £1 billion. That was only four years ago, and profits could reach that level again if we remain competitive and there is investment. Turning the steel industry around is like trying to turn a massive tanker just outside Port Talbot roads: it takes a long time. It requires stability in the industry, not cuts like these. Mr. Moffat wants a good share price when he retires, which is the worst possible type of short-termism.

We cannot avoid certain facts. Corus has no legal obligation to consult, which is why it did not do so. It had no intention of doing so. As someone who worked for a multinational company for some time, I know that some boardrooms cut and run, while others co-operate and negotiate. That is the difference between Corus and Ford, for example. If we do not get the change that we want from the Corus board, we must try and try again. Indeed, consultation might have happened if we had signed up to the European Union employment protection directives. I cannot for the life of me understand a Labour Government who do not get involved in workers' rights. There is no sentiment in big business. The Government have been blocking the employment protection directives. In Nice, for example, they could have signed up to them but they did not. Why? It is a serious matter.

In his opening remarks, the hon. Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) gave a marvellous prescription. Many other hon. Members—if I may use Dylan Thomas's phrase—have demonstrated a tendency to

> "Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

In this case, the dying of the light is in the steel plants. My family, in the early part of the 20th century, worked for the infamous Crawshay in Merthyr Tydfil. We all know what happened to Cyfartha ironworks: it closed down and everybody was out of a job. Indeed, the words "God forgive me" are inscribed on the grave of one of the Crawshays. I do not know whether that will be on Moffat's grave, but it would be deserved.

[Mr. Richard Livsey]

We are in danger of living in a cloud cuckoo land. We must recognise certain facts. There is a global glut of steel. Steel prices are at a 20-year low. Corus exports 3 million tonnes to Europe and also owns Dutch and German production, which is far more profitable. The pound has been 40 per cent. overvalued over the past two years. How can one compete with that milestone around one's neck? That is why such a loss has been made. UK steel demand is in stagnation. Corus is £1.6 billion in debt and has made a loss of £226 million during the past six months.

Something radical must be done. British Steel was uniquely vulnerable to a takeover because of inadequate takeover laws in the United Kingdom. That is why the company is in this state. Of course, the management are far too ruthless and do not care a damn about the work force. The United Kingdom is going nowhere in terms of steel production. In the long term, the cycle will change and things will get better. The nature of the stock market favours short-termism, which puts people on the labour scrapheap. The competition is massively fierce—from China, Russia, Europe and Brazil—and the overvalued pound ensures that imports easily penetrate our markets. In fact, the penetration is massive. Unless the situation changes or there is intervention, Corus will undoubtedly relocate steel production, perhaps to eastern Europe.

The stock market does not value manufacturing production. It is interested only in short-term profitability, hence the job cuts and the increase of 10 per cent. in the share price last week. There is a high pound, and we need to do much to cure that problem. We have to review the takeover rules and company ownership structures. The European Parliament has tried to make hostile takeovers more difficult, but it has been opposed in that. Indeed, Ministers allowed British Steel to amalgamate with Hoogovens.

As a result of all that, we have the demise of Ebbw Vale, a town that depends totally on steel. Everybody there will be out of a job, and there is no alternative. That is a huge tragedy. There must be a management-worker buy-out of the Ebbw Vale steelworks if it is to survive. That is extremely important, because steel is fundamental to our manufacturing industry. We are in serious trouble unless there is Government intervention, as there was in the 1920s and 1930s and in the 1960s. There must be a rapid response for areas hit by closures. Help should be given to construct small and medium-sized enterprises to use more locally manufactured steel. We must have new consultation procedures and boost local demand. Public investment is necessary to save the industry. I am a great believer in Keynesian economics, and when there is a crisis it has to be met head on.

Unless we join the euro as soon as possible, we will continue to lose money on every tonne of steel produced. There should be more buy-outs of plants to save our industry and assistance from the Treasury to increase the Welsh block. We must meet head on this huge crisis—in human as well as industrial terms—if the steel and manufacturing industries are to continue in Britain at all.

10.37 am

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): I understand the feelings of hon. Members who have already spoken. I was born in Tredegar and my mother's family have lived there all their lives. I know the importance of steel and coal to the psyche of that community. It is understandable that hon. Members want to try to protect their constituents and, if necessary, to lash out on their behalf, and they are to be commended for it. I do not criticise them, but I shall explain why I believe that their energies have been misdirected.

It is easy to run a business that is going well. The tills ring, the salesmen are out and the money comes in. Any fool can do that, but when business gets difficult, one has to start thinking about it. Business is a bit like a cake: one tackles the slices one by one. When one has finished, one hopes to have a cake that is a bit smaller. One keeps repeating the process, and the day one stops tackling the slices is the day when one goes out of business.

In 1997, British Steel made a profit of £387 million from carbon steel. The line on the graph goes straight down from that point, and now Corus is losing a similar sum. It is losing more than £1 million a day. What can be done about that? Usually, increased efficiency is the answer and the work force can be made more productive. It is unusual for me to quote the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, but in his recent announcement on this sad affair, he said that the productivity of UK steelworkers is now at 571 tonnes a year per man—a staggering figure that makes ours one of the most efficient and productive steel operations in Europe, if not the world. We can be proud of our work force.

If lack of efficiency is not to blame, let us examine the marketplace, which the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) discussed earlier. Total UK steel consumption has actually increased slightly since 1997, but if we examine that 1 million tonnes increase, it proves to consist of growth in imported steel goods and steel mill products. The pressure on our steel mills is to reduce volumes of production.

If the marketplace is not to blame, could transport be the problem? One must consider that our transport costs are among the highest in Europe.

What about regulation? If one takes the British Chambers of Commerce figures as broadly accurate—I shall not argue about £1 billion either way—we find that the cost of regulation on British business has increased by £10 billion.

Finally, we come to the largest slice of the cake, the ratio of the pound to the euro, which I think is the hammer blow. Of course, we have a further straw on the camel's back to come in the climate change levy. The Secretary of State dismissed it as a concern to Corus, but I can tell him that it is a concern to every company that tries to operate in Britain.

What can we do? The pluses are that we have an efficient work force and a market that has grown, but the minuses are transport costs, the forthcoming climate change levy, the huge burden of regulation and the impossibly high pound-euro rate.

Can Corus ask for a dramatic increase in the efficiency of its work force? No, because the work force has done magnificently. When I was the Member of Parliament

for Workington, the blast furnace there was appallingly inefficient. The present operation is brilliant, and everyone connected with it can take a great deal of credit.

Can Corus do anything about the price of fuel? No. Can it do anything about the climate change levy? No. What can it do about regulations? Nothing. The damaging pound-euro ratio is the thing that really hurts not only Corus but British manufacturing in general. The hon. Members for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) and for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones) put their finger on it when they began to discuss the imbalance in the pound-euro rate.

Ms Dari Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Page: No—unless the Minister is happy for me to take up her time.

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): It is entirely up to you.

Mr. Page: No, then.

Why do we have such a strong pound against the euro? It is because we have a high interest rate. Why do we have a high interest rate? Rightly, it has been set by the Monetary Policy Committee to limit inflation. I shall not argue that squeezing out interest should not be the criterion that it should operate on. It must do that because the fiscal policies followed by the Chancellor have resulted in masses of stealth taxes.

I must say to those hon. Members who gratuitously argued that Corus is slicing back assets simply because it likes to, that that seems a peculiar way to run a business. A management team that made cuts for fun would have minimal business experience.

In the last steel debate before Corus reached its decision, the Minister for Competitiveness concluded:

> "We are taking action on the three key issues of the European exchange rate, the climate change levy and energy prices."—[*Official Report*, 10 January 2001; Vol. 360, c. 238WH]

It is hard to say about energy prices, but what action is the DTI taking on the exchange rate and the climate change levy?

The hon. Member for Stockton, South asked what specific offers the Government have made to Corus. I, too, would like to know the answer to that question. The announcement was no surprise: it had been coming for a long time. What was Corus offered to keep its plants going, given that—through the Government's own actions—it is losing £1 million every day? In the time since this debate started, Corus has lost £55,555—I have not calculated the pence.

Ms Taylor: Please will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Page: In a minute, perhaps.

For the Government to give a few million pounds to a company in such a situation would be like turning to a drowning man with a hundredweight of lead strapped to his legs and saying, "We'll take a few pounds off you, but you'll still drown unless more dramatic help arrives."

Ms Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way now?

Mr. Page: I will, but only because I have been given the nod by the Minister.

Ms Taylor: Is it now official Conservative party policy to support joining the euro, and will the hon. Gentleman be pressing for entry at the earliest point?

Mr. Page: Even I, in my ignorance, see a trap, which I shall not fall into. I see no difficulty in having a correct fiscal policy that is not only beneficial to the nation but puts us more in line with the currencies in Europe without all the penalties of joining the euro. We can have the penny and the bun: all we need to do is change the Chancellor.

I am worried that what is being suggested may not draw a line in the sand under this matter. If the high pound-euro ratio continues, it may be difficult to restore the profitability that carbon steel manufacturing enjoyed back in 1997.

I am desperately sorry for the employees who are caught up in this. They are efficient and hard-working, and it is not their fault. I understand why right hon. and hon. Members are so vehement in their defence; my attitude would be exactly the same if I had a steelworks in my constituency.

Ms Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Page: No.

Those in government who so loosely accuse Corus should be examining the real facts. The fault of the Government lies not in their stars, but in themselves.

10.48 am

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) on securing this important and timely debate. He and my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones), my hon. Friends the Members for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) and for Gower (Mr. Caton), and the hon. Members for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones) and for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) forcefully and movingly expressed the fury that is felt by workers and their families and communities about the announcement that was made last week by Sir Brian Moffat on behalf of Corus. They also spoke about the appalling effects of the decision not only on individuals and families but on entire communities and economies. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in his statement in the House last week, the Government share absolutely that fury and sense of betrayal.

I congratulate all my hon. Friends on their efforts to support their constituents and the workers in this industry, and on working with the trade unions to persuade Corus to take a different, more constructive and long-term approach. As my right hon. Friend said last week, and as some hon. Members have said this morning, there are real problems with structural

[Ms Patricia Hewitt]

overcapacity in the steel industry worldwide. Corus has had to deal with real losses in its UK operation, from which it continues to suffer. However, last week's announcement is undoubtedly a short-term response that fails to take account of the long-term and fundamental strength of the UK economy and of manufacturing in particular. We now have a sound and credible platform for growth. We have low and stable inflation, low interest rates and sound public finances.

To be frank, the comments of the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) were economic gobbledegook. We all remember inflation rising to 11 per cent. and interest rates of above 11 per cent. for years on end. We all remember that 1 million manufacturing jobs were lost in the first Conservative recession of the early 1980s, and almost a further 1 million in the second one of the early 1990s. We will take no lessons from the Conservatives on economic policy and how to ensure the platform of stable economic growth that is the essential precondition for success in the manufacturing sector.

Several hon. Members have rightly referred to the general state of manufacturing, as well as the specific conditions in the steel industry, and I should stress that manufacturing output is rising. Indeed, as the *Financial Times*, among others, reports this morning, we have the highest growth in manufacturing output in general since 1994—an annual rate of 1.6 per cent. That should be compared with a fall in manufacturing output of 20 per cent. in the 1980s, and of more than 7 per cent. in the early 1990s. There is particularly strong growth in sectors such as the aerospace industry.

Several speakers mentioned the motor car industry. Despite the difficulties experienced by certain companies, there is real growth in that sector, with increased investment, output and exports. Moreover, the United Kingdom is retaining its position as the number one destination for direct foreign investment in Europe. Major global companies are giving a real vote of confidence to the UK. My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths) rightly referred to recent long-term decisions by Ford that were taken on the basis of constructive dialogue with the Government and with workers. Decisions in recent weeks by Toyota and Nissan also illustrate confidence in the economic stability and good business environment that we have created.

In striking contrast is the announcement by Corus. As I said, the carbon steel manufacturing arm of Corus's UK operation is experiencing problems, with real losses of about £1 million a day. Corus must of course address those difficulties, but given the broad background of economic stability, growth and a sound manufacturing sector, it is simply unacceptable for the company to take this decision in this manner, and for its new leadership to refuse to talk to the Government. Indeed, until last week it refused to talk to the workers and their trade unions. I am glad that, following the decision on 1 February, Corus finally accepted that it should talk to the trade unions about its announcement. I understand that it effectively agreed to stop the clock for 14 days to allow those talks to continue. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said last week, we were in discussions with the company and the joint chief executives, but the new chief executive made it very clear, very early on, that no package of measures would be of any interest to the company in terms of remedying the underlying problems as he saw them.

We have been working in Government, across Government and with the National Assembly for Wales to try to put together a more constructive long-term strategy for Corus. The problem has been its unwillingness to talk to us, to the National Assembly for Wales or, until last week, to the trade unions. Several of my hon. Friends referred to the proposal from the workers at Llanwern who want to mount a worker buy-out. We heard in the debate last week—I am not sure whether it has been referred to this morning—about the successful experience of the Tower colliery, which, following massive closures in the industry, was successfully bought out by the workers. I repeat what my right hon. Friend said last week: we urge the Corus leadership and management to sit down with the ISTC and the workers at Llanwern and seriously consider the constructive proposal that has been made for a worker-led buyout.

Several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire, referred to the broader economic situation and other factors that might lie behind the Corus decision. He referred to transport and, as my right hon. Friend said last week, that can hardly be an issue when the company is now proposing to move goods from Stockton to Llanwern. The company has not raised the matter with us. Similarly, the climate change levy has not been raised with us by the chief executive. Corus, in common with many other manufacturing companies and in response to our proposal, has negotiated a discount of 80 per cent. in the climate change levy in return for further improvements in energy efficiency.

On regulation, as the hon. Gentleman knows and as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development recently confirmed at an international benchmarking study, we now have a lighter framework of regulation than other members of the European Union do.

The exchange rate is a serious matter, but let us be clear that much of the worsening of the exchange rate took place before 1997. In recent months, the value of the euro has strengthened. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has said on many occasions, it was clearly undervalued. Again, a company is failing to take account of long-term changes in the economy and making a decision on short-term considerations.

Several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth, referred to consultation. Let me stress that United Kingdom law fully implements the European directive on collective redundancies. Corus is already under an obligation that was put into United Kingdom law by a previous Labour Government to consult workers and trade unions for at least 90 days before any dismissals take effect. That 90-day period will begin to run if the company, following its current discussions with the trade unions, confirms that the enormous redundancies are to continue.

The requirement in law for that minimum 90-day consultation period is that there should be good faith consultation, including consideration of ways of avoiding redundancies or reducing the number of dismissals or mitigating their effect in other ways. That obligation has been there for years under employment law enacted by a previous Labour Government. Also, the European works council directive applies, as it does to other multinational companies that operate in the United Kingdom.

I repeat my call to Corus to sit down with the unions, the National Assembly for Wales and us to seek a better long-term solution for the communities, economies and families affected by its devastating decision.

Ambulance Service (London)

11 am

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is that how I am supposed to address you?

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): Hon. Members are supposed to address me by name. I know that you can pronounce my name, Dr. Tonge, so perhaps you should do so.

Dr. Tonge: Thank you, Mrs. Michie. May I ask you to sort the confusion out with the Speaker's Office? Depending on who is in the Chair, we are sometimes expected to use names and sometimes titles. All Members share my confusion.

I should like to welcome two ambulance men to the Strangers Gallery. They are on their day off.

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): The hon. Lady is not supposed to refer to people who are not in the Chamber.

Dr. Tonge: I am terribly sorry, Mrs. Michie.

All Members should have an interest in our debate, because the London ambulance service will come to pick us up when we have our heart attacks and strokes, which is not unusual in the House of Commons—although I hope that it does not happen too often. Perhaps the men more so than the women ought to declare an interest, because women are much fitter. Nevertheless, we all have an interest in the service, which is crucial to the life of Londoners. In Paris, the ambulance service headquarters has a special phone for the Assemblée Nationale. I am glad to say that our ambulance service does not have any such phone, and that we take our chance with the rest of our constituents.

What a chance it is. If someone has a heart attack in a London street, there is a 1.8 per cent. chance that he will be alive a year later. In Paris, that person would have an 18 per cent. chance and, in America, he would have about a 30 per cent. chance. That is a poor figure for the United Kingdom. I know that that is due to a lack of cardio-pulmonary resuscitation techniques among the public, but it is also due to the great difficulty that the ambulance service has in meeting its response times. Its target is that 55 per cent. of all calls should be responded to within eight minutes, but it achieves only 34 per cent.

That is no fault of the people working in the service. As we all know, traffic congestion in London is currently impossible. I am told that the average speed of traffic is 10 mph.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Whose target is that 55 per cent? Is it in the patients charter? Is it an internal target or the purchaser's target?

Dr. Tonge: I think that it is the target in the patients charter, but I shall have to look into that.

It is a good day if the average speed of traffic in London is 10 mph. It regularly takes me much more than an hour to travel a little over five miles back to my constituency. Speed bumps and other traffic-calming

[Dr. Tonge]

measures have slowed traffic down, so they also slow ambulances down. Delays caused by congestion mean that the ambulance service needs more ambulances if it is to achieve a response time of eight minutes. An ambulance and crew has a range of only three miles, so more ambulances and more crews are needed to achieve those times.

The London ambulance service answers 700,000 calls a year with 350 ambulances. That is some service. Our lives may be in their hands, but those ambulance crews are still last in the league table of the nation's 32 ambulance trusts. The ambulance service was promised 25 more ambulances last year, but by December 2000 only 11 were staffed and operational. More ambulances are urgently needed. More paramedics on motor bikes are needed, because they can get through traffic to acutely ill people: they probably save lives while waiting for the ambulance crew to arrive. The London ambulance service improvement programme estimates that more than £11 million capital investment is needed, rather than the £5.5 million that it receives now.

Before I leave the subject of capital investment, I want to speak briefly about what most ambulance crews would call the icing on the cake—the helicopter. London, with a population of 6.5 million people, has one helicopter to use for really serious accidents. Paris has a population of 1.5 million people and has two helicopters. That is a shortfall for London. If I am ever taken acutely ill, I hope that it happens in France.

Other problems affect response times, and I touched on some of them in a debate on the health service in London a few weeks ago. The ambulance service is short of 400 ambulance crew. One reason for that is the maximum pay that staff can expect to receive. A qualified staff paramedic with many years' service can expect to earn about £20,000 a year including overtime. Those men and women put up drips, restart hearts that have stopped beating, make accurate assessments of the clinical condition of patients, stabilise broken backs and necks and crawl into the wreckage of road traffic accidents; and we reward them with a maximum payment of just under £20,000 a year.

In my pre-registration work as a junior hospital doctor, I relied on ambulance crews in emergencies, and I know many newly qualified doctors who feel the same as I do. We often rely on ambulance men and women in emergencies, yet we pay them only £20,000 a year. They cannot buy houses in London on that sort of money; nor can they give their families a decent life. It is no wonder that more than 10 per cent. of ambulance staff in London were lost during the past year to ambulance trusts in other parts of the country, where the living is easier, the housing is cheaper and they can just about manage on their pay. That movement of staff means that the training and dedication of those people are lost to the London ambulance service.

Of the £21 million given to the ambulance service nationwide last year to improve services, £2 million went to the London ambulance service and £19 million to services in the rest of the country, yet a third of all category A calls to the ambulance service are dealt with by the LAS. London does a third of the work, and receives a tenth of the funding. I rest my case.

Another problem is the safety of staff. Ambulance staff in London suffer an average of one assault a day. It has got so bad that they are now being issued with safety vests. News Direct has sponsored a poster campaign in London to point out to the general public that those whose job it is to save lives in emergencies now have to risk their own lives to help others.

The constant misuse of the ambulance service by the public is another factor. A woman in my area splashed vinegar in her eye while making a salad dressing for a dinner party and called an ambulance. She dialled 999. Someone with a badly broken nail—extremely painful and extremely urgent!—dialled 999. All those calls cost the health service hundreds of pounds to deal with, but the patients charter states that the ambulance service must respond to all calls.

Some progress has been made in recent months. The London ambulance service has used some of its precious paramedics, who are supposed to be in ambulances answering emergency calls, to filter calls more effectively and to suggest to patients that they take the advice of a nurse or pharmacist, or ring NHS Direct. However, if the caller insists on having an ambulance—as people often do—the ambulance has to go and the money is wasted. We need some serious re-thinking about where ambulance stations are located and what their relationship is with NHS Direct and other NHS bases and emergency services. The ambulance service needs to be co-ordinated with the rest of the health service.

Savings, as well as improvements, can be made, especially if the LAS gets the computerised service that it desperately needs. Computers and the London ambulance service have a long history, and the service desperately needs a new system.

How much time is spent delivering the patient to hospital? It should take crews about 15 minutes to get from the door of the casualty department back to base. However, in winter, it can take more than 30 minutes. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) wants to comment on that in more depth. The problem is caused when accident and emergency departments are full and all the beds have been taken up. Sometimes the casualty department has no trolleys left, and the ambulance trolley has to suffice until one can be found and the patient can be transferred on to it. That is not a modern service.

We have expected far too much for far too long from the men and women of our ambulance service in London. It must be given special consideration. It needs support and a unified commissioning structure. It is ridiculous that it is commissioned by 16 different health authorities. Each of those health authorities has its own priorities. Acute hospital trusts are in deficit and other Government priority areas, which also deserve attention, have to be addressed by the trusts. The ambulance service always comes down the bottom of the list of priorities. If any of us in the Chamber has a coronary or a stroke, we will need the ambulance service pretty damn quick. It will not be good enough if it is at the bottom of the health authority's list of priorities.

Everyone accepts that there have been mistakes and mismanagement in the past in the London ambulance service. However, it now has an excellent chairman, who was appointed by the Government. The chief executive, who was appointed last year, is hugely popular with the

staff. Having worked in the health service for over 30 years, I find it unusual that every ambulance man or woman I speak to thinks that their chief executive is a great guy, is working for the service and communicates with them. He makes a point of donning a reflector jacket and going out with an ambulance crew at least once every couple of weeks to ensure that he knows what is happening on the ground. Peter Bradley is a good chief executive and he should be encouraged. We probably have the best union-management relationship of all time in the London ambulance service.

In short, we have the chance of a lifetime radically to modernise and improve the service. I know that the Government care about the NHS. They should not forget the core of the NHS in London—the ambulances.

11.14 am

Mr. John Horam (Orpington): Mrs. Michie—I hope that that is correct.

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): That will do very well.

Mr. Horam: I want to speak briefly, Mrs. Michie, because as a Minister in the previous Government I was privileged to have responsibility for all the ambulance services in the country, including London, from 1994 to 1997. As all hon. Members present probably know, owing to the historic problems of the London ambulance service, I shared responsibility for it with the Secretary of State.

As the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) pointed out, there have for a long time been problems in the London ambulance service that need special attention. As Minister responsible, I found that the difficulty was not that the service did not receive the special attention that it deserved by virtue of such factors as the size of London and congestion, but that it did not receive even ordinary attention. It was often the Cinderella of the services, which is astonishing given the fact that however good a hospital service may be, it is pointless to provide it if people fail to arrive there. I felt that my effort should be directed at obtaining for the service the attention that it needed.

Although I should not refer to some of my former special advisers, I am glad to note that they are taking an interest in the debate and pleased that they are still involved. They are from other services, but give their time to the London ambulance service. They were invaluable to me as a source of advice and I think that we made progress.

The problem in the past three years has been, first, a failure of management. For example, a tier of middle management was removed, leaving ordinary ambulance men with little in the way of hierarchy to which to report. The result has been, to an extent, what one might call canteen culture at its worst, which can create difficulties in the efficient running of an ambulance service. Ordinary ambulance men are superb people trying to do a job that is very difficult compared with, for example, that of the fire service. They have to do more with fewer resources and have a more relentless daily task and, in many respects, less public support. Certainly they have less Government support, and that remains the case.

I was alarmed to note that the ambulance service is not mentioned in the NHS plan, which was produced in summer. That is astonishing. The centrality of the task of getting a sick person to hospital is not mentioned in the plan that is supposed to solve all problems. I was disappointed about that, because the mindset that I struggled against—that of the ambulance service as a kind of tail-end Charlie that would receive some small funds when they were available—is still in the Department. I worry about that.

The failure in the first instance has been one of management, which is why I am pleased about the appointment of a new chairman. The hon. Member for Richmond Park was right to mention the new chief executive, whom I, too, have found to be extremely popular with ambulance men in Bromley. That bodes well. Recruitment, and the use of ordinary ambulance men and women, have also proved difficult. For example, although we live in a 24-hour society in which problems evidently arise on Friday and Saturday nights, there is no overtime pay for weekends. Not to provide incentives to people to be available at those times of high demand is ludicrous, but that is the consequence of negotiations conducted without the common sense that one would expect. The trail of difficulties involving management and past negotiations has led to the current problems. One would hope that an ambulance would be waiting to deal with any emergency that might arise, but the reverse is nearer the truth and, if an accident happens, it is to be hoped that an ambulance will arrive.

As the hon. Member for Richmond Park said, the figure for meeting the eight-minute deadline has fallen to 32 per cent. I had thought that it was 36 per cent., but whatever it is, it is far below the necessary level. It is also far below that level in provincial cities. London has special problems, which mean that one should have lower expectations for the timing of ambulance arrivals. Although the expectations that one would have in provincial cities simply could not be met, the figures should be much better. Otherwise, we would not be providing a proper service. Indeed, to some extent, no ambulance service operates at weekends.

Mr. Hammond: I want to probe my hon. Friend's statement that it would not be reasonable to expect the London ambulance service to meet the response times that are met in provincial cities. I understand that the London ambulance service's percentage response time achievement in central London is not bad, but that in outer London the response time gets worse, dragging down the overall average. Is not that his understanding?

Mr. Horam: I am not familiar with the distinction between inner and outer London on response times. I was referring to the fact that Newcastle and Liverpool have much better ambulance response times than London. London has always been way behind the response times in cities throughout the rest of the country, and I think that the Minister would agree with that. That is certainly my experience.

London has particular problems such as the size of the city and the historic problems of the service. For example, the lack of computerisation is still a problem. Everything works by paper after all these years, although several efforts have been made to install a fully computerised system, which is standard in cities such as

[Mr. Horam]

Liverpool and Newcastle, which are way ahead. Such problems must be solved. I am appalled to find that, four years after I handed over responsibility, the London system is, amazingly, still paper based. Progress has been extremely slow, and the results are unsatisfactory to Londoners and to ordinary ambulance men. They want proper support and a proper system of which they can be proud, but they have neither.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): The hon. Gentleman speaks with considerable experience, but does he agree that the disastrous attempt to introduce an information technology system to the London ambulance service in the 1990s knocked the service back considerably? The events surrounding that prevented it from making progress in that area as quickly as others did. Will he comment on that?

Mr. Horam: Yes, there were all sorts of reasons for that, many of which were related to the traditional set-up and relations between the trade unions and the management. No one would defend that now. It is poor that we have made so little progress, even in 2001, compared with that made in provincial cities, which were computerised in my time. London still is not and that is the problem. I hope that the Minister will say something positive about that, because progress must be made on that front.

I am pleased that the service has a new chairman—who, incidentally, is a resident of my own borough, Bromley. I have spoken to him, and he is very effective. The service also has a new chief executive. The management, at the instigation of a new chairman and chief executive, are much more understanding and friendly towards their staff and they are making a genuine effort to understand the problems that staff face in delivering a decent service. The impression that I have gained from the people to whom I have spoken at the ambulance headquarters in Bromley is that management are very staff oriented. They are grasping the nettle, realising that they have to work with staff, try to recruit staff and understand their problems.

The management must carefully consider pay and recruitment, which are fundamental problems. As the hon. Member for Richmond Park said, given the competition in the job market and housing problems in the London area, the organisation will not work if those with considerable experience are paid a salary of £19,000 or £20,000. One cannot have a decent service and have the right quality and quantity of people if that situation is not addressed fundamentally. The management well understand that, and are doing their best to do something about it.

Management are now much more flexible and coherent and I understand that they have a clear idea about capital and resource requirements and about the fact that the service needs some £12 million next year to contribute to providing more and better ambulances, better equipment and facilities. The management have set out a clear programme for the next four or five years, which the Government have been given. I hope that the new team can build on the undoubted good will that is being generated among staff and address the problems. I hope, too, that the Government will chip in with the right sort of funding and no longer treat the service as a Cinderella and that London will once again be proud of its ambulance service.

11.25 am

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): It is a privilege to serve under you, Mrs. Michie, as I do not think that I have done so before. If I may say so without embarrassing you, although I am not your constituent, I am one of your biggest fans and only regret that you will not be here in the next Parliament, as some of us hope to be.

I am glad that we are having the debate because it is important for London. That shows how magnanimous I am, because I have been applying for weeks for the same debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) beat me to it. Last year, six Liberal Democrat Members decided that we must raise the issue and we have all done so in different ways. There was nothing conspiratorial about that—we all agreed that the matter was important and my three colleagues who cannot be present are very much associated with the issue. We benefited collectively from having been briefed and brought up to date before Christmas by the new chief executive, to whom tribute has been paid.

Some two weeks before Christmas, at about 9 o'clock one evening, I went to the headquarters of the London ambulance service in Waterloo road, which lies outside my constituency by about two yards. I went out with a crew of two ambulance drivers, Bart Wood and Peter Gallen, on their evening shift in a conventional London ambulance. Within a minute or two, they received a call to attend to a young boy, living in Walworth, who was choking and at severe risk of heart failure. They drove through the traffic—not easy, even at that time of night—through narrow streets on which the parking made access almost impossible. They made it to the house and were joined by their colleague, Ian Price, who was on a motor cycle. Paramedics with ambulance crews often use such vehicles nowadays. As far as I could see, when the crew took that youngster and his parents to St. Thomas's, they saved his life. In lay terms, it prevented that child from dying that evening. That was a dramatic introduction to an evening shift.

Last month, Jim and Christine Bradford, my constituents, had a tragic experience. Michael Bradford, their 14-year-old son, was knocked down in St. James road in Bermondsey when he ran out between two cars. He died after a week in the London hospital. He was the only child of those parents—one had two daughters by a previous marriage. I went to see Jim and Christine the day before the funeral and spent time with them at their home before going to the memorial service at the school and the funeral service. In their grief and desolation, they paid tribute to the air ambulance service that had taken Michael from the road accident over the river to the London hospital.

Although Michael did not survive, his parents could not have paid higher tribute to that service. They could not understand why, in the whole of London, there is only one air ambulance—that point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park. Unless things have changed since I made my visit as health spokesman for our party, that air ambulance, I

understand, is largely funded by private money, not the NHS. Those are two recent examples, which took place within a month of each other, of the work of the ambulance services, the air rescue service and the support services in trying to save lives in London.

I join in the tributes paid by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park and the hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) to a service that has had terrible difficulties, but also has the resolution and will to overcome them. It is asking political representatives, in particular the Government, for help to change from a service that is overstretched and unable to meet its target times, and sometimes unable to do the job that it wants to do and save the lives that it can, to the Rolls-Royce service that we would expect in a capital city such as ours.

I want to concentrate on pay, but, by way of solidarity with colleagues, shall flag up the other points that have been mentioned. First, it is clearly sensible that we change as quickly as possible from a paper-based system, which is not sufficiently reliable or logical, to a computer-based, automatic, electronic system. I know the history and remember all that difficulty with the old computer that crashed—the whole system went to pieces and the IT did not work. The Minister referred to that. That is history; we need to introduce a system that allows information received at the call centre to be passed on for the crew to be summoned, and the sooner we can have that, the better.

Secondly, we need the kit to do the job. We need the ambulances on the ground to be able to respond. My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park referred to the fact that there is a bid in for and a promise of 25 more fast response ambulances, but only 11 have been on the road. Again, I talked to the crew who were with me that day, and who have been kind enough to come to Westminster this morning, and they said that even on one of their most recent days on duty they were scrabbling around for an oxygen cylinder, because there was not one in the ambulance. Some ambulances have all the kit on board; some do not because it is not there to be had. That does not allow crews to do their job properly.

The third issue concerns staff. This may sound sycophantic, and I do not mean it to, but I knew that I would be impressed by the professionalism of the crew. I expected that, just as I did when I visited the fire service and the police. I expect a professional job to be done and that is invariably the case, probably for 99.9 per cent. of the time. I was more impressed than I ever imagined by not just their professionalism, but their knowledge, expertise, competence and calmness—all the qualities that are vital to doing the job well. A better job could not have been done, and I say that in tribute to the individuals concerned.

I agree that it is unacceptable that no matter how many years' service people have done and no matter how much experience they have gained, their top-whack pay is about £20,000. It is unacceptable that there is no increment as a reward for service. People give five or 10 years' service, but have nothing to show for it. Why stay? Why stay in London? Why not move elsewhere, where there is less pressure? Why not move to a place where house prices, travel costs and the cost of living are lower? Why not move to an area where the incidence of severe accidents and injury is lower? Why not transfer to another profession? Why not go into the private sector? There is no incentive to stay.

We all think that an election is coming down the track. The Minister may not know formally any more than I do as to when it will be, but we are all on alert for the spring. We understand that there will be a Budget in March, and it may be meant as a backdrop to an election. The London ambulance service has bid for and needs about £30 million more than its budget. There must be a way for the Government, if they wanted to, so to adjust their comprehensive spending review plans that they could find that money. The kitty is full; public coffers are overflowing with resources; we have never had it so good in terms of what the Chancellor has to give out.

I make a plea now because we must hold on to public servants whom we value, and they need proper remuneration that is incremental through their career. As the hon. Member for Orpington rightly said, we should recognise that we need them most on Friday and Saturday nights, during anti-social hours when those people who have the choice would not work. We also need them on weekends, bank holidays, new year's eve and all those other occasions when people prefer not to work. We need about 500 extra people so that the job can be done without having to scramble to catch up.

I do not know how the Minister can deliver that extra money, but I know that Mr. Bradley, the respected chief executive, and Mr. Renton, who seems to be a good trust chairman, fully support the request. I am satisfied that the money will be well spent if it comes to the London ambulance service, because the regimes are in place to achieve that. Those who work for the service want to continue doing the job, but they also want their plea for proper remuneration to be heard so that they can continue to provide the excellent service that they are trained and willing to offer to residents and workers and those who visit our capital city.

I hope that the Government will make positive responses to my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park, the hon. Member for Orpington and other hon. Members. The service needs money on the table and a new pay regime this year—I mean this year—which will provide decent pay, and decent increments for service given, for some of the most professional people in the country.

11.36 am

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) on securing this debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said, various hon. Members have tried to secure this debate in Westminster Hall for some time. The London ambulance service warrants our attention and support for the work that it does. I congratulate the hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) on taking part in this debate. I want to respond to some of the points that he and my hon. Friends have made.

The public measure the London ambulance service by how quickly an ambulance turns up at their door after they have dialled 999, administers the necessary immediate treatment and takes them to an accident and emergency department or an intensive care unit to

[Mr. Paul Burstow]

ensure that they continue to stay alive. The work of the ambulance service is a matter of life and death. It is about rapid response—the public are concerned about response times. It is also about a lot more than that, as I have become increasingly aware as a result of my discussions with the London ambulance service. However, we must consider the issue of response times.

The Government have rightly set new standards for category A life-threatening calls. They have set a national target of 90 per cent. of calls to be responded to within eight minutes. Achieving such a target or improving response times will result in more lives being saved. Given the sheer volume of 999 calls that are made—700,000 to 1 million calls a year, or 3,000 a day—600 more people would be saved a year in London alone if performance standards on response times were achieved. As my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park rightly said, only 34 per cent. of 999 calls in London are attended within eight minutes. From March of this year, the target set for the London ambulance service is 55 per cent. of category A calls to be attended within eight minutes. I am not certain whether that target can be met, but I know that the London ambulance service has made great strides and that attendance times have improved since the last time the relevant national statistics were published. We wait with interest to see what the performance indicators suggest has happened in the past year.

Several obstacles are in the way of achieving better response times. Staff recruitment and retention is a problem. Turnaround times in accident and emergency departments need to be explored in detail, and we must consider the vexed question of traffic in London and the fact that there is gridlock at certain times of the day in both inner and outer London, which makes it impossible for ambulance crews to get through. Earlier today, I discussed with an ambulance crew some of their worries, and they said that junctions are all too often the pinch points. A junction can provide ambulances with the way through the traffic, but because thought is not always given to the use of yellow box markings, everyone stays in the junction. What I experienced this morning when I drove to the House demonstrated that problem graphically. The traffic drew to a halt, and all the junctions locked up. I dread to think what it must be like to sit behind the wheel of an ambulance at such times, knowing that the clock is ticking past the five minutes in which to achieve the eight-minute response time, and to know that someone is relying on the ambulance to arrive.

Staff recruitment and retention are undoubtedly an important part of the problem. It is alarming that the turnover of staff in the London ambulance service is double that of any other urban ambulance service in the country. The turnover rate is about 10 per cent. Each month, 20 staff leave the London ambulance service. Some people may argue that a turnover rate of 10 per cent. is nothing to worry about, but given that this relatively small specialist work force work to full capacity, the service can ill afford such a staff turnover.

Something must be done about the turnover of staff as it imposes extra costs on the London ambulance service. In the financial year that is coming to an end, the costs of recruitment to fill the gaps caused by staff leaving the London ambulance service will be about £1.5 million. Included in that figure is the cost of placing advertisements that barely generate a response. Late last year, an advertising campaign throughout London drew in only 15 responses. At the same time, 20 more people went out the door to go elsewhere in the country. The £1.5 million that has been lost to the LAS could have been invested in the service, were it not for the serious staff retention problems in London.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park said, we must take into account the high cost of living in London, which is not fully reflected in the salaries of ambulance crews. Indeed, they receive the lowest pay of all key public sector workers. The police receive about £19,730 per annum plus London allowances and qualified nurses receive £18,300 plus London allowances. Such levels of pay are not generous, but they are more than ambulance crews receive, so it is hardly surprising that people are leaving the service.

Ambulance crews have lower annual leave entitlements than nurses, firefighters or police officers, and they do not receive a shift or unsocial hours allowance. The Government put additional resources into ambulance services throughout the country. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park rightly identified, of the £21 million extra that was allocated, only £2 million went to London despite the fact that a third of all category A 999 calls are made in London. That was a misallocation of resources. It failed to meet the identifiable need to improve the service.

I am not criticising the fact that extra money was provided, but as a result ambulance services in the west country, Hertfordshire and elsewhere have been able to offer attractive packages—golden hellos—to attract ambulance crews to move out of London. They are attracting highly skilled paramedics to a better quality of life and a better pay package. It is no wonder that London is losing 20 staff a month from the ambulance service. As the hon. Member for Orpington rightly said, even the best A&E departments in the world could not do their job properly and could not make a difference to people's lives if patients could not be taken to them quickly enough.

Over 1,000 hours a month are lost because of delays at A&E departments. In January, the average wait for an ambulance crew at an A&E department was 24 minutes. That figure has progressively increased from January to January—24 minutes while an ambulance is waiting to be released to go back on duty to attend 999 calls. That reduces the resources available to respond to 999 calls. It is part of the systemic problem. We have had debates in this Chamber and on the Floor of the House about delayed discharge, which ultimately results in an ambulance being delayed in an A&E department. If a bed is blocked, or there is a delayed discharge in the hospital, the problem feeds back down to the A&E department—no beds are available, so people cannot be admitted to hospital, patients have to wait on trolleys because there are no beds, and those trolleys often come from the back of ambulances. As a result, people wait to move on.

One of the problems raised during a conversation with an ambulance crew was that of the time wasted at an A&E department, especially over booking-in arrangements, which took more than 10 minutes on average. Anything that can be done to shorten the time

that ambulance crews are involved in that procedure would be welcomed. The national health service should look into that when considering the role of A&E departments in freeing up time.

Ms Stuart: How would the hon. Gentleman square that suggestion with what I have heard from ambulance crews who felt that it was important to have a good relationship with A&E departments? The real trick is to know when the service is so stretched that the ambulance crew should book in and go, but they felt that the time spent booking in was important in building a relationship. The time is not at issue; it is what happens in that time. The procedure should be streamlined, but the problem is not as simple as the hon. Gentleman implies.

Mr. Burstow: I agree that none of the measures are simple. What is required is the development of a relationship, as the Minister said, but also some clarity about the protocols used in the operation of the London ambulance service and A&E departments around London. It is not beyond the wit of the staff and the management to develop such relationships. The issue could and should be examined in any attempt to deal with the time taken by crews waiting outside A&E departments.

Mr. Hammond: In examining initiatives elsewhere in the country, is not part of the solution to the problem the use of in-vehicle computerisation, so that communication with the A&E department starts from the moment that the vehicle begins its return journey?

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Gentleman has helpfully brought me on to my next point, which is about capital investment in information technology and communications.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will my hon. Friend give way before he goes on to talk about the capital investment programme?

Mr. Burstow: Yes, as we have the time.

Mr. Hughes: Having heard my hon. Friend's dialogue with the Minister, it would be most helpful if, in dealing with this practical issue, an urgent countrywide consultation could take place between ambulance crews and their representatives and NHS trust staff. We should also listen to the views of others who are not ambulance personnel, doctors or nurses. Lay civilian clerical staff could assist in A&E departments and deal with paperwork when there is no need for personal contact. It would be a helpful move forward if the Minister would give such an undertaking.

Mr. Burstow: All options should be explored. The Minister was listening carefully to what my hon. Friend had to say, and I hope that he and his officials will pick up on that point.

I want to return to the important point about capital and investment mentioned by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), but first I want to talk about traffic in London. Through our personal experience and other evidence, we all know that traffic in London is going slower and slower. As my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park mentioned, that has consequences for the operation of the London ambulance service. It is confined to ever smaller areas because of the distance it can travel in the eight-minute response time—the operating radius is now about three miles and is getting shorter. Thus, more and more ambulance crews and ambulances are needed to cover the whole of London within the response time that the public considers satisfactory. Given the change in traffic speeds between morning and evening peaks, just to maintain response time would require a 25 to 26 per cent. increase in the number of ambulances.

That brings me to the issue of capital investment in the ambulance service. The London ambulance service has a £5.7 million shortfall in its capital programme, which has already resulted in a change to the policy on the working life of ambulances from five to six years, and the capital programme of £5.5 million available under the external financing limit is eaten up just replacing ambulances. We have a serious problem in London, and the LAS needs to spend an extra £1.5 million in the coming year to purchase a further 10 ambulances and 23 rapid response units to enable it to achieve better response times. Whether the extra vehicles have the IT that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge wants or not, they are essential to improve response times.

The funding arrangements for the London ambulance service are unsatisfactory organisationally, let alone in the amount of money available. In London, 16 health authorities are responsible collectively for commissioning the London ambulance service, and I certainly hope that by 16 February they will have good news about their commissioning intentions and resources, but all of those health authorities have other pressures on them. They have responsibility for acute hospitals, who have advocates on their behalf; for primary care needs; and for the Government's national priorities on cancer and coronary heart conditions. The Government must seriously consider allowing the London ambulance service to be commissioned on a Londonwide basis—perhaps through the NHS region—so that someone has clear responsibility for thinking strategically about its commissioning. By fragmenting it across 16 health authorities, that vision is lost and there is no clear ownership of responsibility for commissioning services. That would do a great deal for the confidence of the London ambulance service.

The London ambulance service now has a clear improvement programme, and it is delivering results. It needs support and resources to carry that programme through. In particular, it needs flexibility to reward and retain staff, and we need action to deal with gridlock and the turnaround problems of accident and emergency departments.

London ambulance crews have been underpaid, overworked and overlooked for far too long. The London ambulance service needs a period of sustained investment. Its new management team is able to deliver, and it certainly has staff of a quality to deliver the service. I hope that, in partnership, the Government will be able to deliver as well.

11.53 am

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): I shall be brief.

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): Yes. I hope to start the winding-up speeches at 12 o'clock.

Mr. Cohen: I shall not speak beyond that, Mrs. Michie. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) for introducing this important debate and apologise to her and, indeed, to you for being unable to be present for the start. I was at a Defence Committee meeting attended by the Secretary of State.

I visited the London ambulance service in January 2000. The previous chief executive left shortly afterwards, but that had nothing to do with my visit. I looked around and met the staff who operate the 999 service and run the ambulances. I was impressed by their work, so I am happy to echo the comment about pay being an important factor both for them and for ambulance staff. However, I noticed that there was no system for tracking ambulances. That surprised me, because only a couple of months earlier I visited a taxi firm called Computer Cab with a couple of other Members of Parliament. It had a tracking system, so staff knew where every taxi was. I have been arguing the case both to the London ambulance service and to Ministers that we should take advantage of the technology. That is my main reason for speaking in the debate.

The new chief executive of the London ambulance service, Peter Bradley, wrote to me in November. His letter stated:

"You are right to say there is a good case for a 'computerised tracking' system for ambulances and I am pleased to say that such a system will be installed early next year."

It is now "early next year", so I ask the Minister whether any progress has been made in putting that tracking system in place. It is important because it would add to the efficiency of the service and may save lives. I shall be interested in her comments on that matter.

I shall make a couple more brief points. The first concerns cardiac care, which is important and needs investment. There is a programme, which is part of the London ambulance service's plans to improve cardiac care, to replace the old-fashioned type of defibrillation units with AEDs—automatic external defibrillators.

The survival rate a year after people have been taken to hospital with a coronary by the London ambulance service is less than 2 per cent. Although that figure is comparable to that for most other major urban conurbations, it is still poor. I see from the London ambulance service plans that it would prefer that figure to be much closer to 15 per cent. Obviously, that would require investment, but the London ambulance service thinks that it is achievable, so an effort should be made. The modernisation of defibrillators is part of that process. There is also a need to upgrade clot busters so that ambulance paramedics can deliver the injection and answers to my parliamentary questions suggest that progress is being made on that important way in which paramedics could increase the cardiac care survival rate.

My final point concerns the London ambulance service management plan. In his letter to me, Mr. Bradley said that:

"we are determined to turn the LAS into a world class service and have recently completed an extensive internal consultation exercise in developing a four to five year Improvement Programme which will enable us to build the service that London deserves...We welcomed the extra £6 million granted to us this year, but much greater investment will be required to bring the aims of the LAS Improvement Programme into reality."

Mr. Bradley says that he has discussed the investment programme with the Government. I hope that the Minister will tell us that the £6 million investment is the first step in delivering the management programme that Londoners need if many lives are to be saved.

11.59 am

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) on achieving this debate and on the commendable brevity of her opening speech. Too many of these debates in Westminster Hall run out of time because the opening speaker takes 45 or 50 minutes to make his or her contribution.

Having listened to the debate so far, it seems that virtually every Member of Parliament has visited the London ambulance service in Waterloo. I have certainly added to their burden, and I wonder how much better the service might be if staff did not have to spend time showing MPs around the control room. The fact is that despite the dedicated efforts of the thousands of men and women in the London ambulance service, it is failing to deliver an acceptable service to Londoners. It is bottom of all the league tables.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park quoted a target figure of 55 per cent. for an eight-minute response time to category A calls. I should like to probe the Minister about who set that target. My understanding is that the patients charter target was that, by April 2001, 75 per cent. of category A calls would be answered within eight minutes. The 55 per cent. figure represents the purchasers' target—the service for which they have been willing to pay in a negotiated settlement with London ambulance service. If I am not mistaken, there is a 75 per cent. national target, but health authorities in London have decided that they will only pay for a service that delivers a 55 per cent. target. If that is correct, will the Minister tell us why people in London should be prepared to pay—sometimes with their lives, as shown by the figures quoted by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow)—for the lower level of planned service that the London purchasers are willing to finance?

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that the London ambulance service's own targets are 65 per cent. by spring 2002 and 75 per cent. by March 2003. As the hon. Gentleman said, there is a caveat: money must be available.

Mr. Hammond: I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about that. Will she also tell us whether, under the Londonwide purchasing arrangements, the same service targets are in operation thoughout London, because the achievement rates have been different? In central London, the London

ambulance service has been achieving about 60 per cent. category A eight-minute responses, which is good by any standards across the country. In other areas—I am afraid that it is the usual suspects, such as Newham, where service provision is repeatedly less good—the response times are higher.

Given the overall London percentage achievements, 60 per cent. in central London shows how poor the response times must be in outer London. Although, as the hon. Member for Richmond Park said, we do not have a hotline to the London ambulance service from this place, we are privileged to be in an area that is better served than some of our neighbours across London. Will the Minister tell us whether it is acceptable in her view that London ambulance service purchasers should be allowed, by design, to purchase a lower standard of service response than that set by the Government's own targets?

Will the Minister also explain the distinction between categories A and B? Of course the focus is on category A response times for immediately life-threatening incidents. The last time I called the London ambulance service, I was with an elderly person who had fallen over and broken a leg and was not able to move. That is not a life-threatening condition, but it is not a pleasant position to be in at 11.30 on a Friday night in a street in the constituency of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). We all know that Friday nights are a busy time for the ambulance service, but I think that the Minister would agree that to have to wait for 45 or 50 minutes is unacceptable.

The Government must make a clear statement about the targets that they expect the London ambulance service and its purchasers to achieve for the people of London, so that we can measure what purchasers and providers are agreeing against the targets that the Government, as the responsible body, are setting.

Will the Minister give us her assessment of the extent to which capital deficiency and inadequacy of capital spending programmes is at the heart of the problem and the extent to which it is a problem of staff retention and recruitment? In the latter context, what are the Government doing to deal with the problems of providing public services in the south-east?

Can the Minister tell us whether she is satisfied that commissioning arrangements, which the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam described as fragmented, are not a contributory factor to the relatively poor level of service delivery? Specifically, how do the Government allocate additional cash resources that are made available for ambulance services? We have already heard that of the £21 million that was made available last year, only 10 per cent. was allocated to London, although London faces a third of all category A calls in the country.

What lessons have the Minister and her Department drawn from comparisons between organisational systems and service achievement in the London ambulance service and the ambulance services of other cities? I am sure that she will mention computerisation and the use of technology. When I went to the London ambulance control centre, I was quite shocked to find little pieces of card being physically moved about the room. Although there were plenty of computer screens, the system appeared to be essentially paper-dependent, not computer-dependent. Perhaps the Minister can tell us that matters have moved on in the past 12 months. Will she say how far the Government are willing to support the extension of technology?

The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) talked about the situation in which heart attack victims find themselves. In Paris about 10 years ago, I saw a demonstration of how paramedics are able to transmit an ECG reading from the scene of an incident back to consultants in a hospital, who make a diagnosis and instruct the paramedics at the scene on the administration of drugs. That is the kind of initiative that we should be considering. It is rather sad that it took place 10 years ago in Paris yet we still have nothing comparable in this country. Will the Minister tell us whether the Government are willing to consider such an initiative? I imagine that it would require changes in legislation dealing with who can administer what treatment.

Will the Minister consider the publication of more information about response times to category A calls? We know the percentage that are within eight minutes, but it is important to know whether the remainder of the calls are responded to in nine or 90 minutes. If 39 per cent. are responded to in eight minutes and 75 per cent. in 10 minutes, that would be a different order of problem to the remainder being very much delayed.

Will the Minister tell us about international comparative figures? How does London stand in the league table of ambulance response times in comparable cities? What is the Government's assessment of the impact that misuse of the ambulance service has on the service delivery equation in London? The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam talked about the waste of ambulance time when ambulances are stacked up at A&E departments as the problems of those departments multiply. That does not happen only because they are waiting to unload. I have also heard graphic descriptions of ambulance crews caring for patients because no one else is available to do so. Until they are able to hand over care of the patient, they cannot leave the A&E department. However, it would be an equal waste of time for ambulances to respond to calls that should not have been made, or which did not warrant an ambulance response. I should be grateful if the Minister would clarify the Government's view on that issue and what they intend to do about it.

We all recognise the phenomenal escalation of demand that the London ambulance service faces, and the special problems associated with London's traffic. We know about the difficulties in recruiting and retaining public service personnel in London and the south-east. The London ambulance service is an essential service that provides support for people who live and work in London, and for the many millions who visit the city. However, in overall terms it is not delivering an adequate service to Londoners. Worse than that, poor overall performance figures conceal pockets of far worse performance in certain areas.

We recognise the scale of the problems, but we must respond not by cutting targets to an unacceptable level, but by addressing the problems head on. If the percentage improvement in London ambulance response times that was achieved between 1994 and 1997 had been achieved between 1997 and now, 100 per cent. of category A calls would have been responded to within

[Mr. Hammond]

eight minutes. It is the Government's duty to ensure that the London ambulance service delivers an acceptable service to Londoners, and I look forward to the Minister's response to the many specific points that were put to her this morning.

12.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) on securing this debate, and I shall try to deal with many of the questions that were asked during the debate. I am sure that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) will forgive me for beginning by discussing the points raised by the hon. Lady who initiated the debate. I shall work my way through the points in a sequence that will sometimes appear logical, and sometimes not.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park said that we should not forget the ambulance services, and I should make it clear that in the past few years we have far from forgotten them. The hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) expressed his disappointment at the apparent lack of specific reference to ambulance services in the NHS plan. Ambulances have for too long been viewed in isolation. Their function is much wider than that of a simple people carrier from point A to point B. Ambulance staff are highly trained professionals who have a very important function to fulfil. The NHS plan refers to telemedicine, cardiac work and the provision of thrombolysis by paramedics. Ambulance services must be a far more integrated part of the jigsaw of emergency medicine, and they are very much in our minds. Indeed, the Secretary of State has commissioned a review of emergency care and out-of-hours services, which are intrinsically linked.

Given the number of people who visit the London ambulance service—I, too, have visited it on a number of occasions—I am tempted to suggest that it should charge for visits. I have also visited my own West Midlands ambulance service, which kindly allowed me to spend a day with its staff. It was an extraordinary learning experience, because the various problems to which hon. Members have referred came to the forefront.

Reference was made to helicopter air ambulances, and I shall refer to them specifically, but I want first to make a general point. In London, the helicopter emergency medical service is an important component of the ambulance service, but I want to correct two misconceptions. First, helicopters are not the universal panacea that they are sometimes thought to be. They cannot fly at night, so they cannot operate for between eight and 12 hours of the day. Secondly, in many areas public funds contribute to the service, but we must not underestimate the amount of NHS money that is provided. In London, a large proportion of the cost of running the service—some £1.4 million a year—is funded by the NHS. NHS funding pays for maintenance of the helicopters, fuel, insurance and all costs associated with the pilots, operations staff and paramedics. On top of that, only 84 hospitals in the country and about 12 in London have helipads. I do not underestimate the role of helicopters, but they are not the panacea that is sometimes suggested.

The hon. Member for Orpington suggested that the whole system should be reviewed, but I hope that he acknowledges the considerable progress that has been made. There was a danger during our debate of giving the impression that all was doom and gloom. The London ambulance service has always faced a difficult task and it has made huge improvements.

Mr. Hammond: Does the Minister acknowldge that concern is being expressed because the rate of improvement seems to have slowed down dramatically? Between 1993-94 and 1996-97, the percentage of eight-minute responses to category A calls tripled from 12 per cent. to 35 per cent., but between 1996-97 and 1998-99, it improved from 35 per cent. to only 39 per cent. It seems that the rate of progress is slowing down.

Ms Stuart: I shall examine those figures, because it is easy to extrapolate figures and draw conclusions. I want to speak about the improvements that have been made.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) referred to a tracking system. I saw such a system in operation when I visited Merseyside ambulance service. The development of such a system is being looked into, and I shall come back to my hon. Friend with more precise information about the time scale.

The hon. Members for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) made some valuable points, but they always think that everything will be resolved with money. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) referred to the 55 per cent. target in London and whether we can meet it. Of the money allocated, £21 million was to help towards the improvement of targets.

It is important to pay tribute to the London ambulance service on the improvements that have been made following various initiatives. Its legitimate and correct aspiration is to provide the city with the ambulance service that it deserves. It handles around 20 per cent. of the total ambulance work load in England. The population of 7 million in London increases each day because of the 3 million visitors to the city. The London ambulance service has more than 3,000 staff and 600 vehicles and last year handled around 12 million calls. Dealing with that volume of calls is not easy, and I want to thank members of the London ambulance service for their tremendous work day in, day out. The value of that work is abundantly clear from the way in which they dealt with crises such as the Paddington train crash and the Brixton and Soho bombings. Given that the service receives about 3,000 calls a day, it is vital that the LAS is considered an integral part of the NHS.

Before dealing with the situation in London, I shall refer to ambulance services across the country. The Government's priority is to save more lives by providing faster and more responsive emergency ambulance services. Clinical evidence shows that early defibrillation and resuscitation saves more lives. The Government set challenging response targets for all ambulance services as soon as we came into office in 1997. Since then, ambulance services have improved their response times through a range of measures, including more staff and vehicles, faster activation, better matching of resources

to demand, dynamic as opposed to station-based cover, effective relief levels and rotas, and flexible responses to 999 calls.

I shall compare two ambulance services that appear to have had real difficulties in meeting the 75 per cent. target. One is in an urban area; the other is in a rural area. The method of meeting those targets varies from one area to another.

Dr. Tonge: That is all very interesting, but the Minister is being far too general in her response. I asked a number of questions about the London ambulance service, not least about the level of pay. Only nine minutes of this debate are left; shall we be given any answers?

Ms Stuart: I hope to proceed. I need to put those matters into the overall context.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Can we have the answers?

Ms Stuart: Would the hon. Gentleman do me the courtesy of listening to my response?

We are also introducing a range of community and volunteer responder schemes; it is no answer simply to say that we need more ambulances. Those new schemes will include the use of motor cycles and rapid response vehicles that can make their way through traffic congestion more easily. Mention was made of traffic problems, but even such things as the signposting of streets and the numbering of houses can make a difference. We spoke also of traffic entering marked spaces on roads that can cause junctions to become blocked. We are not dealing with aspects of the problem in isolation. I urge hon. Members to consider the matter in the round.

Liberal Democrat Members in particular wanted the Government to make another commitment to giving extra money to the London ambulance service. We were told that that was the only solution. Perhaps they have a little list; but those extra demands add up. Every time we have a debate with Liberal Democrat Members, they demand more money.

Mr. Hammond: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Stuart: No, I must make progress.

The problem is not simply one of extra ambulances. I have already said that ambulance service response times have improved significantly since we came to office. We expect ambulance trusts to achieve that target by 31 March—

Mr. Hammond: What target?

Ms Stuart: If hon. Members would listen, I might be able to finish a sentence.

We expect more ambulance trusts to achieve their targets. The London ambulance service is expected to achieve its target as quickly as possible, because that could save as many as 1,800 lives every year among people under 75 who suffer acute heart attacks. During the last three years, the number of calls to the London ambulance service has increased by 130,000—that is more than 12 per cent.

Mr. Hammond: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mr. John William (in the chair): Order. The hon. Lady has made it clear that she is not giving way.

Ms Stuart: That increase should be seen against the background of some of the worst traffic congestion in the country, so things are improving. Despite the difficulties of working in the busiest city and dealing with the highest number of calls, the London ambulance service has been making progress. In 1993, an ambulance responded in less than eight minutes to only 12 per cent. of the most urgent calls; by March this year, that figure is expected to rise to 55 per cent. Thus 190,000 more patients will be treated within eight minutes than were treated in 1993-94. However, that is not good enough. I have asked Neil McKay, the chief operating officer of the NHS, and John Bacon, the acting regional director of the NHS executive, to meet the chairman and chief executive of the London ambulance service to discuss how the 75 per cent. target can be achieved as quickly as possible and how good practice can be shared. That meeting is due to take place before the end of February.

I know that hon. Members are keen on the idea of increased resources for ambulance services. The Government are committed to providing a first-class public service. In answer to a question about extra payment, I stated:

"Ambulance staff, on national terms, including those employed by the London Ambulance service have been offered an above inflation increase of 3.7 per cent. from 1 April 2001. We are currently awaiting a response from trade unions on this offer. National Health Service trusts have the flexibility to pay still more where there are proven recruitment and retention difficulties." — [*Official Report*, 24 January 2001; Vol. 316, c. 598W.]

I can imagine that in a week's time hon. Members who have demanded more money for paramedics and the ambulance service will report staff shortages in London hospitals because of a movement from accident and emergency departments into ambulance work, leading to a need to target hospitals for more pay. The whole structure needs to be considered: it is no good dealing with the matter in isolation.

Hon. Members: What is the answer?

Mr. John McWilliam (in the Chair): Order. Hon. Members have been heckling and they must not do so.

Ms Stuart: In 2000-01, we invested an extra £21 million in the NHS ambulance service in England to help it to make continued progress. That money was for investment in extra vehicles and front-line staff. The funding was made available on a recurrent basis. This year an extra £6 million was given to the ambulance service in London to help it to improve its service. The total investment in the London ambulance service for this year is £120 million.

Mention was made of health authorities working together. They are working much more closely together and developing a three-year funding programme that will provide increased funding for the ambulance service.

[Ms Stuart]

I welcome the London ambulance service's performance improvement programme, and I am pleased that staff have welcomed it. I was also delighted by the support for the chief executive. The extra investment will go alongside changes in the way in which the service is provided. It is not a question of simply buying and operating more ambulances.

Mr. Hammond: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Stuart: No. I want to make progress. The first service to reach the 75 per cent. target did so because it took a radical look at how it was providing its service. We expect that everywhere. Just paying more to do more of the same is not the way forward. Hon. Members know that, but it is easy to ask for more money. Improving the ambulance service is not just about ambulances. Planning to ensure that the right ambulances are in the right location is very important.

We need to work with information technology, as hon. Members have mentioned, but to do that we need the infrastructure. It is no good just providing one set of ambulances with telemedicine if they cannot link into the infrastructure of accident and emergency departments. That is why we are investing something like £1 billion over 10 years in infrastructure and information technology. That means huge progress.

Mr. Horam: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Stuart: No. I want to finish, because I am being accused of not answering questions and I want to make my point.

Hon. Members have graphically described the dreadful situation with regard to NHS and category C calls, and have raised the issue of how the ambulance service should respond to, for example, a babysitter who dials 999 because she has run out of nappies. They offered no solutions other than to provide more money. The question of inappropriate calls is being addressed by NHS Direct pilots dealing with category C calls, and by having paramedics on premises. Those projects are trying to categorise calls properly so that, as the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge said, faster response times are possible.

We are investing in accident and emergency departments in London. More than £20 million has been invested in the past 18 months to improve through-flow and design. The London ambulance service has installed defibrillators in every vehicle, and plans to buy more than 400 more of the latest model, which has meant a great enhancement of monitoring and use in public places. The service is investing in more information technology—and I hope that it will do so more effectively than it did at the last attempt, under the previous Administration, because that did not work.

I want to comment briefly on the shock of seeing the paperwork that is still done in the London ambulance service. A move to information technology is being made, but the paperwork system is being run in parallel. When things went wrong in the 1990s, one of the big disasters was the attempt at a big bang—switching straight from one system to the other. The transition is now being successfully completed. Greater use is also being made of extra motor bikes.

There is still a long way to go, but the service has a huge contribution to make. The staff are responding to that challenge. We are providing the money to expand the service in a sustainable way. That is the way forward, not another call for more money for one group, which is what the Liberal Democrats repeat over and again. They want more money, but they do not know where it should come from.

Hysterectomies

12.30 pm

Mrs. Diana Organ (Forest of Dean): I am pleased to have the opportunity to raise the issue of hysterectomy services, since it has been brought to my notice by women in my constituency that they are a cause for concern. Concerns range from the lack of information, advice, counselling and guidance about the procedure and its after-effects, to the treatment offered, surgery involved and after-care, and to the attitudes of some members of the medical profession towards women receiving the treatment. The issue is not restricted to women in the Forest of Dean and Gloucestershire, but involves many thousands of women throughout Britain. I am not a clinician and do not endeavour to make judgments about medical requirements, but it is right to raise certain questions about hysterectomy services.

Roughly 50,000 hysterectomies are carried out in Britain every year. One in five women will have had a hysterectomy by the age of 65. We carry out more per head than France and the United States of America. Some 10 per cent. are carried out because of cancer and others for serious health conditions, but most are carried out because of non life-threatening conditions and to improve the quality of life of the patients. Hysterectomies should improve those patients' lives and not deteriorate them.

Hysterectomies divide into three main types. A total hysterectomy is the removal of womb and cervix; that is the most usual practice. A sub-total hysterectomy is the removal of the womb only with the cervix left in place. A radical hysterectomy means the removal of the womb, the fallopian tubes, the upper part of the vagina and the surrounding fat and lymph glands, and is carried out in the treatment of cancer.

My interest in the issue arose after a constituent came to see me. She had been a healthy, active young woman who was diagnosed with a benign cyst on her left ovary. After her hysterectomy, however, she suffered cross-infection. She had to have a bowel section, and damage to the nerve at the back of her spine caused withering of the muscle in her leg. She is now doubly incontinent and her health is ruined. All of that has had consequences for her sexual life.

I wrote to the hospital asking about cross-infection rates. At the time, the hospital did not keep that information. I then wrote to Ministers. On 30 July 1998, I was told that the information was not kept at that time, but that the Government would publish clinical indicators later that year, one of which would relate to unplanned re-admissions to hospital within 28 days of treatment. It was understood that although the information was not kept at the time, better information would be compiled in the future.

I felt that other women might have had similar health problems as a result of a hysterectomy. I placed an advert in the local Gloucester edition of *The Citizen* newspaper. The advert read as follows:

"Hysterectomy. Researcher wishes to talk to women who have suffered health problems as a result of undergoing hysterectomy in Gloucester."

Thirty-four women responded from all over Gloucestershire although, because of the paper's distribution area, they came predominantly from the Forest of Dean and Gloucester. They were obviously a self-selected group, which I had actively sought. I met with the group, whose problems related to a whole range of issues. They had health conditions and other problems and had had hysterectomies over a period of time, ranging from 12 months to many years previously.

I had put the original constituent in touch with the medical negligence solicitor, Helen Barry, who subsequently met with some of the women in the group. After interviewing them, she took four complaints to the General Medical Council. The press was greatly interested by now and at the second meeting of the support group, there were up to 54 women. Helen Barry took on another two cases for complaint to the GMC.

I do not want to discuss the cases, as it would be inappropriate. I shall not pursue those matters for they properly belong elsewhere. However, medical negligence cases are difficult to pursue. Sheila McLean, professor of law and ethics in medicine at the university of Glasgow, states in "Old Law, New Medicine: Medical Ethics and Human Rights" that the United Kingdom courts depend heavily on the Bolam test, which is designed to judge the competence of medical procedure but does not tell us whether a practice is right or lawful.

The debate is not designed to cause a witch hunt against any specific surgeon or hospital. Different clinicians at different hospitals treated the women in the support group at different times. I have raised the matter because I want better guidance and practice for all other women receiving hysterectomy services.

I asked the 57 women in the support group to fill in a questionnaire, so that I could see whether there was any commonality. There was a disturbing pattern of anger at the manner of their treatment. They were not ready for and did not expect what happened to them, and all complained about a lack of information and advice. They were often told that the procedure was the only option. The exact nature of the surgery was not clearly explained to them, so there was a general feeling of a lack of informed consent. Only one was given a leaflet, and that was in relation to a hysterectomy many years ago.

A loss of libido was common, and a side effect was a change in their sex lives and lack of satisfaction with sexual intercourse. There were acute menopausal problems, incontinence after the operation and lower back pain. Unfortunately, most of the women did not complain at the time through the normal complaints procedure, because they felt beaten down and decided that it would be useless to try to take on and fight the whole medical fraternity.

The women in the group complained that some of their questions at consultation before treatment were brushed aside. Many were told that they would not need wombs or ovaries at their age. Some asked whether it was possible to retain the cervix and were told that it was not, but it is. When they asked about the effects on their future sex life, they were told that everything would be fine, if not better. When one woman mentioned the loss of libido post-operatively, it was suggested that she have a couple of gins.

The women in the group did not have hysterectomies because of cancer. For 37 of them, the reason was heavy periods, and some had ovaries removed as well for that reason. It is worth noting that some women are not

[Mrs. Diana Organ]

aware that they had healthy organs removed. The Minister assured me, in a letter dated 8 March 2000, that the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists does not have a policy of removing healthy organs without consent while performing hysterectomies.

In some cases, we must ask why hysterectomy was carried out at all. Consultants say that most hysterectomies are elective, and could be termed social gynaecology. Rates vary depending on region and consultant, but disparities should surely be monitored and investigated. Why are alternative therapies and treatments not exhausted? Why do surgeons carry out unnecessary surgery? The matter was recently highlighted in a BBC television programme that focused on one consultant's use of alternative therapies.

There is growing evidence of the loss of libido or a change to sexual experience as a side effect of the removal of ovaries or a hysterectomy. That can radically affect the quality of a woman's life, but it is rarely mentioned in any of the advice leaflets, even that produced by WellBeing. It is often dismissed by medical staff in consultation as being insignificant.

I have a document dated 28 March 2000 about a voice tempo trial into female sexual dysfunction, sponsored by a pharmaceutical company, which is currently under way. The study is trying to find out why many women have a less active and satisfying sexual life after ovary removal. The research shows that at least one in three women, and possibly one in two, say that their libido has decreased since surgery. Other research clearly proves that sexual changes after hysterectomy are real, not imagined, as it shows that the uterus and cervix must be present if women are to fulfil themselves and climax. Why are women not informed that they could suffer such side effects of hysterectomy? It would have an impact on their lives. Why do some surgeons unnecessarily remove the cervix when retention would help?

Other serious side effects are not mentioned, including the possibility of further surgery being necessary as a result of adhesion. Women are not informed of that risk, either.

The response to my advertisement was not unexpected. Many other support groups have been set up over the years, notably those run by Louise Greenhill, Brenda Johnson—who set up the Ledward support group—and Sandra Simkin. Those groups all experienced the same problem. They felt that they were ignored and not given good consultation, and they were not expected to have an interesting and full sex life after hysterectomy.

Some professionals, such as Professor McPherson and Professor Roger Gosden, have spoken out about this issue, saying that the effects can be devastating, and that some women are actually driven to suicide, or experience suicidal depression as a result of the after-effects of the surgery. There should be much more work done in this field, more investigation into alternative therapies and more monitoring of the necessity of hysterectomy and of the use of sub-total or total hysterectomy. Much more research should be done into the clinical evidence of the after-effects of hysterectomy and the effects on women's lives.

After the interest taken by the local press, one of the Gloucestershire hospitals, the Gloucestershire Royal, asked me to come in and talk about the issue. The head of the clinical team, quite rightly, wanted me to understand the work that they do, the expertise that they deploy and the excellence that they hope to provide. They wanted to show how they are continually working to provide a better service for women and how they are always looking to improve their procedures.

The hospital's women's health directorate subsequently sent me details of procedures and advice, and the leaflets that are available. That procedure is a model of best practice. It is thorough, and the hospital is to be congratulated on it. If the procedures carried out at Gloucester Royal hospital had been used in the past, followed elsewhere and implemented across the NHS, that would have dealt with the concerns and the problems of many in my support group. If that best practice model were to be used elsewhere, it would provide a much-improved situation for women receiving this kind of treatment.

The Gloucestershire Royal hospital administrators took seriously the fact that women in the support group had not used their complaints system. They told me that they would be examining their own system to find out how it could be improved and made more user-friendly and available. They would like to learn from the support group. They would like its members to talk, if they were happy to, about their experiences, and offer constructive advice about how the hospital might respond and put in place a better system.

I want to impress on the Minister that not only is more research necessary, as I mentioned at the beginning, but that there is a need to find out about different treatments and their effect on different women. There should be a much freer exchange of best practice within hysterectomy services across the NHS. Women must have better experiences both with and after hysterectomy. There should be clear guidance from Government in this field. There should be inquiry into procedure and the guidance on it from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence.

There should also be clear, explicit statements on good practice from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. We should inquire into the number of elective hysterectomies, and what consultants are saying about social gynaecology. We should also inquire into the possibility of using alternative therapies instead of performing the unnecessary surgery that seems so often to take place.

It is also necessary to examine the advice and counselling that women get, so that they can always get the necessary support, advice, counselling and information, and that their consent is genuine and informed. If people fill in a consent form, that does not necessarily mean that they know what will happen to them. People must be able to make an informed decision, and informed consent requires information about what will be done to their bodies and what that will mean for their quality of life afterwards.

I wrote to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health on 29 November 2000 and asked whether he would meet the delegation from the Forest of Dean support group so that members of the delegation could make their experiences clear to him and ask the

Government to improve the service for women in future. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to make a commitment to receive the group at the earliest possible opportunity to allow us to improve services for many women so that we do not have to form support groups in future to give support to women whose lives have been devastated by hysterectomy services.

12.45 pm

The Minister for Public Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ) on having secured this debate on hysterectomy. It is a subject to which she has devoted considerable time and energy in her constituency, and I congratulate her on the work that she has done locally with the support group. The matter deeply concerns many thousands of women throughout the country.

Hysterectomy is one of the most commonly performed gynaecological operations, and it has brought symptomatic relief to many thousands of women. It has profoundly changed the lives of some women by enabling them again to go out in public without fear of embarrassment and dealing with the symptoms from which they have suffered. However, I also recognise that other women have experienced long-term physical and psychological side effects and have not received the standard of care that we would accept.

In the past, before the advent of other methods of less-radical treatment, hysterectomy was sometimes offered as the universal panacea for heavy periods or severe period pains. Fortunately, times are changing, as is reflected in the falling rates of hysterectomies being performed. In 1993, more than 72,000 hysterectomies were performed in England. By 1998, the latest year for which figures are available, that figure had been reduced to more than 56,000. My hon. Friend may be interested to learn that, in the same period, the comparable figures for Gloucester were lower than the national figures and show a fall from 2.3 hysterectomies for every 1,000 women in 1993 to two hysterectomies for every 1,000 women in 1998.

My hon. Friend described the experiences of some of her constituents and those involved in the support group who had experienced problems as a result of hysterectomies. I know that she brought those matters to the attention of senior management and clinicians at a meeting at the Gloucestershire Royal NHS trust, and I welcome her remarks about the practice and the changes taking place there. The trust has examined its clinical practice in gynaecology and has done what it can to improve practice and to work with the active participation of patients. It has introduced new information leaflets, clear and explicit consent forms and a nurse consultant in gynaecology to offer counselling and support to women faced with this traumatic operation. I was interested to hear my hon. Friend say that it was effectively a model of best practice, and I should be interested to hear more about its work and how that best practice might be spread across the country.

Mrs. Organ: Would it be appropriate for me to send my hon. Friend a copy of the exact formula that the health directorate of the Gloucestershire Royal NHS trust uses for its procedures so that she could use the formula elsewhere?

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for that suggestion. That would be extremely helpful. I shall discuss later how we could further spread best practice in the field. I congratulate her support group on its work with the trust. The most powerful changes will take place in the health service when we embody patients' experience in designing services and ensure that patients' voices are heard in terms of providing health services and how professionals operate.

The most common reason for a hysterectomy is a condition known as menorrhagia, which is severe bleeding, often with abdominal pain. In some cases, it is due to the growth of fibroids or benign tumours in the wall of the womb, but in many other cases the cause is not known. Although the symptoms are not often discussed in public as they may be deemed to be embarrassing, they can often cause considerable distress to women who experience them.

Other reasons include the painful condition known as endemetriosis for which, when child bearing is over, a hysterectomy may offer the only permanent solution. Older women may suffer a prolapse of the womb when it drops into the vagina. Furthermore, emergency hysterectomies may need to be performed to save a woman's life after a catastrophic bleed during childbirth or when a malignant tumour needs urgent treatment.

My hon. Friend was right to say that most hysterectomies are undertaken to relieve menstrual problems, particularly excessive bleeding. In many cases, no specific cause for the underlying problem can be found and more simple forms of therapy have failed to provide a woman with sufficient relief. The important fact is that a hysterectomy is rarely the only available solution to a menstrual problem and usually other treatments can be considered first. When different alternative treatments are available, it is vital that a woman should have the opportunity to discuss all the possible options and consequences of the different treatment. She should be fully informed before giving consent to a particular treatment and to a hysterectomy.

I am aware that many women consider that they have not undergone a hysterectomy of their own free will, that the full options were not explained to them and that they were not aware of the consequences. In those circumstances, the psychological effect can be considerable. However, it is not always fully explored and appreciated. A hysterectomy is different from many other surgical interventions because it can involve the removal of a healthy, non-diseased organ. That can make it difficult to come to terms with what can be a huge life event for some women, depending on the circumstances involved. It must be the right choice for the individual and she must fully understand the reasons behind it. She must have the opportunity to have a full discussion about it with the professionals.

My hon. Friend asked whether women are receiving the right treatment for their particular condition. Also, we must consider whether they are receiving all the necessary information, so that they can make a full, informed decision about which option to choose. I welcome the fact that the Royal College of

[Yvette Cooper]

Obstetricians and Gynaecologists is taking such issues seriously. It has issued guidance to its fellows and members on the need to reduce the number of unnecessary hysterectomies. It has also issued evidence-based guidelines on the management of menorrhagia that clearly outline alternatives to hysterectomies for the treatment of women with excessive menstrual bleeding. It is important that those guidelines are now being used increasingly in clinical audit and governance programmes to ensure effectiveness locally. The RCOG has asked its guidance committee to examine further hysterectomies, a matter to which I shall return in a moment.

Increasingly, patients rightly expect to receive more information and want a full, proper discussion about the options that are available to them and the problems from which they are suffering. In that context, self-help groups can play an important part. We should never underestimate the importance of patient support groups and the patients themselves working together on a voluntary basis to raise the awareness of hysterectomies or problems of other patients and providing support for others in the same situation.

The NHS has a responsibility for such matters, too. The Department of Health funds through the section 64 scheme several organisations such as Women's Health, which runs telephone helplines and produces information leaflets. I was interested in my hon. Friend's point about providing national guidance on information that should be given to women. I am interested in that proposal and in how to take it forward. Options may include working through the NHS on-line or through the on-line electronic health library. More work can be done in that area.

However, even that cannot get away from the important need for individual advice from health professionals to patients, depending on their personal circumstances. The Department's role is to liaise with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. The question is how to ensure that best practice is spread throughout the country. There are excellent examples of the right kind of support being provided for women, but we must ensure that that happens for all women everywhere in the country.

We asked the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists to update and reissue guidelines to members on the need for consent. Last April, the RCOG reminded fellows and members of the need to obtain informed consent from patients. Patients should be given an adequate explanation and time to come to their decisions and consider other options; their specific wishes should be observed and recorded in the notes at the time of discussion and decision making. The possibility that a woman's ovaries might need to be removed in the operation should be fully discussed with her beforehand, and not carried out without her express written consent.

The RCOG's guidance committee has been asked to consider hysterectomies and informed consent as subjects for further guidance, and we will work with it on that. I take on board the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean, and will be happy to meet her and any delegation that she brings to discuss the issue. I suggest that we should use such a meeting to discuss what we could feed into the debate, as well as the work that the royal colleges will do.

My hon. Friend spoke, too, of the question of referring guidelines to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. She will be aware that our approach is to establish national standards across the board, but that we already refer a large number of guidelines to NICE. Our first step will be to work with the royal colleges on the guidance that can be set out.

I hope that what I have said emphasises the Government's continuing commitment to the principles of keeping the patient at the centre of care and improving quality care across the board. We should recognise that although there are good examples of best practice, things are not perfect everywhere throughout the NHS. There is a long way to go before we can establish good communications between every doctor and every patient as standard.

We are making significant progress and beginning to make a real difference to informing and working with women, so that hysterectomies are undertaken for the right reason and the women concerned understand the decision and play an active part in reaching it, as part of the management of their condition and treatment. That will ultimately mean that we spare many women the misery that they currently experience, when they take such a huge step in their lives without being fully involved in a key decision affecting them and their families.

That is an area in which we can work with the voluntary sector and self-help groups. Patients' experiences should inform all the improvements that we take. I look forward to discussing the matter further with my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean and thank her for raising the issue today.

McMaster Family (BNFL)

1 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the issue of the McMaster family and BNFL. It is, without doubt, one of the saddest cases that I have dealt with as a Member of Parliament. I have known Stella and Joe McMaster for many years. We have tried all avenues to get the issue affecting them properly recognised by BNFL. Joe and Stella live in Fulwood, Preston, in my constituency. I have had several meetings with BNFL at Springfields, and although we are offered tea and sympathy in relation to the case, the matter is always left in the air. The company denies even the slightest responsibility for the plight of the McMaster family. Today, the case of the McMaster family will receive its proper airing, and I look to the Minister to see that they receive justice.

Joe McMaster joined the Atomic Energy Authority in 1951, aged 29. He had a thorough medical and was passed fit to join the company. Joe was a chemist and handled many chemical substances, which he examined to ensure that they were properly enriched. These were turned into fuel before being transported to Windscale. Joe was one of the team leaders responsible for sampling.

The rules that employees follow today would not be the same rules that were followed then. Joe tells me that surveillance of work practices was almost non-existent at the time. In May 1953, Joe was working at the plant when he received an ingestion of uranium. He believed that one of the valves was incorrectly fitted, or that there was just a faulty valve. He had a daily urine test, which showed him to have 18 times the level of radiation that he was normally showing. That excessive amount of radiation showed up for several months. He logged the accident—that he had received a blow-back of UF6—in the incident log book. During Stella's discussions with BNFL, it was not until yesterday conceded that an incident occurred in 1953. When Joe went to see a geneticist, Mr. Gareth Evans, a few years ago, the geneticist asked for Joe's medical notes from BNFL. Notes relating to 1953 were missing. However, Stella has managed to procure the 1953 notes, and would be prepared to make those notes available to an inquiry.

I shall tell this Chamber about the McMaster family and the tragedies following the incident, and perhaps another incident at Windscale. Stella and Joe had their first daughter, Lynne, in October 1950. Stella had a miscarriage in 1954. In February 1955, another daughter, Jill, was born. She suffers from an immune deficiency. Hon. Members will remember that Joe had perfect health when he joined the company and had a full medical in 1951. In August 1955, all his teeth were removed. His teeth were so loose that the dentist said that he could have removed them without pliers. He could have twisted them from Joe's gums using his fingers. There was obviously something seriously wrong; Joe was only 34 and all his teeth had to be removed.

We now come to what I would call the twist in the tail. Joe, Stella and the family were on holiday in Cumbria at the time of the fire at the Windscale plant, when 376,000 curies were discharged from 40 isotopes during a three-day period. In a letter on 13 January 2001 to Mr. Shuttleworth, the company secretary and group legal director, Stella reminded him that milk and vegetables were contaminated. The local newspaper, the *Lancashire Evening Post*, on 14 October 1957, carried the headline

"Atom dust makes farmers worried"

and the sub-line

"but expert says 'no need'".

The article states:

"Very worried farmers in the district around the Windscale plutonium factory were today besieging their NFU officials with inquiries about new aspects of the atomic threat which caused a ban yesterday on sales of milk from 100 farms following the overheated reactor alarm last week. The restriction was imposed because the level of radio iodine in milk was 6x the permissible amount, following the escape of radio-active dust. But apart from the milk ban farmers are worried about their livestock."

There was no ban on livestock, and no ban on the sale of vegetables. The McMasters ate the local produce while on holiday and drank the milk before it was banned. Both girls, Lynne and Jill, played daily on the beach.

In 1958, Stella gave birth to twins. They were six weeks premature, and one died at three days. The other daughter is still alive. Stella tells me that her daughter is worried about her health but refuses to get a medical check-up because she is so worried about what might be discovered. She has three children of her own. I will not mention her name at the request of the family, because their privacy should be properly protected.

In 1964, the eldest of the children, Lynne, started to have trouble with her kidneys, and developed kidney stones. She was only a teenager. She was anaemic and had to take iron tablets. In 1960, Joe had kidney stones, too, which were removed. Jill, who was born five years after Lynne, left school at 17. On 9 May 1973, when she was 18, she suddenly got a nosebleed. She was admitted to Royal Preston hospital for a week, before being transferred to Manchester. She was diagnosed with acute leukaemia, type unknown. On 23 May 1973, 14 days after her first nosebleed, Jill died.

In 1972, the eldest daughter, Lynne, married. Her first child was stillborn, in 1978. Lynne first complained about feeling constantly tired in 1986. Her doctor upped her iron tablets, but that did not work. In 1987, Lynne had tests that showed that she had acquired idiopathic sideroblastic anaemia, which is a disease associated with elderly people. She was admitted to hospital for months in an isolated ward. She needed a bone marrow transplant, and Joe was found to be a suitable donor. However, tests proved that Joe had a chromosome defect due to radiation. A donor was finally found in the United States, but unfortunately it was too late. Lynne died, aged 38, on 27 August 1988, with—as Stella describes—a lovely face but the body organs of a very old person. She was blind, deaf and paralysed before her death. The doctors could not work out how she had contracted the illness. They even asked her whether she had worked with any radiation materials. When they found out what her father did for a living, they simply nodded.

[Mr. Nigel Evans]

Stella started to get thyroid trouble and is on thyrodoxine and both she and Joe now have cataracts. Joe retired from BNFL in 1982. He had a whole body count that showed that he had 300 bequerels, when it should have been only five.

In 1987-8, Professor Sir Richard Doll stated that leukaemia clusters were caused by radiation. Sir Richard then became a consultant for BNFL at the Hope and Reay cases at the High Court in 1993. By that time, Sir Richard had changed his story. The judge, Mr. Justice French, found in favour of BNFL on the balance of probabilities; there was insufficient evidence to prove the case. That judgment came on 8 October 1993. The case cost almost £10 million. Had the case been successful, 40 other families were expected to bring similar cases. The centre of their claim was a report in 1990 by distinguished epidemiologist Professor Martin Gardner of Southampton university, who has since died. He examined a cluster of leukaemias in the village of Seascale, 2 miles from the plant. He found that a higher than average incidence of fathers who had received high doses of radiation had cases of leukaemia.

The judge ruled that scientific study into only five cases was unsupported by other studies. The first of the two test cases was brought by Elizabeth Reay, whose 10-month-old baby died of leukaemia in 1962. The father, George Reay, had died of cancer in the mid-1980s. He had suffered one of the largest radiation doses of any Sellafield worker. The other case was brought by Vivian Hope, aged 28, who had received chemotherapy for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, another blood cancer, diagnosed in 1988. That had left her disabled and sterile. Her father, David, was a fitter at the plant for more than 20 years.

At the time of the court case, Greenpeace said:

"The number of childhood leukaemia cases around Sellafield remains ten times higher than the national average. BNFL has yet to prove that these facts are not connected."

Research into the atomic bombs in Japan showed that there was no link between radiation and childhood leukaemias, but some excellent research by the respected Professor Alice Stewart demonstrates that radiation in small amounts over a longer time has a different impact on individuals. The Japanese research is not relevant in this case.

BNFL has always been willing to meet me whenever I have asked, but it is obvious that it was keen to end correspondence with the McMasters as soon as it could. The McMasters have asked questions but received few answers. The facts of their tragedy are there for everyone to see. The company states that the McMasters have been unlucky and that it was just a tragic coincidence that they had lost all but one of their children; and, of course, that other tragedies had befallen them. They certainly have been unlucky, but they deserve answers. I am well aware that the case has important repercussions for many other families. That does not mean that we should not get answers to those questions; we must try to do so.

In a letter to me on 1 March last year, the then Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, now the Secretary of State for Scotland, wrote to me to say that she was saddened to read the tragic details of Mr. McMaster's family. I understand that BNFL has rigorously examined his long-standing claim that BNFL operations and Mr. MacMaster's employment at BNFL's Springfields site have in some way caused the sad loss of his daughters. BNFL's firm view is that there is no medical or scientific evidence to support this claim. What the Minister said was confirmed by BNFL. There are no surprises there; I would not expect BNFL to say anything else.

The Minister then referred to a Department of Health study into cancer or genetic defects resulting from low-level radiation exposure. The Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment is carrying out this study, and it was due to publish a report last year, but that has now been delayed until next year. Those findings may well give some support to the McMaster theory that his exposure—either through the digestion or through playing near Windscale at the time of the fire—had something to do with the deaths and other tragedies surrounding his children and his own illness.

BNFL wrote to me on 30 June 1999 about a meeting that I had had with them and the McMasters. Mr. Shuttleworth said:

"As I said at the end of the meeting, I do not think that further meetings would be profitable as agreement is extremely unlikely and it is obviously upsetting and distressing for Mr. and Mrs. McMaster to go through their extremely sad family history."

In a letter of 25 February 2000, Mr. Shuttleworth stated that the McMasters always had the opportunity to bring legal action against the company; but how much would that cost, and who would pay? This is a normal family, they simply could not carry the costs of a case such as that against a company such as BNFL. It is a David and Goliath scenario that they could not contemplate.

I ask the Minister for a full and independent inquiry into the McMaster case. The inquiry must look at all the evidence; it must be independent. It is pointless having BNFL look over the case and it is pointless having reassurances from BNFL. The inquiry must be independent and undertaken by someone who has access to all the facts; there must be no cover-up or delay.

The McMasters are getting on; Stella always jokes with me that BNFL are waiting until she dies, but she refuses to die until she gets the case sorted out. She is a sturdy lady, and she is determined to get answers to the questions that she has posed. The family have suffered long enough, and for BNFL to say that they should not have to endure the stress of going through their story time and time again is really pointless. They have lived this tragedy; when Stella tells the story today, she will still cry, because she feels it as though it happened yesterday. The family have suffered long enough; they still feel guilty, I suspect, that they have played some role in the death of their children. They should not be allowed to carry that burden one day longer.

I know that the courts did not find that the case was proven, but an independent inquiry would get to the bottom of the problem and answer the questions that have dogged and plagued the McMaster family for many years. They will be listening as carefully as I am to what the Minister has to say. Will he please give them some hope?

1.15 p.m.

The Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry (Mr. Peter Hain): I begin by paying tribute to the energetic manner in which the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) has supported Joe and Stella McMaster, who have suffered such terrible tragedies. As a father of two, I find it difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend such devastating events and so will many other parents. My heartfelt sympathies go out to the McMasters and to their surviving daughter and grandchildren.

I well understand why the McMasters have been intensely anxious to identify a common cause linking two of the three deaths from apparently similar illnesses. I also understand why they have sought to attribute the deaths to radiation effects, given that it has been established in research on Japanese atomic bomb survivors that those exposed to high levels of radiation have an increased risk of developing cancer. I understand also why Mr. and Mrs. McMaster should have sought compensation initially in 1990, at a time when the possible link between childhood cancer and nuclear industry operations at Sellafield had been put into sharp focus by publication earlier that year of the report of Professor Martin Gardner and his colleagues.

Professor Gardner's study had found a statistical association between the dose of radiation received occupationally by men before conception of their children and the level of leukaemia in these children. This association was both new and controversial.

Substantial further research followed to clarify the association and in particular to establish whether the evidence supported a causal link with the Seascale childhood leukaemia cluster. A review written by the distinguished epidemiologist Sir Richard Doll and his colleagues in 1994 concluded that

"the hypothesis that irradiation of the testes causes any detectable risk of leukaemia in subsequent offspring cannot be sustained."

The Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment, the Government's independent expert advisory committee—with members chosen for their medical and scientific expertise—concluded in its fourth report, published in 1996, that

"we have not found any epidemiological study elsewhere to support Gardner's findings in Seascale in relation to preconception irradiation effects."

The Committee considered that PPI—paternal preconceptional irradiation—

"cannot account for the Seascale childhood leukaemia excess."

Following publication of the Gardner report in 1990, the Department of Health and the Health and Safety Executive jointly sponsored two large-scale studies to investigate Professor Gardner's findings. These studies, the record linkage study and the nuclear industry family study, were published in 1997 and 1999 respectively. The authors of the record linkage study—drawn from the Childhood Cancer Research Group, the National Radiological Protection Board, the university of Birmingham and the Cancer Research Campaign—concluded that

"the results of this study of occupational exposure to radiation before conception of a child do not support the hypothesis that paternal preconception irradiation (PPI) is a cause of childhood leukaemia or non-Hodgkin lymphoma."

The authors of the nuclear industry family study—drawn from the Leukaemia Research Fund, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the Imperial Cancer Research Fund—concluded that

"overall the incidence of all cancers and of leukaemia was similar"

among children of nuclear industry workers

"to that expected in the general population".

These two large studies included the children of workers at Springfields, where Mr. McMaster was employed.

Two legal test cases to which the hon. Gentleman referred—Reay *v.* BNFL and Hope *v.* BNFL—were heard in the High Court during 1992-93, when extensive expert evidence concerning the statistical association found by Professor Gardner and its scientific interpretation was heard. In his judgment, the judge found that this expert evidence was "decisively" in favour of the defendant—BNFL—and the claims failed.

Understandably, however, the McMasters have sought to prove that there is a link between Mr. McMaster's exposure to uranium while working at Springfields and the deaths of their daughters. I understand that Mr. McMaster was employed at the Springfields uranium processing factory for 31 years between 1951 and 1982. One of his daughters, Lynne, was born before he joined the Springfields work force, but the others were born while he was employed there. I am told by BNFL that its records show that the cumulative radiation dose received by Mr. McMaster in the 31 years in which he worked at Springfields was not large, at under 50 mSv. For much of that time, the statutory maximum dose would have been 50 mSv or greater per year.

In 1990, Mr. and Mrs. McMaster initiated a legal claim for compensation, alleging that the death of their daughter Jill was caused by BNFL's operations. Their claim was one of a number pursued at that time, following the publication of Professor Gardner's report.

Jill was born after Mr. McMaster started work at Springfields. She died in her late teens of acute leukaemia. In the light of the independent scientific research that I have described, it appears most unlikely that her leukaemia was caused by Mr. McMaster's exposure to radiation at Springfields; although, as a parent, I can understand why that might be supposed to be otherwise. Moreover, BNFL's records show that the cumulative dose that Mr. McMaster received at Springfields before Jill was conceived was only 10 mSv over about three years. That can be compared with a current legal limit of 20 mSv per year, based on agreed international standards, although the limit at the time was higher.

Mr. McMaster's first daughter, Lynne, suffered and died from the uncommon blood disease sideroblastic anaemia. She was conceived and born before Mr. McMaster started work at Springfields. I am advised that her disease cannot, therefore, have been caused by his exposure to radiation while working there.

Mr. Evans: The 1957 fire at Windscale may have contributed to her cancer.

Mr. Hain: I understand the hon. Gentleman's argument. The McMasters have suggested that the fire at one of the Windscale nuclear reactors at Sellafield in October 1957 may be a factor in Lynne's death, and possibly also Jill's. As the hon. Gentleman said, the McMasters used to stay in a caravan in Cumbria some 15 miles south of Sellafield. In the light of work done by the National Radiological Protection Board, I understand that even if they were there at the time, the doses to their red bone marrow—the relevant tissue for inducing leukaemia—would have been small.

The NRPB's comprehensive dose assessments show that the red bone marrow doses received by children living in Seascale—which is adjacent to Sellafield—as a consequence of the fire were less than the doses received from natural background radiation during 1957. BNFL says that the doses due to the Windscale fire for children in Silecroft would have been even less, and in Preston very much less. Wherever Lynne and Jill may have been during and immediately after the Windscale fire, I am advised that the radiation doses to their red bone marrow received as a consequence of the fire appear unlikely to have been the cause of their diseases.

Twin girls were born in 1958, and Mrs. McMaster says that they were six weeks premature. One of the twins died of respiratory problems three days after birth. Unfortunately, such death in premature newborn twins was not unusual in the late 1950s. Mr. and Mrs. McMaster seem to have acknowledged in their meetings with BNFL that the death of the weaker twin due to respiratory problems would not have been unexpected at that time, especially as she was six weeks premature.

I understand that Mrs. McMaster suffered a miscarriage before the birth of Jill. The nuclear industry family study has produced no evidence that a father's exposure to radiation before conception increases the risk of miscarriage in his partner's pregnancy. In any case, the dose that Mr. McMaster would have received at Springfields before conception of the miscarried foetus would have been even lower than that received before the conception of Jill.

Mr. McMaster had lost all his teeth by 1955. I understand that all the evidence linking the loss of his teeth to radiation exposure relates to high doses received to the oral cavity during radiotherapy. That evidence provides no support for an argument that low doses of radiation received by Mr. McMaster during his work at Springfields could have caused the loss of his teeth. Tooth loss was common in the 1950s and was usually due to gum disease.

Mr. McMaster told BNFL that he was involved in an incident in 1953 that led to his being exposed to uranium. BNFL says that its comprehensive investigation of his dose records confirm that he was likely to have been exposed to uranium at that time, but adds that comprehensive monitoring for uranium-in-urine showed that his exposure was relatively low and not unusual for that period.

Mr. McMaster has also referred to an apparently unusual whole-body monitoring result just before he retired in 1982. These tests were regularly carried out by BNFL, which states that it comprehensively investigated the results for Mr. McMaster in 1982. Its investigation found that the result referred to by Mr. McMaster was not particularly unusual and that other whole-body monitoring tests taken at that time were quite normal. Whole-body monitoring and uranium-in-urine measurements carried out in 1997 found no evidence for the presence of abnormal levels of uranium in Mr. McMaster. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley received a full explanation from BNFL in a letter dated 16 September 1998.

Mr. McMaster also feels that a blood test carried out in 1990 shows that he has abnormal chromosomes. Tests carried out in BNFL's cytogenetics laboratory at Sellafield revealed some unstable chromosome abnormalities that BNFL's genetics expert at the time, Dr. Tawn, concluded were unlikely to be due to Mr. McMaster's employment at Springfields prior to 1982, and even less likely to be linked to his exposures in the 1950s. The level of chromosome abnormalities found were not unusual in a man of Mr. McMaster's age—he was 68 years old at the time—and raised levels can be due to exposure to chemicals, medication or cigarette smoke, in addition to ionising radiation.

Repeat blood tests were carried out by Westlakes research institute and the National Radiological Protection Board in 1997. As in the earlier 1990 analysis, the level of unstable chromosome abnormalities was not particularly unusual. Analyses were also conducted for stable chromosome abnormalities, which are more relevant to radiation exposures dating from many years ago. The frequency of stable chromosome abnormalities was slightly raised, but not unusually so, given that Mr. McMaster was 75 years of age when his blood was sampled. Also, those slightly raised levels may reflect exposure to other material such as tobacco smoke; I am told that Mr. McMaster was a smoker.

All these issues have been covered in an extensive correspondence between BNFL and the McMasters since 1993, when the possibility of successful legal action became remote. There have also been a number of meetings between BNFL and the McMasters since 1994 to explore these matters and to try to allay their concerns about their surviving daughter and grandchildren. To this end, BNFL arranged a consultation with Dr. Gareth Evans, consultant clinical geneticist at St. Mary's hospital, Manchester. Similarly, blood tests and radiation monitoring were also arranged by BNFL. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley has seen the greater part, if not all, of the correspondence between BNFL and the McMasters. He has also twice accompanied the McMasters to meetings with BNFL. He is therefore aware of BNFL's reasons for not accepting responsibility for the McMasters' tragic losses.

A recent study, published in a scientific journal last year, found that in terms of mortality as a whole, and cancer in particular, the Springfields work force has rates that are below those of the general population. BNFL has given detailed and comprehensive explanations to the McMasters, and to the hon. Member for Ribble Valley, of why it believes that there is no reasonable scientific basis for considering BNFL to be responsible for these tragedies. BNFL strongly and honestly believes, in the light of the evidence that has been so painstakingly examined, that it cannot reasonably be expected to compensate the McMasters. BNFL has offered the hon. Gentleman full access to its

files, and I hope that he will take up that offer in order that he may be satisfied that his constituents' concerns have been scrupulously examined.

BNFL has also offered to arrange for independent expert examination of its dosimetry records, which is a helpful suggestion. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will agree that it should be pursued. I add my condolences to Mr. and Mrs McMaster on this deeply distressing case. I know that they will be disappointed with my response, but I have seen no evidence to contradict that which I have cited and which the courts have supported. There is no basis for an independent inquiry, but I shall be happy to receive any further evidence or representations from the hon. Gentleman, directly or indirectly, if he believes it to be appropriate.

Strangeways Riot (Woolf Report)

1.30 pm

Mr. Paul Stinchcombe (Wellingborough): In April 1990, Strangeways prison in Manchester was the scene of the worst penal disturbances that this country has ever witnessed. Prisoners took over the chapel and defied the authorities in a roof-top siege lasting 25 days. It was the longest riot in prison history, during which 47 inmates and 147 police or prison officers were hurt.

On 5 April 1990, Lord Justice Woolf, as he then was, was appointed to lead an inquiry into Strangeways and 10 years ago last week, on 31 January 1991, he handed his report to the then Secretary of State for Home Affairs. The 10th anniversary of publication of the Woolf report was commemorated by Lord Woolf last week when he gave the Prison Reform Trust lecture. I am a trustee of that trust. The lecture was one of three speeches that we have heard during the past week about prisons and the penal system. It was made alongside the speech of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on the same day and that of Mr. Martin Narey, director general of the Prison Service, the day before yesterday. It seemed a good idea, 10 years on, to review progress since the Strangeways riot.

Lord Woolf found a sorry picture when he reviewed the prison system 11 years ago. At the time of the riot, 1,647 prisoners were held in Strangeways, which was intended to accommodate only 970. It was overcrowded by almost 70 per cent. and that was not unusual in prison establishments. In 1989-90, the 40-odd local prisons and remand centres were overcrowded by an average of 37 per cent. Some were overcrowded 100 per cent. and holding double the number of prisoners that should have been held.

The effects of overcrowding at Strangeways and elsewhere were many and serious. Prisoners were held three to a cell without sanitation or washing facilities. They were allowed just one shower a week. They were forced to share a single bucket for a toilet. With too few staff and too many prisoners, there was a lack of purposeful activity for prisoners. They were locked up and left idle, often for 23 hours a day. There was a lack of decent visiting facilities, so contact between prisoners and families was severely limited. There was low morale among prison officers and when prisoners had grievances—they had many—the arrangements for addressing them were inadequate.

Lord Woolf found those factors to be the cause of the Strangeways riot. In his landmark report on the events of April 1990, he recognised that change was desperately required and provided a blueprint of a just, humane and secure prison system. The following questions should be asked 10 years on. What has been done? Has the blueprint been fulfilled? Have Lord Woolf's recommendations been implemented? Some of the recommendations have indeed been implemented and progress has been made. However, others have been implemented only partially or with only partial success; some have not been implemented at all or their progress has been lamentable.

I shall start with the good, because Lord Woolf called for more visible leadership by the Prison Service and the director general. He stated proudly last week in his Prison Reform Trust lecture that that had been achieved

[Mr. Paul Stinchcombe]

and he referred to Mr. Martin Narey. I want to put that on the record in the light of Mr. Narey's speech two days ago.

However, similar progress has not been made elsewhere. For example, Lord Woolf recommended that compacts or contracts should be used for each prisoner to develop a personal sense of responsibility. Although some establishments have made progress with compacts, especially with drug reduction strategies and the earned privilege scheme, it has been impossible across the Prison Service as a whole to deliver what the compacts should provide. The use and benefits of the compacts have not been as widespread as they should have been. The good practices of some establishments have not been shared and become the good practices of all.

Likewise, there has been some, but not enough, progress in respect of the recommendation for an improved standard of justice in prisons. At the time of the Strangeways riot, justice stopped at the prison door. Lord Woolf thought that to be one of the worst aspects of the prison system 11 years ago. As he said in his lecture last week, for the justice system to send somebody to prison, only to treat him unjustly when he is there is simply intolerable.

There have been significant improvements since then. We now have a prisons ombudsman and a grievance procedure has been established. However, there remains room for real improvement. The delays in the grievance procedure are excessive—justice delayed is often justice denied. Last week, Lord Woolf said that an ineffective grievance procedure is probably as bad as no grievance procedure at all. Unless more is done to speed up the system, it risks falling into disrepute.

In respect of many of the other recommendations, progress has been negligible. For example, Lord Woolf recommended that there be a national system of accredited standards—it has not been established. Worse still, last year the Prison Service's own key performance indicators were met in less than half of the cases and that, as Lord Woolf said, is hardly an impressive record.

Lord Woolf also recommended that slopping out should end, with all prisoners having access to sanitation not later than February 1996—five years ago this month. Officially, slopping out has ended: its demise was formally announced in 1996. But when the Chief Inspector of Prisons visited Exeter, he found that in the segregation unit not one of the cells had integral sanitation or a water supply. At Portland young offenders institution, he found that slopping out had not ended in the induction and the therapeutic wings. Five years after the announcement that slopping out was ended, cells in four wings at Strangeways still have no integral sanitation. These are buildings that should have been razed to the ground, but they are still being used.

Progress has also been slow in respect of Lord Woolf's recommendation that prisoners should be held in community prisons as near to their homes as possible. The reason for that recommendation is a simple one: research shows that good family ties can reduce a prisoner's risk of reoffending by a factor of six. We therefore know that the greatest single factor determining whether a prisoner is likely to reoffend on release is whether he has a stable family life to go home to. If we are going to be tough on crime and the causes of crime, a good place to start would be to implement Lord Woolf's recommendation to accommodate prisoners as near to their families as possible. After 10 years, however, 26,000 prisoners are held more than 50 miles from their committal court town; 11,000 prisoners are over 100 miles away; and 5,000 prisoners are over 150 miles from their home area.

When I visited Wellingborough magistrates court last week, Mrs. Green—the chair of the youth bench—told me that they had to send their young prisoners to Huntercombe, many miles away from their parents. Quite apart from everything else, the Prison Service currently spends over £2 million every year on fares for family visits—money that could be spent elsewhere on crime prevention.

Lord Woolf also recommended that there should be a separate statement of purpose, separate conditions and a lower security categorisation for remand prisoners. Again, that has simply not happened. As Lord Woolf said in his lecture last week, the treatment of remand prisoners all too often means that they are left at the bottom of the pack when they should, as unconvicted prisoners, be at the top. After all, of male prisoners received on remand in 1999, 53 per cent. did not subsequently receive a prison sentence; and for female prisoners that figure rose to 65 per cent. Over 20 per cent. of both male and female prisoners remanded in custody were actually acquitted or had the proceedings against them terminated early. And yet, because they may be in prison for a short stay only, remand prisoners are kept in conditions described by Mr. Narey as primitive.

Why do we have these legion problems? Why is slopping out still taking place in wings that should not even be standing? Why are prisoners still held hundreds of miles from home when we know that that makes reoffending far more likely? Why are remand prisoners held in primitive conditions when they have not been convicted of a crime, and may never be so?

In significant part, it is simply because many prisons are still grotesquely overcrowded. Lord Woolf recommended 10 years ago that there should be a new prison rule that no establishment could hold more prisoners than was certified to be its normal level of accommodation. That rule has not been introduced because, as the Minister said in March 2000, there was no prospect that overcrowding would end. Indeed in April 2000, Mr. Narey said that overcrowding was approaching the limits of what he found acceptable in terms of the risk of disorder and loss of control, and that it already surpassed what he wanted in terms of hygiene and treating prisoners decently and constructively.

Let us look at the figures. On 24 November 2000, Preston prison was overcrowded by 81 per cent, Shrewsbury by 74 per cent. and Northallerton by 70 per cent. Some 11,553 prisoners were held two to a single cell. At Leeds, 800 prisoners were held in overcrowded cells. At Birmingham and Doncaster, the figure was over 600. At Altcourse, Preston, Durham and Wandsworth, over 400 prisoners were held in overcrowded cells. Not

just old prisons are overcrowded. Of the 24 new prisons built or re-opened in the last ten years, half are already overcrowded.

Ten years on, Strangeways is still overcrowded. One in four of its prisoners are held in overcrowded cells. That is why slopping out has not ended, why prison wings that should have been razed to the ground are still standing, why prisoners are still held far from home and why remand prisoners are still treated primitively. That is why prisoners at Northallerton remand centre are locked up for more than 19 hours a day.

The ramifications of overcrowding are wider still. The Prison Service still fails to provide adequate levels of purposeful activity. The key performance indicator of 24 hours purposeful activity a week is not met in many establishments. On average, prisoners receive just ten minutes more purposeful activity a day than they did in 1990. In Brixton, where 242 prisoners are held in overcrowded conditions, barely 11 hours of purposeful activity is provided a week.

Overcrowding is the core problem facing prisons. It has been described by Mr. Narey as a scourge, by Lord Woolf as a cancer and by Christopher Scott, the former president of the Prison Governors Association, as an obscenity. It is not the only target of reform and it must not become the excuse—the mantra—behind which establishments hide their other failings. However, when four of the six hellholes identified by Mr. Narey two days ago are overcrowded, it is a problem that must be tackled and tackled soon.

We are in a vicious cycle. We lock up more and more people and because of that we hold them in conditions that make it more likely that they will reoffend when released. With prisons already overcrowded and overstretched, 57 per cent. of prisoners discharged in 1996 were re-convicted within two years. More than three-quarters of young male prisoners are re-convicted within 24 months. Little wonder that the prison population has increased by over 15,000 in the last 10 years and that 64,000 men and women are now in prison in England and Wales.

The Home Office predicts a prison population of 80,000 by 2007. If those Home Office figures and predictions are correct, we will spend an awful lot of money locking people up only to see them reoffend shortly after their release. The average cost of a prison place is £26,000, which is about twice as much as a place at a top public school. For every 40 additional prisoners, we spend £1 million extra a year. The 30,000 increase in the prison population projected for 1991 to 2007 will cost us £750 million every year on top of building costs, which since 1995 have amounted to £1.3 billion. To spend that amount of money and keep prisoners locked up in primitive conditions, miles from home, with adverse consequences for their potential rehabilitation, is not a progressive penal policy.

What can and should be done if simply building more and more prisons is an expensive way of making little progress? What can and should be done if—as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said in a speech on penal policy last week—we cannot and will not cut prison sentences for serious and serial offenders? Within those limitations, our options are few. I shall touch on three of them.

First, we need to cut the number of criminals and cut crime. That is not a trite thing to say, but a policy imperative. Preventative crime reduction policies are part and parcel of a properly integrated criminal justice and penal system. In Wellingborough, car crime and repeat burglaries have fallen by 25 per cent. following Home Office investment in problem estates. Cars, houses and whole estates can be made more secure; so can mobile phones. We heard today that road deaths in Northamptonshire have been cut by 28 per cent. through the more intensive use of speed cameras. We can be tougher on pubs and clubs who sell alcohol to drunks. We can work harder to confront drug-related crime by tackling the addictions that force so many into robbery and prostitution. We can better tackle the illiteracy, poverty and helplessness in which crime breeds.

Secondly, we need to develop more effective and more flexible sentences, in which the community will have confidence. We need to invest more in restorative justice. We need to look for credible alternatives to prison, as the Home Affairs Committee unanimously agreed in its recent report. As Lord Woolf said last week, initiatives to tackle offending can often work as effectively outside prison as they can within. Indeed, short custodial sentences are a poor alternative to sentences served in the community if they place a disproportionate burden on the Prison Service and then do little, if anything, to tackle offending behaviour.

Thirdly, we need to ensure that those who should not be in prison are not sent there. No one would argue against the imprisonment of serious and serial offenders; and, when appropriate, it should be for a long time. However, because we have insufficient secure and semi-secure hospital accommodation, we are also imprisoning the mentally ill. In the 12 months before their custody started, 20 per cent. of male prisoners and 40 per cent. of female prisoners had been treated or had sought treatment for mental health problems. Nine out of every 10 young people in custody have mental health or substance abuse problems—or a combination of the two.

We are also imprisoning asylum seekers.A whole landing in Wandsworth prison is dedicated to them; yet 486 prisoners there are held in overcrowded conditions. We have even imprisoned a man in Wellingborough whose crime was to set fire to some church curtains the week after his foster parents died. He put out the fire himself and waited for the police to arrive, yet he is currently serving the 22nd year of his sentence.

We should make crime more difficult to commit. We should tackle offending behaviour effectively. We should develop sentences that, when appropriate, do not involve incarceration. We should not lock up those who should not be locked up. Only then can we stop our prisons being overcrowded; only then can we start to ensure that prisons help to rehabilitate prisoners rather than becoming universities of crime. We can break the never-ending cycle between prison and crime, prison and crime.

At the end of his lecture last week, Lord Woolf said:

"What would have a greater effect on overcrowding than anything I can propose would be an announcement by the Government that it fully accepts the damaging effects of prison overcrowding and that it attaches the highest priority to eliminating this problem".

[Mr. Paul Stinchcombe]

My hon. Friend has the opportunity today to make that announcement. I invite her to take it.

1.47 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): First, I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Stinchcombe) not only on securing this important debate, but on the way in which he spoke. He clearly has a passionate interest in the subject, and he also has a detailed knowledge of it. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), the Minister with responsibility for prisons, has a great deal of regard for the work that my hon. Friend has done generally, and particularly in Wellingborough, in trying to reduce crime.

My hon. Friend gave us a succinct yet comprehensive history of Lord Woolf's report and its recommendations. Great changes have taken place since 1990. Recent change and our planned future agenda have replaced the Woolf agenda. Nevertheless, the imprint of Lord Woolf's recommendations on the prison system remains clear to all. They have stood the test of time, and the Prison Service will lose sight of them at its peril. I am grateful for my hon. Friend's acknowledgement of what has already been achieved in putting many of those recommendations into effect. He is correct, of course, to say that the pressure of the prison population is the main reason why others have not yet been achieved.

The Government support the use of imprisonment for serious, dangerous and persistent offenders when it is necessary to protect the public, but we recognise that it needs to be effectively targeted. It may not be the best or the most effective option for less serious offenders, especially when tough non-custodial sentences are available. If community sentences are to be effective and credible, strong enforcement is essential. Too often, however, such sentences are seen as a soft option by offenders and the public.

The new enforcement measures set out in the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 send a clear message that flouting a court order is not an option. We believe strongly that those measures will ensure greater compliance with community sentences and give a clear signal that non-custodial sentences are real punishments. My hon. Friend will warmly welcome that. He is right to draw our attention to non-custodial sentences.

The Government have commenced a review of the sentencing framework to examine the scope for new sentencing options, especially for more flexible arrangements to combine time served in custody and in the community. We have invested more than £220 million from the comprehensive spending review and a further £200 million from SR 2000 to provide constructive regimes in prison designed to reduce reoffending, based on "what works" principles. We have established the prison and probation accreditation panel, chaired by Sir Duncan Nichol, to approve regimes that work best to reduce reoffending. Offenders serving community penalties will also be required to follow "what works" programmes.

My hon. Friend referred to the continuing need for slopping out. A programme to provide 24-hour access to sanitation was implemented by February 1996. It consisted of providing integral sanitation in cells, with an alternative where that was not practical of providing access via electronic unlocking. That was implemented across the estate in all cells in use for normal accommodation. There are three wings at establishments where integral sanitation and electronic unlocking are not practical. We did not intend to keep those wings in use, but population pressures have made that necessary. Staff have been provided to unlock cells should prisoners wish to use the lavatory facilities. A recent survey of all segregation and health care accommodation identified cells where it would be appropriate to install integral sanitation, and funds for that are being sought.

My hon. Friend rightly pointed out that it is regrettable that levels of purposeful activity are now similar to those in 1992-93, at 23.6 hours a week. However, that needs to be seen in the context of the prison population increase of more than 40 per cent. The Prison Service is therefore providing considerably more purposeful activity, and the average amount per prisoner was up in 1999-2000 compared with the previous year.

The quality of purposeful activity has also improved. Time is better focused on activities such as drug rehabilitation, offending behaviour programmes and basic skills education, which are known to have an impact on reducing crime. No one who visits prisons—I know that my hon. Friend does so regularly—can fail to be aware that tackling those basics, especially raising people's levels of literacy and numeracy, is essential to prevent reoffending.

My hon. Friend was right to say that prisoners, especially short-term ones, are less likely to reoffend if they have a job and stable accommodation on release. That is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has announced that he wants the number of prisoners who go into jobs on release to double in the next three years. We are also addressing the other factors—basic skills, drugs education and accommodation—that we know are vital to the resettlement of prisoners.

The key to effective resettlement of prisoners is an approach that works with them through the gate and into the community after release. We must ensure that prisoners are directed as far as possible to a stable address and to a job, new deal place or training place. That will be the focus of a new Prison Service custody-to-work programme, supported by an extra £21 million during the next three years.

My hon. Friend rightly mentioned the need to tackle alcohol-related crime. The amount of such crime is a matter of tremendous concern. According to the British crime survey, about 40 per cent. of violent crime is alcohol-related. Something like 13,000 violent incidents take place on or around licensed premises every week. Last year we launched the Home Office action plan on alcohol-related crime, which sets out an important programme of measures to tackle underage drinking and the problems associated with public drunkenness and related behaviour. The plan includes measures to share learning about what works in this context. We need to learn from best practice and to consider the role of education, particularly for young people, to ensure that we tackle the problem at its root.

My hon. Friend mentioned asylum seekers in prison. He is a member of the Home Affairs Committee, which recommended increasing the removal of people who, having made unsuccessful asylum applications, have no basis for staying in the United Kingdom. The effort to meet the relevant removal targets has led to a temporary need for more prison space. We are increasing our dedicated detention space to effect removal.

The Government are not in the business of artificially reducing the prison population. We are committed to reducing reoffending. To that end, we are committed to providing the courts with an appropriate range of custodial programmes that have been shown to reduce reoffending. My hon. Friend was right to consider what those programmes might mean and to point out the need to examine them. I have seen some good ones, particularly in the probation service. Some of those programmes are certainly not soft options. They are focused on the prevention of reoffending, on rehabilitation and, importantly, on the protection of the community.

I commend my hon. Friend for having obtained today's debate and for the way in which he began it. It was short but important. I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister of State will be very interested to read what he said. We look forward to continuing our work in this context and to working with my hon. Friend on the matters that he raised quite appropriately today.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 8 February 2001

[MRS. SYLVIA HEAL *in the Chair*]

Social Security Fraud

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Rooker.*]

2.31 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): We are pleased to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Madam Deputy Speaker. We are glad to have the benefit of your chairing our debate, which, given the current turnout, I suspect will not be too acrimonious.

The Government thought that it would be useful to have a wide-ranging debate on social security fraud. As hon. Members know, the Social Security Fraud Bill is going through another place. The subject is touched on only briefly at Question Time and I do not think that we give it the time that it deserves. The Department of Social Security's annual budget is about £100 billion, and social security fraud and error cost about £2 billion a year. Our duty is to ensure that the system is secure from those who seek to attack it, from fraud, from error in the Department, which can occasionally occur, and from genuine errors that claimants may make. The money must go to the right people, particularly those who need it most.

I shall draw attention to what we inherited in respect of social security fraud and the results of the action that we have taken so far. I shall then say a little about what needs to be done in future, after which I shall refer to the Social Security Fraud Bill.

Our best estimate is that social security fraud and error cost at least £2 billion a year. I see that that comment has made the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) raise his eyebrows. To put the problem into perspective, we spend £1.7 billion running the Benefits Agency.

From time to time, various estimates are given of the level of fraud, such as between £2 billion and £4 billion, as well as the famous figure of £7 billion. As I have said in answer to parliamentary questions, the £2 billion is what we know about. Another £2 billion may be regarded with a high level of suspicion and there is a weak suspicion—sometimes, no more than a hunch—about another £3 billion, which is how the figure of £7 billion came into the public domain. We have said repeatedly that we do not think that that is the amount of fraud. I want to put the debate into the context of what we can measure.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Clearly, it is important to restate the position. Does the Minister dismiss out of hand the claim by the Public Accounts Committee that, in reality, £9.5 billion is involved?

Mr. Rooker: To be honest, the short answer is yes. I have not come here to pick a fight with the Public Accounts Committee, but I have never seen any estimates of social security fraud at anything like that level. I have explained how the £7 billion figure is made up; there are hunches, a weak suspicion—an inkling. I am giving the figure that we work on: the minimum that we know of is £2 billion, which in itself is a substantial figure. It is unacceptable and we must stem the flow.

Fraud is not, as it is often portrayed to be, a victimless crime or a small-time activity. It is true that a good deal of it arises from people working down the pub a couple of nights a week or at the bingo hall and claiming benefit, which, of course, is unacceptable, but more often than not fraud is planned and calculated—in some cases, it is highly organised—and diverts public money from other objectives.

I should say that something like three quarters of the population have contact with the Department in some way, if we include child benefit, pensions, disability benefit and all the other benefits, and the overwhelming majority of people in every sector are honest. If there are errors, they will make that clear and sometimes say, "I think I'm being paid too much." Therefore, fraud relates to a small minority, but that still amounts to a large number of people.

When we started to look at this issue in 1997, we identified four key weaknesses. We repeatedly make the point that, although we are critical of the previous Administration, in 1995, they started to measure fraud—measurement did not start in 1997. There were the beginnings, the gleam in the eye, of a strategy, even at the fag-end of the previous Administration.

Measurement was attempted in 1995, but the scale of the problem was not understood. There was no overall strategy and no targets or objective measures of success. The only measure—it was a key weakness—was the amount of fraud detected, so those paying out benefits sometimes had a perverse incentive not to worry about preventing fraud: the more fraud entered the system, the easier it was to find. They could say, "We've got a lot of fraud. Aren't we good because we've added it up?"

There was also—I think this is generally accepted—totally inadequate investment in information technology. I have described the computer systems at the Department as rubbish. They are vastly improving day by day under this Administration, whose largesse on capital expenditure will revamp the whole of the Department's IT infrastructure. Nevertheless, past investment is a real problem; it was obviously a problem for the previous Administration. The IT system did not allow us to draw together information on people's claims and to guard the system. A local authority worker processing housing benefit claims did not have automatic access to details of existing or previous awards of income support, for example.

There was a culture that saw security, fraud and detection as a cul-de-sac: it was not an integral part of the system but a bit of a bolt-on. Our assessment of income support claims in 1997 was that 40 per cent.—two out of five—were paid without enough evidence. That is a substantial number.

I turn to some of the things that we are trying to do to get a grip on the system after a good deal of neglect. We have invested more in policing the welfare state; we make no bones about that. We have tightened the gateways to benefit and devoted more staff to front-line

[Mr. Rooker]

offices where they can check claims more rigorously. We published a strategy document, entitled "Safeguarding Social Security", in March 1999. For the first time, we had a plan to secure the system from the first claim to the final payment. We established a system that provided continuous measurement of levels of fraud and error, especially in income support and jobseeker's allowance. That system will be extended to housing benefit from April this year.

We have set targets for reducing the amount of fraud in the system. We have published targets and must be judged on our success in reaching those targets. We have raised our targets for reduction of losses due to fraud and error in relation to income support and jobseeker's allowance to 25 per cent. by March 2004 and 50 per cent. by 2006. The National Audit Office supports the approach of setting targets for reducing fraud and error, and will report to the Public Accounts Committee on that and a variety of other anti-fraud measures.

We have introduced much tighter checks at the gateway to income support before money is paid out. We have already halved the percentage of income support claims that are paid without enough evidence—20 per cent. are so paid, down from 40 per cent. I accept that that is still too high, but that change alone saves £1 billion during the current Parliament, which is not to be sniffed at. We have given local authorities on-line access to essential benefit information held by DSS systems. That means that 10 million forms previously sent by post from the Benefits Agency to local authorities are now sent electronically. That speeds up the process and makes it far more secure.

We have introduced the verification framework, which requires local authorities to perform tougher identity and evidence checks on housing benefit claims. No doubt I shall hear from hon. Members about some of the difficulties that some local authorities have had. The degree of competence and commitment in local authorities is variable, to say the least. Nevertheless, we are locking down avenues for fraud in the system. We have stopped housing benefit fraudsters redirecting their mail from false addresses.

It is appropriate to tell hon. Members—it may avoid lengthy interventions— that we have introduced our own staff training. It is not just something to give them when they have nothing else to do. We are introducing professionalism to anti-fraud activity through the Professionalism In Security programme—PINS. In the Benefits Agency, Inland Revenue, Department for Education and Employment and Northern Ireland Social Security Agency, 3,000 staff have started PINS foundation training. By March this year, more than 2,000 staff will have completed the training and been awarded the accredited counter-fraud officer qualification. From this April, we are offering PINS training to up to 900 local authority investigation officers.

The training is of such good quality that certain advertisements for anti-fraud jobs in the national health service and Customs and Exercise are listing PINS training from the DSS as an advantage or requirement. That is wholly good for government and public money, but my Department is carrying the burden. We do not want to lose too many of our staff, having put much effort into training them.

Mr. Pickles: Can the Minister explain why, given such excellent training, the number of prosecutions for benefit fraud dropped dramatically last year in comparison with previous years?

Mr. Rooker: I shall come to prosecutions in a moment. It is a fair question and I have a good answer.

I could speak about training in more detail, but it takes the form of module courses and is organised in conjunction with the university of Portsmouth. We are making sure that our staff are professionally qualified to search out fraud and error and to deal with the problem sensitively, which ensures that a civilised system operates and that people are dealt with accordingly.

The other point that is worth mentioning is that we asked for a report on organised fraud from John Scampion, which we have received. We have implemented most of his recommendations and he is content with our approach so far. Work has begun to strengthen the organised benefit fraud investigation service, to establish a national fraud intelligence unit, to set up joint working arrangements with local authorities and to replace the weekly benefit savings regime for local authorities. Those are four key areas.

That work has included the appointment of two senior managers from outside the DSS, which we thought was important. They both joined the Department at approximately the same time in autumn 2000: John Alpass is head of fraud intelligence and Richard Kitchen is chief investigation officer. Both came from outside the DSS. That is an important aspect of what we are doing to change the system.

I shall now look at the results of our new approach. Figures published last November showed that losses from fraud and error in income support and jobseeker's allowance had fallen for the first time. For benefit paid between April 1999 and March 2000, the saving was estimated to be about £60 million. In 1999-2000, about 22,000 people were sanctioned or prosecuted, an increase of 60 per cent. compared with the previous year. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar cannot dismiss that. We introduced sanctions, which were not available under the previous Government. Sanctions and prosecutions must be seen in the round. The sanctions are highly effective: payback of the benefit, plus a 30 per cent. top-up. People are given a choice. We say, "We fingered you. We'll sanction you or prosecute. You can pay up what has been overpaid"—to put it politely—"and a 30 per cent. sanction on top of that." Many people choose to do that. It avoids the consequence of court appearances. We are dealing with more people than ever before by having the opportunity to sanction as well as to prosecute. One has to look at sanctions and prosecutions in tandem.

The hon. Gentleman will say that, one year, prosecutions may vary. They were down a few hundred, perhaps a thousand; I do not have the figures directly in front of me—they are in my folder. However, sanctions and prosecutions cannot be treated in isolation. Some

of those people were given the option: it was their choice to be sanctioned. We do not force the sanction on them. The alternative is to be prosecuted. That is an effective way to deal with fraud cases. We are able to recover more money and to put the squeeze on more people. I hope that they will be less likely to commit fraud again.

We are piloting specialist identity checks. Since June 1997, there has been an operation in Balham—I have been there twice in recent months—to use more intensive questioning and investigation when people apply for national insurance numbers. The interviews are very structured. I sat in on one. I was champing at the bit to jump in with the next question, but the interviewers are highly trained and skilled and have a pattern to go through.

That was only a pilot in Balham, but it has led to more than 200 arrests. Later this year, we shall be rolling out nationally the procedures that we have been using in Balham. By definition, London is a big centre for national insurance number applications from people doing casual work, people from overseas, people who have come in casually and, in some cases, people who have come to this country by surprise as asylum seekers. Self-evidently, London has a big transient population, as has every capital in the world. Nevertheless, the greater intensification of those interviews will assist greatly in ensuring that we gain better control over the national insurance number system, which is highly managed in the first place.

Of the 409 local authorities that we deal with regarding benefit, we have managed to supply 404 with on-line access to essential benefit information owned by the Department of Social Security—the obvious question is which are the five that we have not managed to supply. At least one remote access terminal has been provided to each authority. Some authorities have more than one. That is a substantial help in cross-checking information.

Mr. Pickles: I ask a straightforward question arising from the study in Balham. Approximately 14 per cent. of all cases involve some kind of fraud or customer error. Can the right hon. Gentleman say what the balance is between them?

Mr. Rooker: Off the top of my head, I cannot, but I will take advice on that question. If I can provide a breakdown, I will be happy to share it with colleagues.

Approximately 250 local authorities have signed up to perform tougher verification checks on housing benefit claimants. That is not such a high success rate—a little more than half. However, we are making a further £160 million available over the next three years to ensure that 85 per cent. of housing benefit expenditure is covered by the verification framework by 2004. That is intensive work. I understand the pressure that is put on local authority staff and I pay tribute to them. Housing benefit is very complicated—much more so than income support.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I am sure that the Minister knows that the complexity of housing benefit is one of a number of reasons given as to why fraud is at such a high level. Although we have heard about various initiatives and sanctions, how will the Benefits Agency and the Department of Social Security deal with the problems raised by the complexity of the system?

Mr. Rooker: Briefly, a White Paper on housing has been published in which aspects of housing benefit are touched on. I do not deny that the system is ripe for reform. However, I was astonished to learn—I never picked it up as a constituency Member—that 409 local authorities pay housing benefit, which means 409 application forms.

Mr. Pickles: Absolutely.

Mr. Rooker: I like the way the hon. Gentleman said, "Absolutely." Long before your time, Madam Deputy Speaker, I sat on the Standing Committee that converted rent rebates to housing benefit in 1981 or 1982, when Hugh Rossi was the Minister. The Government forgot to say, "We'll have a standard form for this."

We are on the verge of improvement. The benefit fraud inspectorate, which provides a lot of assistance in going into local authorities to check systems, is about to publish a form that it has devised following consultation. The form has a crystal mark award for plain English. It is not as short as the new minimum income guarantee form, but it is a lot shorter than it could have been. Local authorities will be encouraged to use the form, although it will be voluntary—we have not taken legislative powers to force them to do so.

Some local authorities' housing benefit forms did not even require claimants to declare their income. One would have thought that that was minimal information. We are working on it, but the nature of housing benefit means that the problem is bound to be complicated. Many variables need to be dealt with, including the income and family circumstances of claimants and the rent system that is in place, or whatever arrangement the landlord has with the tenant.

More than 350 local authorities have signed up to a scheme in conjunction with the Royal Mail that is designed to stop housing benefit fraudsters redirecting their mail from false addresses. I am annoyed that there is no follow-up because we pay for it—central, not local, Government pay. We are trying to work in partnership with local government, not to use a heavy hand. We are now cross checking—the warning needs to go out to everyone concerned—more DSS records and other Government-held records than ever before, which has already saved £150 million.

We shall soon begin a cross-check on benefit and tax records, particularly those relating to the building industry. We are assessing the high-risk aspects and, as everyone knows, the building industry is high risk. No factories are involved. The workshop is different. People move around the country. Employers come and go. They come in various sizes and, as is well known, factors such as tax exemption certificates are involved.

We shall cross check our tax records with benefit records for people in the building industry. We shall shortly start using the stronger powers that we have to inspect employers' records to check whether people are working while claiming benefit as unemployed. As a

[Mr. Rooker]

caveat, all our proposals are legal and above board and fully consistent with data protection legislation and the European convention on human rights.

Increasingly more information that is held by the Government is being matched. That was prevented in the past by the rubbishy computer systems inherited from the previous Administration. When I explained to one of my constituents why she was being asked some questions and said that one computer was being checked with another, she said, "Mr. Rooker, the computers is kissing each other." She was damned right. They are. When variations exist, we examine the matter at local office level to check it.

We must consider what more needs to be done. Through tighter checks and targeted plans, we are starting to turn the corner, although I am not saying that we are winning the battle—far from it. The fraud figures that we are now using are moving in the right direction.

Mr. Pickles: The Minister says that everything is above board and compliant with data protection legislation. Why does he think that Elizabeth France, the Data Protection Registrar, is so hot under the collar about the Government's proposals? She says:

"As I see them, I am unable to support the proposals in the form in which they are currently made."

Mr. Rooker: I shall come to that in a moment because it relates to the Bill being considered in another place, and I want to end on that aspect. Our proposals are legal and above board. The Government do nothing illegal. We are operating within a framework, but I shall deal with the Bill separately.

We are investing money in fighting fraud. We have a large programme protection budget in the Department, but we must go further. We are setting up a national fraud intelligence unit to ensure that all available information is used strategically to steer the campaign against fraud and to ensure value for money, targeting areas of highest risk. We are tightening the management of fraud investigators to ensure that they concentrate on the most fruitful cases.

We plan to launch a national advertising campaign to get across the message and the culture that fraud is unacceptable. The hon. Gentleman may be aware of our pilot scheme in the north-west to try to change the culture. It is unacceptable to defraud the system, as the effect of doing so is fewer teachers, doctors, social workers and road repairs. Such fraud is not victimless. The victim is public expenditure for other worthy causes.

From April, we shall phase in a new incentive scheme to give more generous rewards to councils that act to prevent fraud from entering the system. It has been difficult to arrive at a system that does not allow fraud to enter the system, or people to turn a blind eye. We must strike the right balance between carrot and stick.

I do not want to open a new debate, but, as hon. Members know, I have always been a frank Minister who is willing to debate such issues. We are moving towards the payment of benefit by automated credit transfer, which will be introduced from 2003 to 2005. We are doing that for lots of reasons, one of which is to combat fraud. We estimate that we shall save at least £100 million through the changeover to electronic transfer of money. Perhaps hon. Members have, like me, had the opportunity to see some of the highly sophisticated forgeries of order books, which involve removing the rivets, reprinting the books and sending them out with various identities. One person with a dozen books might catch a train from London to a town 70 or 80 miles away and nip round the various post offices and streets in that town. That person would make the book look as if it were used, so that it was not queried. The operation is highly sophisticated but, when we begin using electronic transfer, we can begin to eat into that. We expect to save a considerable sum through automated credit transfer.

Mr. Andrew George: I should be grateful for clarification, as there is a genuine concern that automated credit transfer may result in more fraud. Because the system will depend on technology, people will have more chance fraudulently to impersonate others and to use the necessary technology to withdraw the benefits.

Mr. Rooker: I welcome you to the Chair, Mr. O'Brien.

The hon. Gentleman is right. The nature of the fraud will be different. We shall have to be careful. One third of all benefits is paid through ACT now, two thirds are not—that means millions of benefits. It is no good simply transferring them and then leaving the situation to look after itself. Organised crime will migrate from one system to the other—criminals will find other ways to commit fraud.

People may choose not to collect their benefit weekly at the post office, although that will still be an option. When we market ACT, more people's benefits will be paid directly into their bank or building society, so they will no longer see the postmaster. Local information will no longer be available to them. There will not be any personal contact with the claimants, as there is now, so we will have to build anti-fraud measures into our ACT strategy, for the time when all those millions of benefits are paid differently. That is an integral part of the ACT planning.

Some 140,000 claims will have to be transferred from paper-based to electronic systems every week until the work is complete. Fraudulent claims have already been made through the ACT system. I will refer later to an item in the Social Security Fraud Bill, now in the other place, which needs to be reinforced for ACT. I want to keep the issue of the Bill as a separate, discrete part of my speech.

Extra investment is being made available for information technology and front-line staff. In the 2000 spending review, the Chancellor of the Exchequer showed vast largesse by investing in massive capital expenditure programmes, the like of which could not have been dreamt of by the previous Administration. He was able to do that because of his successful management of the economy.

Mr. Pickles: It says here.

Mr. Rooker: No, it does not say that here—those who draft my speeches would never write that. That is me speaking as a loyal hack of the Labour party.

As everyone knows, there is a substantial capital expenditure programme. Some £2 billion is being spent on modernising the Department of Social Security with the introduction of good computer and IT systems, better trained front-line staff and better directed staff. That is crucial.

We are beginning by installing new computer programmes for the Child Support Agency and we are planning improvements to pension credit arrangements. It is important that our systems can talk to each other. In the past, each new benefit had its own computer system. No one thought of linking them up.

Mr. Andrew George: Yesterday, the Government announced—although, in my view, it was not a new announcement—their intention, should they win the general election, to address the economic tests by which the United Kingdom would enter the euro. In preparing its computer system and software, has the Department itself taken into account a potential change to the euro?

Mr. Rooker: It takes a Liberal Democrat to ask that question. I had not expected a debate about the euro. However, I did ask—in another context—about that matter. The Department has a preparatory programme, as do all other Departments and the public sector as a whole.

Our economy is highly integrated and diversified. Adopting the euro would change many of the systems. I shall be careful about what I say about the timing, but all new systems are ordered and designed to cope with the euro. When I raised the matter some months ago, I thought in my simplistic way that all it meant was changing the factor—tweaking the system, with so many euros to the pound. However, that cannot be done with the systems that we inherited. The computer systems that are on order for the new programme—the Child Support Agency and the issuers of the pension credit will be among the first to receive them—will be euro-friendly, whether or not we join the euro. Obviously, we make payments abroad; we pay retirement pensions to 1 million people abroad.

Our systems will be adequate. If and when the decision is made, after the economic tests have been looked at, after the Cabinet has agreed, after Parliament has agreed and after the British people have voted in a referendum, which the Conservative Party would deny them, the transfer programme will be massive. The answer to the question is yes. We will be okay—if and when we join the euro—with our new systems. The old systems would be a nightmare—paper-based systems and computer systems that are not geared up.

Mr. Pickles: That is a helpful answer. I accept the explanation about the British people, the fullness of time and so on.

The right hon. Gentleman has confirmed that there is a programme, which will take care of future events. Will he confirm that the programme will begin the process of dealing with historic records, which is important, particularly in the management of fraud? Has the Department calculated the cost of rounding up or rounding down figures when converting into euros? Has a decision been made on the exchange rate? If so, can he give us an indication of the cost?

Mr. Rooker: The answer is probably no. I have no figure for that. We are here to discuss fraud. There is a lot of fraud in the European Union, which is one reason why the Court of Auditors' reports must be taken seriously, but the question of how the Department would cope with the transfer to the euro if we were to join is a legitimate one. The systems that we inherited would cause great difficulties. They would mean paper-based administration. However, Government and the public sector are planning for the possibility that we join the euro. People ordering new IT systems naturally take account of that and build in specifications. I cannot give a cost off the top of my head for the new systems because we do not know how soon the systems will be available, the date of entry into the euro, or how much will be left of the old systems. It is not possible to give a figure because the issue is a moving target.

Mr. Pickles: I asked a second question about rounding up or rounding down.

Mr. Rooker: I have not got a clue. If I receive some advice, I will pass it on to the hon. Gentleman, but at the moment I have no idea.

It could be argued that the payment of benefits weekly to the penny is ludicrous and antiquated. That is one reason why the pension credit will be a different benefit from the minimum income guarantee, which is calculated on a weekly basis. The consultation paper explains that the system will be simplified in that respect, so that it is not a weekly assessed benefit. It is a fair question, but I do not have the answer.

I am not about to make a Second Reading speech for the Social Security Fraud Bill, but it is worth putting a few points on the record. The Bill is narrow in scope and builds on reforms already made. It gives us new tough powers to tackle benefit fraud and delivers the key recommendations in Lord Grabiner's report, which was published almost a year ago.

We want to tackle the problem of persistent offenders. Some people think that we are fair game, but the new system of "two strikes and you're out" will act as a deterrent. No one can say that thousands of people will be affected—only hundreds will be—but the Bill will give the DSS and local authorities the power to catch persistent offenders. They will be able to check the bank accounts of those who are suspected of fraud.

The Bill contains four main provisions. I shall deal with them in summary form. The "two strikes and you're out" regime will act as a deterrent for the hard core of offenders. The Bill introduces new powers to reduce or to withdraw benefit for up to 13 weeks from people convicted twice of benefit fraud. That penalty will not affect those on whom sanctions have been imposed; it will affect only those who have been convicted by the court. Some benefits can be subjected to sanctions and some not, irrespective of which benefit was the subject of the fraud.

DSS and local authority staff will have the right to check information from public and private sector organisations, banks and utilities about suspected cheats. The caveat is that local authorities will not have the legal authority to check online unless they have specific permission from the Secretary of State. They will not have carte blanche rights. They will usually have to write to the banks, but they will not have on-line access without the approval of the Secretary of State.

[Mr. Rooker]

We shall have rules to ensure that. We are not prepared to give 409 local authorities on line access willy-nilly. We do not have that much confidence.

Mr. Pickles: We may be few, but we are a merry band. The British Bankers Association is anxious that Customs and Excise and the Inland Revenue are sending only junior officers to banks. Has a decision been taken on what level of officer in the DSS and in the banks should deal with such inquiries?

Mr. Rooker: Broadly speaking, the answer is yes. Senior officers will be named. I cannot guarantee that; we have yet to make commitments in the other place. However, the Committee stage has finished and discussions are going on. We shall probably know within a fortnight. We shall have 13 area directorates, but only a small number of senior officers, working in tight teams, will have contact with the banks and financial institutions. Junior fraud investigators from local benefit agency offices, however well trained they are, will not have the wherewithal to go to the banks. I do not know what level of bank officer will be involved; we have not reached agreement on that yet. However, like us, those officials do not want people whom they do not know making inquiries about other cases, or other aspects of the same case. It is important that we have co-ordination.

I make two points clear about access to data. Under no circumstances will there be fishing expeditions. We have already agreed that one aspect of the Bill could be construed as fishing, but I have defended it on the basis of reasonable grounds—the kind of person involved, the nature of his or her employment, and whether fraud has already been committed. There was a reason for the approach, but it is too wide and could look like fishing. We need something specific to a person, using reasonable grounds, and subject to the caveats under the Bill. There will be no fishing expeditions.

A fairly tight, well-defined code of practice will be used. That will be published. I have given a commitment that it will be available in draft before Report in the House of Lords. As I speak, the draft is being discussed with industry.

Mr. Pickles: It is a narrow point, but I thought that what the right hon. Gentleman just said slightly contradicted what he said earlier about the type of employment concerned. To make matters clear, will he confirm that simply having been in a particular type of employment or having had a history of such employment would not be a reason for such action?

Mr. Rooker: I think that the hon. Gentleman is referring to what I said about the building industry. That was about an exercise to match existing Government information—tax records against social security records. That happens inside government. The Inland Revenue has its own powers, but the exercise in question has nothing to do with going to banks or credit agencies. It is an internal data-matching exercise on information held by public sector bodies. The provisions of the Bill that I have been discussing are different. They entail approaching the private sector for information already in its possession, which might be useful in certain well-defined circumstances.

As to the point about ACT, I cannot remember whether clause 1 or 2 of the Bill introduces a more effective criminal offence of not declaring a change of circumstances. A clarification of the law is already needed with respect to ACT. The lawyers are always trying to make things more precise, so that they are judge-proof or slick-barrister-proof, if I can put it that way without denigrating the legal profession. We do not want to leave loopholes. The signing of an order book every week or month—that mere signature—is a declaration by benefit claimants that nothing in their circumstances has changed. With ACT, that does not happen. That gap is dealt with in the Bill.

Another key area is the targeting of employers who collude in benefit fraud by introducing the option of a swift civil penalty as an alternative to court. We do not necessarily want to prosecute; we want to get fraud out of the system. I am interested in the outcome. The process is important, but the outcome is what counts. If we achieve our aim by civil penalties and sanctions, so be it.

Other provisions in the Bill allow the DSS to exchange information with social security administrations in other countries. I imagine that we shall debate that at length. The arrangement will be made only with countries with the same type of judicial system and data protection as ours. The countries concerned will need legislation to protect the relevant data. At present, we have only a memorandum with the Irish Republic. It has not yet passed into legislation, but it will in due course. What is proposed will also improve the flow of information between the DSS and local authorities, particularly with respect to housing benefit.

The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar asked about the Data Protection Commissioner. We are in discussions with her to explain our position and to eliminate any misunderstandings that may have arisen. We are confident that the Bill does not contravene the Data Protection Act 1998 or the Human Rights Act 1998. Ministers, with Parliament's approval, are in charge of policy. We expect our policy and its operational aspects to conform to rules under the Data Protection Act 1998, but it is our job to decide what the policy is. I make that absolutely clear. We are certain that any misunderstandings between ourselves and the Data Protection Commissioner can be settled by the time they reach the House. We hope that the Bill will help to reduce fraud by prevention and earlier detection, by use of powers to acquire data from the private sector and by deterrence through the powers to remove benefit from those persistent offenders. It is about rights and responsibilities; there is no doubt about that.

The Bill is necessary in the United Kingdom. People might wonder what happens in Europe. One reason why we need the Bill is that, unlike other countries in Europe, we have no identity system in this country. The Bill is part of the price that we pay for not having such a system. Some member states of the European Union have pretty rigid identity systems that track people throughout their lives, through their education, tax, work and social security. Hon. Members should not run

away with the idea that the national insurance number is an identity number; it is not. Therefore, we need those extra powers to restore public confidence in the social security system, deter the hard core of cheats and get at the organised fraudsters. I have not said anything about those in detail today, but we are undertaking big operations against organised fraudsters. People tell us lies and they do not tell us about changes in their circumstances. We need to have more information where we have doubts about the information that we are being given. We have a range of measures that reaffirms our determination to crack down on benefit fraud.

Our estimate of confirmed fraud is £2 billion, based on a proper statistical measurement of fraud. It is not a guess. I have explained how the £4 billion and the £7 billion were made up from past figures.

The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar asked about the breakdown of fraud and customer error and I have a few figures to share with him. The latest Government statistical survey report covering the period April 1999 to March 2000 gave figures for the most vulnerable benefits: income support fraud, 4.4 per cent., customer error, 1.2 per cent.; jobseeker's allowance fraud, 8.2 per cent., customer error, 0.7 per cent. One can see that it is overwhelmingly on the fraud side, which is one of the reasons why we take the matter so seriously.

3.22 pm

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): This has been an interesting debate, almost like a Standing Committee in view of the Minister's courtesy. It is perhaps as well that this important issue is the subject of an Adjournment debate, as the Chamber is well and truly balanced at the moment and the Government's majority deeply threatened.

One cannot be unaware of the impending general election, when the right hon. Gentleman will retire. We will all be genuinely sorry to see him go. He has been a distinguished Member of the House. Some of my colleagues thought that this might be an appropriate occasion to pay tribute to him, but I do not believe that it is. I am confident that we shall be debating fraud on many more occasions. After all, this is the 49th announcement about fraud and I am certain that when the right hon. Gentleman delivers his golden address for the 50th announcement, we shall have something even more spectacular. We have had plenty of opportunities to debate the Scampion proposals. The hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) is in his place and, to my certain knowledge, we have debated them at least three times in this Chamber. There seems to be almost a mathematical law that, as the number of prosecutions goes down, the number of announcements goes up—or perhaps it is the other way round.

The right hon. Gentleman gave the confirmed cost of frauds as £2 billion, but that is £5 billion less than the figure that others have given. I hope that that does not mean that he has given up the chase and is saying that we can measure only so much. The Public Accounts Committee has a larger sum in mind. When we last debated the issue, only a few months ago, the figure of £7 billion went unchallenged. That works out at about £300 a household. The Committee has talked about the much larger figure of £500 a household. As the right hon. Gentleman said, we know that two out of five income support claims were once paid without sufficient evidence, but now that figure is one in six.

Not much was said about organised fraud, but the right hon. Gentleman has been kind enough to organise various seminars on it in the past. It was quite something to see the ingenuity of some of the forged instruments, which would have fooled me. I cannot help but be struck by the irony of the fact that post offices go through an enormous rigmarole to check for a dodgy £5 or £10 note, yet are blasé about handing over a giro for several hundred pounds. If the same scrutiny were given to giros as to dodgy fivers, we could eliminate a lot of fraud.

The right hon. Gentleman gave us a brief outline of the Bill that we hope to see in the dog days of this Parliament. I have a terrible suspicion that, if the Prime Minister in his wisdom decides to go to the public in April or May, we shall not have a proper Committee stage on the matter. Many problems must be dealt with. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will not take it the wrong way, but listening to him and reading the *Hansard* reports of another place, there has been plenty of controversy about the question of access to people's banking or credit agency records, as though we could have a system with perfect matches.

I know that the right hon. Gentleman has been to various offices, as have I, and he is right to say that the IT facilities available are rubbish. I suspect that they were cutting edge when they were delivered. However, as we all know from our own shopping for IT, the moment that something becomes obsolete and rubbish is the moment that we undo the packing case.

Marrying information is important, but much of the information gathered by the Department is handwritten and stored in filing cabinets, especially in small local authorities. I have seen it stored in shoe boxes in one place. I do not know what happened when the boxes became full; perhaps they sent the staff out to buy some more plimsolls. We are a long way from matching all that information in a great data transfer. Better mainframe computers for the Department will not be the solution, because we are so reliant on the kind of information that is put in.

The right hon. Gentleman was right to mock local authorities for the nature of the questions asked. Some authorities do a marvellous job of cracking down on fraud. I was especially interested to read the recent report about the London borough of Wandsworth, which detailed great improvements there. Unfortunately for the British people, not all councils are as diligent as Wandsworth. Part of the problem is that local authorities have treated housing benefit forms as an opportunity to ask a couple of gratuitous questions so that they can check on various aspects, which would be good for the records. I suspect that in my time in a local authority I, too, was guilty of doing that, because it is a wonderful opportunity to get to know a little bit about the population that one serves.

However, organised criminals, and even an informal network of people who are less than honest, know which authorities have weak records and they will target them. Such authorities will feel the full effects of fraud because they are least likely to do something about it. It will take quite some time to deal with clapped-out equipment and bits of paper left hanging around. A single form would

[Mr. Eric Pickles]

be a great stride forward. Such a form would require only one type of training and would soon become familiar. An experienced housing benefit officer, when moving from one authority to another, takes along certain baggage and knowledge, which are not necessarily of any help in a new employment. A single form would help to build up expertise.

It would help if we could ensure that housing benefit staff met regularly to identify the latest frauds and discuss ways of ensuring that mistakes are kept to a minimum. I have little doubt that that would go some considerable way towards reducing housing benefit fraud, because dealing with housing benefit fraud, and I suspect with all fraud, is the practitioner's problem. It is a difficult nuts-and-bolts operation that means getting the right people into the right jobs and dealing with procedures that are clearly understandable.

Mr. Rooker: That was one of the recommendations of John Scampion's report. We are setting up regional boards so that we can have discussions with local authorities on a regional basis. That means that they can discuss certain elements with each other, on a regional basis, which was the key aspect identified by the hon. Gentleman. There is a real problem in getting practitioners to talk with each other. I hope that those regional boards will help to facilitate that.

Mr. Pickles: I find that reassuring.

This has been a good-tempered debate. There are differences between us in our general approach but not in the substance of the difficult matters with which we are dealing. I was struck by the lack of discussion on such matters among local authorities, and even between adjoining local authorities. I had an opportunity to visit one of my local authorities, Epping Forest, where the manager dealing with housing benefit fraud decided, off his own bat, to get volunteers to deliver benefit forms by hand instead of posting them, as a result of which an enormous saving was made, because, during the next few weeks, it was discovered that some people had perhaps forgotten to inform the local authority that their personal circumstances had changed. Such an initiative can make an enormous difference. I know that the adjoining authorities have not taken similar action. If there were regular meetings, the problems would be understood, and that would make a considerable difference.

We know the extent of the problem of social security fraud from the Public Accounts Committee. In response to a question of mine, the Minister produced some figures a few moments ago. I regret asking that question because I have the same figures, particularly with regard to the jobseeker's allowance where errors amounted to 2.8 per cent., resulting in an overpayment. Even that small proportion amounts to £21 million. We should be able to tighten up and ensure that people are properly assessed. The Minister was quite right to say that the overwhelming majority of people who apply for various benefits do so honestly and decently, and if they are overpaid will come to the counter and say so.

However, the system should not trap people. One of the most common problems dealt with in my constituency surgery is that of changing circumstances. People are suddenly tight for money. They do not tell the Benefits Agency, but they plan to do so next week. Another week slips by, the bills are still coming in, and still they do not tell the agency. In the third week, the shortage of money is no longer at the forefront of people's minds. They are more worried that a month has passed without them declaring that they are in trouble.

In my part of the world, dealing with the Benefits Agency problems involves getting people to the agency office and persuading them to accept that they have made a mistake and will have to make recompense, but that they can wipe the slate clean quickly. We need to find a way to make the effect of changing circumstances much clearer in people's minds. That could be done through some of the recommendations in the Social Security Fraud Bill.

We have many reservations with regard to the practicality of the provisions, and particularly with regard to the role of the Data Protection Commissioner. We are not as sanguine as the Minister on the question of how judge-proof the legislation is. Nor do we always assume that what the Government are doing is legal and above board. I hope that the Minister does not find that offensive, because, particularly with the human rights legislation, the ultimate decision will rest with a judge and not with the Chamber.

The Public Accounts Committee stated that the amount of fraud in income support and child benefit alone exceeded £1.7 billion a year. The Minister says that we should disregard those figures. They are practically the same as those that he gave us for total fraud. The Benefits Agency reported to the Public Accounts Committee, about a year ago, that there was only a limited prospect of improvement within the medium term. The report also mentioned the problem that the hon. Member for St. Ives legitimately and correctly raised, that of devising an over-complicated system. I refer particularly to paragraph 37 of the third report of the PAC, which states:

"A key cause of error and fraud in income support is the complexity of the regulations, and the Benefits Agency told us that without simplification, 10 per cent of payments would always be wrong. This is poor administration, which creates confusion and uncertainty for those most in need, extra costs, and high levels of debt, much of which is not collectable."

Any measure on fraud that the Government seek to introduce should come hand in glove with a simplification of the regulations, or should include powers to simplify them. That goes to the heart of the debate. The PAC states that more than 50 per cent. of child benefit fraud occurs on claims for children over 16 who are falsely described as being in full-time education. Losses on the encashment of order books and girocheques have risen to £1.9 million per year. The Committee was right to say that it was disturbed by the agency's admission that it expects the level to continue to rise during the next few years.

All of those things can be dealt with at practitioner level; they are practical problems that we need to overcome. The simpler a system is, the easier it will be to administer. I am not as sanguine as the hon. Member for St. Ives that automatic credit transfer will cut out much fraud; the fraudsters will simply move on to another system of fraud. We know how money can be moved around the world at the blink of an eye. Automatic credit transfer may result in years of delay between payment and identification.

We are pleased that the Minister is starting to implement Scampion's proposals, but he referred to fraud and the fact that national insurance numbers are not as secure as most people think. What are the Government doing to address that? At a seminar, the Minister made great play of the falsification of records and "The Day of the Jackal" fraud, which involves people going round graveyards looking for somebody who would have been roughly the same age as them who died in infancy and taking their identity. Lord Grabiner, who considered the informal economy recently, also raised that point. What are the Government doing to tighten up that regime, so that people cannot obtain someone else's birth certificate as the prime source of their identity? When the Minister winds up what I suspect will be a short debate, it would be interesting to know what is being done about that.

The official Opposition are minded to be as helpful to the Government as possible, especially with regard to the crackdown on fraud. We want greater attention to be paid to the simplification of regulations, which the Government have considerably complicated. We accept what the Minister says about civil action, but there is a case for magistrates to be able to try people who are evading their income tax responsibilities. The Inland Revenue traditionally takes on only the more serious cases. Magistrates courts should be able to deal with benefit fraud under a fast-track procedure. The Minister did not say much about the "two strikes and you're out" initiative to ensure that people who have abused the system and have two convictions cannot continue claiming benefit at a full rate without facing the consequences of attempting to defraud their fellow citizens, which we support.

We look forward to the golden 50th announcement of initiatives. We also look forward to the Government taking some action.

3.44 pm

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I appreciate that this is an important issue, and, as the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) said, we are grateful to have the opportunity fully to explore the Minister's opening remarks. No one is in favour of social security fraud. We are all against it and it is the role of Opposition Members to harry the Government to encourage them to do more, and to make the Minister feel uncomfortable at times on the understanding that our shared objective is to tackle such a serious problem.

As the Minister explained, we are talking about a potential cost to the taxpayer of £7 billion. To put the problem in proportion, that sum is more than the annual budget of some small Departments, and such a serious amount requires a serious response. I echo the remarks of the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar that, simply because not many hon. Members are in the Chamber today, we cannot conclude that that is necessarily the result of an inverse relationship with the weight of paper in the form of press releases from the Department announcing new ways in which the Government are tackling the issue. Social security fraud is a high priority, and it must be dealt with.

I am sure that all hon. Members have an unblemished view of the matter, but my first connection with the issue was when one of my brothers—I come from a large family—was working on social security fraud for the Department. He had always thought that fraud was undertaken by desperate people who took desperate measures at desperate times. However, it was a culture shock for him when he found that the majority of fraud was carried out by organised syndicated gangs of people who know how the system works and who are milking it, sometimes by sophisticated means.

The Minister rightly pointed out that the first efforts to deal with fraud were made by the previous Conservative Government after they had been in office for 16 years. It was only in 1995 that they began to measure the extent of it. The present Government must be congratulated on the measures that they have announced and rolled out, and the House must debate what has been achieved as a result of their initiatives. The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar said that paragraph 37 of the Public Accounts Committee report refers to the fact that the total amount of fraud is unacceptable, but that much of it is the result of complex regulations. The Government have referred in the past to designing fraud out of the system, which was what the Minister was referring to when he spoke about the necessary changes to ACT. It is also important to simplify the system. The Minister must accept that some of the measures introduced by the Government add to its complexity. I have expressed my concerns about ACT, and we must watch that matter closely.

Another issue is the introduction of the working families tax credit. Originally, child benefit was the only method of supporting families effectively, but we now have working families tax credit and the children's tax credit. The more complexity is introduced into the system, the more opportunities are offered to people—who we must accept are often talented and able—to interface with those levels of complexity and find methods of defrauding the system. The Minister must identify and address those.

The Public Accounts Committee also identified the inadequacies of the Benefits Agency's computer system. The Minister, in his characteristically open way, described his concerns about the computer system in the past. As the Government introduce their proposals for ACT, there will be concern about whether they will address the weaknesses of the computer system. The Public Accounts Committee report states:

"we are sceptical about the timing and success of these essential improvements in the Agency's support systems."

Questions must be asked about what progress the Government have made since that report was published. The report was debated in this Chamber in February 2000, and many announcements have been made, but what progress has been made so far? Some of the targets are ambitious—a 25 per cent. reduction in fraud and error in income support and jobseeker's allowance by March 2004, a 50 per cent. reduction by March 2006, and a 10 per cent. reduction by March 2002. More than 40 anti-fraud initiatives have been announced. The Minister referred to the verification framework, which a district in my constituency, Penwith, was one of the first to introduce. The first phase of that resulted in tremendous complexity, and many difficulties for landlords and tenants. I hope that when the Minister winds up he will tell us how the verification framework is progressing in other districts.

[Mr. Andrew George]

Broader questions need to be asked about data protection issues. As I understood it, the verification framework was, among other things, a way of ensuring that the interface between district councils and benefits agencies was not stymied by data protection. The Minister described it, interestingly, as computers kissing themselves—information being exchanged between departments to verify that claimants were who they said they were, and to receive confirmation from the Benefits Agency that claimants were on the benefits that they said they were on. We strongly support the proposal to reward councils financially for detecting and prosecuting fraudsters and to put in place measures for active prevention. The publicity offensive that the Minister mentioned will take matters forward.

I am sure that, like me, many hon. Members have often had constituents come to them to say that they believe that a neighbour or someone in their community is fraudulently claiming benefit. I always tell them to give me the details or to go direct to the Benefits Agency and give that information confidentially. It is important for them and for the country as a whole that such information is passed on. I urge the Government to do more to encourage people to give information when they are genuinely concerned that benefit is being fraudulently claimed.

We are pleased that the "do not redirect" scheme to which the Minister referred is netting some success, and we are glad that he considers that that is resulting in some benefit. It will be interesting to see how the greater powers for fraud inspectors under the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000 and the benefit fraud hotline develop.

The Minister described the importance of the Social Security Fraud Bill. Does he believe that the Bill is likely to make progress and be enacted before the general election is called? The DSS website refers to 59 press releases relating to the crackdown on fraud since January 2000, announcing a variety of measures. For all the press releases, what is being achieved? Are we on course to meet the targets by March 2002?

The latest figures reveal that the total overpayment of income support and jobseeker's allowance due to fraud and error from April 1999 to March 2000 was £1.32 billion or 8.4 per cent. of the benefit paid. The DSS press release at the time stated that that represented a statistically significant reduction, but closer inspection reveals that fraud and customer error in income support alone increased by 0.6 per cent. last year from 13 per cent.—that is, 499,000 people in 1998-99—to 13.6 per cent or 513,000 people in 1999-2000. Statistically, that may not be a significant increase, but it is hardly progress by leaps and bounds towards the 10 per cent. reduction target for next year.

The recent Audit Commission report published in late January this year contains unwelcome evidence for the Minister. Housing benefit accounted for 92 per cent. of all detected fraud in 1999-2000. The average value of each detected fraud increased from £464 to £644. However, it states:

"There has been a significant decrease in the number of housing benefit frauds detected, from 204,000 cases in 1998/9 to 144,000 cases in 1999/2000".

which is a 30 per cent. reduction, but the cost of each case is going up. According to the Audit Commission report, 22 per cent. of councils have still not appointed inspectors, 23 per cent. have not adopted a "do not redirect" scheme, 29 per cent. do not operate a scheme that imposes penalties as an alternative to prosecution, and 56 per cent. have not introduced a verification framework.

When my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) asked the Minister in November last year on how many occasions he had used his powers to require local authorities to take specific measures to tackle housing benefit fraud, the Minister replied that, to date, one such direction had been made to Northampton borough council in August 2000. Is the measure being used? In the light of his jaundiced view of the action taken by local authority does the Minister envisage using the measure again?

The Public Accounts Committee referred to problems with the computer system. In January 2000, the Benefits Agency paid 112,000 recipients their benefit twice, which cost £10.5 million. That was due to a failure in the new computer system that pays benefits directly to banks.

The Minister will, quite rightly, tell me that it is too early to measure success, but it would be helpful to have some encouragement about when in the coming months he believes that the kind of difficulties that I have identified will be dealt with. Local authorities should be encouraged to share best practice methods to reduce benefit fraud. The Minister has referred to the use of a carrot and stick approach. Doling out financial penalties to local authorities that are not acting effectively, and giving financial inducements to those that are, is to be recommended. As a result of anti-fraud initiatives, some local authorities are achieving savings in benefit expenditure of between 5 and 6 per cent. We should be working towards that level of saving in every local authority, and a nationwide scheme would work towards that goal. We would certainly like to see an immediate review of the best-performing local authorities to establish which methods work. Perhaps lessons have already been learned from the Balham case, to which the Minister referred earlier, that could be transmitted to other authorities.

In conclusion, this has been a welcome opportunity to debate a serious and important subject. The Minister and his Department have announced a number of initiatives, all of which are welcome. Liberal Democrats are not yet convinced that ACT is the best way to deal with benefit fraud, not least because of its impact on the post office network. Modernising the computer system and broadening the extent to which that system is able to connect information across the Department and between Departments is welcome.

On a personal note, although I appreciate the need for data protection legislation to be strongly adhered to, and despite Liberal Democrats being strong on the issue of civil liberties, the Minister is right to identify the issue of ensuring a strong and robust method of interfacing information in order properly to combat fraud, and that needs to be pursued.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (in the Chair): I advise hon. Members that a Division is expected at 4.15 pm, so if we want to come back, we can.

4.5 pm

Mr. Rooker: That is helpful information, Mr. O'Brien. With the leave of the Chamber, I hope to do justice to the debate in the time available before the Division.

Data protection, a matter raised by the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles), is taken seriously. There have been changes in data protection legislation, some of which have only recently become apparent to me—not in my ministerial role, but as they affect Members of Parliament in their case work. When one thinks about it, the idea that our constituents have access to our files is tricky. Changes are afoot that will home in on Members of Parliament: legislation that they have passed will personally affect them as holders of data on their constituents. I suspect some education is due on that matter. So that there is no misunderstanding, the Balham project is nothing to do with local authorities; it is located in the Balham DSS area and relates wholly to the issuing of national insurance numbers and a more intensive type of interview.

The Audit Commission report was mentioned by both the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar and the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George). The Audit Commission, as an auditor, operates with a different set of rules and legal authority from us. Its job is to fish, as it were, and it does; it data matches on computer in a big way, because the role of the auditor is different from that of the DSS. It data matches on a huge scale, cross-checking the hub of housing benefit, along with student loans, other benefits and urban renewal grants, which would not usually be paid to someone on housing benefit. Under legislation, it rightly has powers as an auditor to do a good deal of work and it is highly successful; its reports are most useful.

The hon. Member for St. Ives also asked about progress on the Social Security Fraud Bill. I cannot say; it will come out of the other place at some time. It is not generally known that the Government have only 29 per cent. of the vote in the House of Lords, so we have to negotiate. The Bill will come out of the other House when the combined forces of darkness, as it were—the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats—decide to let us have it. I mention that as an aside, because there is a good deal of consensus on the Bill; I do not want to cause a problem as we finish. We have bent over backwards to ensure that we can robustly defend what is in the Bill at the Dispatch Box and in the court of public opinion outside, with the emphasis on the code of practice and the fact that there will be no fishing expeditions. We will try to get the Bill through the legislative system as soon as possible.

Mr. Pickles: I am willing to accept that the principal problem in the other place relates to data protection, and both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have framed constructive suggestions to overcome that. There is no question of the Bill being held back.

Mr. Rooker: Yes. On Report, the Government and others will table brief amendments to the Bill to meet some of those genuine concerns. I make no bones about that; there will be consensus and agreement in the other place. I should not say so, but I will, because it is part of my style, but had we known that the Bill would start in the other place, it would have contained three or four other items, which we dismissed a while ago and took out. The Bill was a lot longer, but we said, "No, we're not doing that, that, that or that. We don't want a big debate; we don't want to go down that route." We could have left material in the Bill, we could have given the House of Lords a clause, but there was nothing left to give. Some narrow issues have rightly been raised and we are honing the legislation, which will be ready on Report.

I assure hon. Members that allegations that reach the Department, locally or nationally, are checked. However, Ministers cannot report back to a third party. We have set up the fraud hotline—0800 854 440—which is used frequently, and, from time to time, we publish parliamentary answers on its use. Allegations are checked, but people who make allegations may not always understand why they cannot have a report back about the result. That situation is unfortunate, but necessary.

Data matching through the Audit Commission is done on a large scale, and we also do some fishing ourselves. Order books with signatures go into store, and, as hon. Members know, some of them end up in Northern Ireland. Checks sometimes turn up orders that were lost between the printer and the customer or beneficiary. We find the orders cashed with a signature and post office stamp, and if, after checking, we discover something, people are prosecuted.

There are several activities dealing with organised crime to which I have not referred in detail. There are big operations for which high-tech surveillance is used, and although our own staff are not exactly put at risk, they are up against gangs of organised criminals. The matter is taken seriously.

"The Day of the Jackal" scam is a bone of contention, as it should be. The misuse of birth certificates to create a false identity has become a problem. It is stated on the certificate that the certificate is not proof of identity, and that has always been the case, but people ignore that, and continue to issue driving licences, bank accounts and other documents on the basis of such a certificate. However, the DSS does not rely on birth certificates for paying benefits or issuing national insurance numbers. We have our own investigatory powers and a system for checking individuals. Needless to say, problems with people who create false identities continue to occur. Sometimes that is done by using a dead person's identity and sometimes that of a living person. Criminals sometimes piggyback on the back of an existing individual, which is upsetting to the individual concerned.

We have begun to establish a computer base in the Office for National Statistics, which links infant births and deaths. That database will be available to the Passport Agency and the Department to combat fraud. It will go back only a few years, because we have to get it up and running, but it will provide a snapshot of births and deaths since a certain date. With the help of our colleagues in the Treasury, work is under way. People do not usually know that the Treasury is responsible for issuing birth certificates, but the Office for National Statistics is part of that Department.

[Mr. Rooker]

Complexity of regulations has been an issue. Complexity of forms is one thing, complexity of regulations is another, but the main point is that people who claim benefit fraudulently and tell lies generally know that they are doing something wrong. They cannot say, "I didn't understand the rules." Most people do not understand them. They simply want to sign and date the forms and receive their benefit. They do not need to know the mechanics of the rules; they merely need to tell us the truth. If they do that, there is no problem.

A change of circumstances need not present difficulties, as people can phone, write, or visit offices. I should draw hon. Members' attention to a press release, which I have in draft form. It states:

"Social Security Secretary Alistair Darling today welcomed a report by the National Audit Office which for the first time acknowledged the significant progress being made to tackle benefit fraud."

That press release is dated 8 February 2001. I rest my case.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at thirteen minutes past Four o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 29 January 2001

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Social Housing

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make a statement on the resources available to meet the Government's target of bringing social housing up to a decent standard by 2010, and of achieving one third of the target by 2004; [146836]

(2) what estimate he has made of the cost of bringing social housing up to a decent standard. [146834]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The backlog of renovation and improvement work required to the council housing stock in England is estimated to be around £19 billion. This backlog will be addressed through a combination of increased investment in council stock and, where it has the support of tenants, transfer to a Registered Social Landlord (RSL). Last year's Spending Review announced significant increases in resources for the next three years provided to local authorities for housing investment, including £460 million for arms length companies and £760 million for council housing PFI schemes, and funds to support transfer of up to 600,000 dwellings over the period. The total resources for 2003–04 will be more than £2.9 billion, three times the amount provided in 1997–98.

Local Education Authorities

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the *(a)* SSA allocation and *(b)* actual expenditure of each local education authority in England for the (i) primary and (ii) secondary education sectors in the last year for which figures are available. [147167]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information requested is given in the table.

1999–2000 figures

£ million

Authority	*Primary education SSA*	*Secondary education SSA*	*Primary education net current expenditure*[1]	*Secondary education net current expenditure*[1]
Greater London				
City of London	0.541	0.030	1.136	0.060
Camden	29.653	35.789	33.388	39.805
Greenwich	54.220	50.127	59.039	49.348
Hackney	48.693	35.981	58.176	29.869
Hammersmith and Fulham	24.814	23.972	28.544	26.939
Islington	42.498	33.265	44.153	29.795
Kensington and Chelsea	17.420	12.748	23.895	15.230
Lambeth	54.036	35.279	56.661	27.354
Lewisham	58.465	46.899	60.869	47.333
Southwark	60.335	42.789	70.798	39.807
Tower Hamlets	60.756	60.509	59.653	57.263
Wandsworth	41.746	35.173	46.555	33.770
Westminster	24.575	26.647	31.379	28.184
Barking and Dagenham	36.966	33.039	43.487	34.382
Barnet	53.310	56.035	62.778	64.201
Bexley	44.252	45.219	47.265	44.512
Brent	51.488	45.779	57.369	47.397
Bromley	50.555	51.840	55.235	55.317
Croydon	65.682	54.694	69.505	44.995
Ealing	57.007	48.225	63.574	46.546
Enfield	56.843	57.463	62.830	62.827
Haringey	50.404	39.085	60.580	42.019
Harrow	37.163	33.970	49.160	26.834
Havering	42.624	43.876	45.232	46.040
Hillingdon	46.587	42.839	49.481	48.807
Hounslow	40.749	45.261	49.036	48.123
Kingston upon Thames	21.900	21.287	24.754	23.688
Merton	29.370	26.775	34.843	22.674
Newham	70.180	64.557	74.578	57.675
Redbridge	46.053	48.383	49.740	54.268
Richmond upon Thames	23.252	23.131	27.409	22.292
Sutton	30.673	34.605	33.955	36.861
Waltham Forest	50.480	44.416	58.748	41.937
Metropolitan Districts				
Bolton	51.086	50.659	60.280	50.519
Bury	31.763	32.439	34.917	32.065
Manchester	94.322	82.912	96.170	73.862
Oldham	45.806	48.934	54.254	47.063
Rochdale	43.238	40.147	45.338	39.346

1999–2000 figures

£ million

Authority	*Primary education SSA*	*Secondary education SSA*	*Primary education net current expenditure*[1]	*Secondary education net current expenditure*[1]
Salford	44.224	39.474	49.203	36.270
Stockport	47.839	45.977	49.652	41.628
Tameside	42.162	43.128	45.269	38.594
Trafford	36.386	41.187	40.185	43.628
Wigan	54.123	57.564	59.913	58.390
Knowsley	39.098	34.618	41.851	31.482
Liverpool	97.745	100.029	97.614	96.701
St. Helens	32.704	32.925	38.305	35.142
Sefton	50.693	53.695	57.928	57.553
Wirral	60.714	63.088	63.039	67.447
Barnsley	39.928	37.963	46.180	36.266
Doncaster	57.398	57.893	64.600	61.913
Rotherham	47.741	52.703	53.675	53.069
Sheffield	86.122	81.997	98.051	80.260
Gateshead	33.636	32.080	35.881	30.739
Newcastle upon Tyne	45.217	45.435	46.560	53.463
North Tyneside	33.298	32.274	34.724	40.391
South Tyneside	29.262	31.409	31.005	27.501
Sunderland	55.379	57.615	59.000	52.199
Birmingham	218.656	206.467	266.896	202.792
Coventry	57.620	55.793	68.730	62.151
Dudley	52.507	54.655	64.479	53.997
Sandwell	59.512	58.126	72.753	56.438
Solihull	37.489	40.118	45.020	39.714
Walsall	50.256	54.500	57.024	58.721
Wolverhampton	48.244	44.321	54.928	48.924
Bradford	99.492	93.943	96.661	114.127
Calderdale	36.975	37.079	42.853	39.958
Kirklees	72.029	69.387	81.544	72.730
Leeds	124.590	120.714	150.100	128.017
Wakefield	56.511	57.182	64.028	53.957
Shire Counties				
Cornwall	81.285	84.335	86.643	86.189
Cumbria	81.260	84.398	97.629	95.202
Gloucestershire	89.208	91.656	91.784	100.033
Hertfordshire	183.980	186.640	189.146	208.858
Lincolnshire	103.346	109.077	109.030	119.232
Norfolk	120.664	123.768	141.606	126.369
Northamptonshire	110.605	105.949	109.669	127.445
Northumberland	51.326	55.515	43.291	78.389
Oxfordshire	94.498	90.027	91.284	99.603
Somerset	78.454	75.464	76.484	79.293
Suffolk	107.072	104.740	103.904	131.504
Surrey	155.874	148.714	166.329	149.937
Warwickshire	80.391	80.816	89.278	87.802
West Sussex	115.935	115.298	127.777	116.644
North Yorkshire	89.617	96.293	104.575	105.261
Bedfordshire	67.540	66.269	54.612	95.194
Buckinghamshire	79.231	80.276	81.557	87.213
Derbyshire	118.175	116.069	128.229	120.693
Dorset	56.094	58.653	49.662	73.442
Durham	86.097	88.105	99.041	89.034
East Sussex	76.252	74.095	79.355	76.005
Hampshire	202.419	194.709	222.476	181.314
Leicestershire	95.562	96.748	103.706	117.852
Staffordshire	135.600	140.157	138.095	155.788
Wiltshire	68.885	66.067	76.281	72.464
Cambridgeshire	85.221	79.399	95.894	81.635
Cheshire	108.986	114.218	126.390	127.484
Devon	105.727	103.297	117.219	107.115
Essex	223.301	227.552	233.236	243.366
Kent	229.133	231.163	245.655	248.405
Lancashire	203.387	206.280	218.166	203.139
Nottinghamshire	123.602	130.741	143.180	148.463
Shropshire	43.759	45.589	46.845	48.195
Worcestershire	84.099	84.456	79.951	99.265

1999–2000 figures

£ million

Authority	*Primary education SSA*	*Secondary education SSA*	*Primary education net current expenditure*[1]	*Secondary education net current expenditure*[1]
All Purpose Authorities				
Isle of Wight Council	21.519	23.182	16.862	32.188
Bath and North East Somerset	23.698	28.151	29.027	35.182
Bristol	63.028	49.779	75.976	55.756
South Gloucestershire	40.980	37.802	48.612	44.968
North Somerset	27.562	29.341	31.517	34.763
Hartlepool	18.307	19.136	19.139	18.082
Middlesbrough	31.239	28.999	31.799	25.904
Redcar and Cleveland	28.288	31.157	32.018	29.852
Stockton-on-Tees	34.993	37.274	42.152	34.111
East Riding of Yorkshire	49.668	53.772	52.102	59.126
Kingston upon Hull	52.922	48.006	58.852	45.439
North East Lincolnshire	32.244	32.705	36.813	31.443
North Lincolnshire	27.619	30.501	31.807	30.936
York	26.653	25.430	33.447	25.903
Luton	40.285	37.287	42.203	36.618
Milton Keynes	40.009	38.216	45.245	35.180
Derby	42.922	40.634	47.621	40.366
Bournemouth	21.963	24.865	22.811	26.457
Poole	20.189	20.934	22.830	21.435
Darlington	17.870	17.148	18.505	15.894
Brighton and Hove	36.437	33.380	37.510	33.440
Portsmouth	33.270	30.220	37.332	29.735
Southampton	38.501	37.852	42.977	34.685
Leicester	58.974	56.462	63.018	57.970
Rutland	4.857	5.767	6.043	6.691
Stoke-on-Trent	45.034	42.712	55.301	38.778
Swindon	33.376	31.248	35.332	30.859
Bracknell Forest	19.054	16.175	18.768	17.252
West Berkshire	24.278	27.302	24.885	31.453
Reading	22.453	17.031	24.181	18.803
Slough	25.189	23.494	24.551	23.537
Windsor and Maidenhead	19.603	23.185	19.119	28.808
Wokingham	24.767	24.865	24.754	28.113
Peterborough	31.478	33.273	35.720	37.421
Halton	25.559	25.820	—	—
Warrington	33.231	34.203	37.717	36.019
Plymouth	42.494	45.983	45.099	50.475
Torbay	19.437	22.121	20.979	23.443
Southend-on-Sea	27.890	29.139	30.482	31.778
Thurrock	28.383	25.708	32.041	23.504
Herefordshire	28.035	26.359	29.185	27.179
Medway	49.999	48.957	54.461	54.832
Blackburn with Darwen	31.548	30.272	33.449	28.242
Blackpool	24.571	21.554	26.692	20.495
Nottingham	56.307	43.947	62.719	43.877
Telford and the Wrekin	29.543	29.319	32.344	30.623
Isles of Scilly	0.534	0.580	0.616	0.653

[1] The primary and secondary education expenditure data in columns three and four is net current expenditure as reported by local authorities on the revenue outturn (RO) forms for 1999–2000. It is defined as expenditure on employees and running expenses less income from sales, fees and charges, internal recharges, and other non-grant income but it is gross of expenditure funded by specific grants. It is therefore not comparable with SSA sub-blocks which do not include specific grants. It is not possible to derive expenditure that is comparable with education SSA sub-blocks.

[2] The net current expenditure data is not available for Halton, as we are still awaiting the receipt of their completed returns.

Local Authorities

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* those local authorities that are debt free, *(b)* the 10 least indebted authorities and *(c)* the 10 most indebted authorities. [147168]

Ms Beverley Hughes: An authority is defined as debt free if:

(i) it has no money outstanding by way of long-term borrowing, from the Public Works Loan Board, the Bank of England and institutions authorised by it, and building societies;

(ii) at the end of the previous financial year, it has a nil or negative credit ceiling.

It should be noted that authorities with high levels of debt are generally those which have undertaken capital investment and that longer-term borrowing to finance capital expenditure is regulated by Government through the issue of

credit approvals. Total debt for all English local authorities will be available at http://www.local.detr.gov.uk/finance/stats/ in February 2001.

On the latest information available the following English local authorities are debt free:

Barking and Dagenham
Basingstoke and Deane
Bath and North East Somerset
Bedford
Bracknell Forest UA
Breckland
Broadland
Bromley
Bromsgrove
Chiltern
Christchurch
City of London
Congleton
Corby
Cotswold
Crawley
Dacorum
Dartford
Daventry
Dorset
East Cambridgeshire
East Devon
East Dorset
Eden
Elmsbridge
Epsom and Ewell
Forest Heath
Hambleton
Hart
Havant
Hertsmere
Huntingdonshire
Kennet
Lichfield
Malvern Hills
Mid Bedfordshire
Mid Sussex
Mole Valley
North Dorset
North Wiltshire
Penwith
Reigate and Banstead
Runnymede
Rushmoor
Ryedale
Salisbury
Sevenoaks
South Buckinghamshire
South Cambridgeshire
South Northamptonshire
South Oxfordshire
South Ribble
South Shropshire
Spelthorne
St. Edmundsbury
Straford-on-Avon
Suffolk Coastal
Surrey Heath
Swale
Tandridge
Tewkesbury
Tonbridge and Malling
Tunbridge Wells
Uttlesford
Vale of White Horse
Watford
Welwyn Hatfield
West Berkshire UA
West Sussex
Windsor and Maidenhead UA
Wychavon
Wyre

Source:
Capital Payments and Receipts Return 2000–01.

This list is updated regularly and can be found at http://www.local.detr.gov.uk/finance/stats/debtfree.htm

(a) The 10 English local authorities, that have the least gross debt and are not debt free, at 31 March 2000, are:

Poole UA
Staffordshire Moorlands
Tynedale
North Cornwall
South Holland
Waverley
Epping Forest
Maldon
Oadby and Wigston
Teignbridge.

(b) The 10 English local authorities, that have the most gross debt, at 31 March 2000, are:

Manchester
Birmingham
Lambeth
Southwark
Hackney
Islington
Sheffield
Liverpool
Leeds
Tower Hamlets

Source:
Borrowing and Lending Survey—March 2000.

Single Regeneration Budget

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make a statement on the Single Regeneration Budget 7; [147128]

(2) if he will list the funding available for SRB activities over and above existing SRB commitments for 2001–02 for each RDA area in England; [147130]

(3) if his Department's grant to RDAs for 2001–02 will fund new unannounced Single Regeneration Budget activities over and above existing SRB commitments for that year. [147129]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer of 7 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 129–30W, where detailed arrangements for new Single Regeneration Budget activities in the transitional year 2001–02 are currently being considered. An announcement will be made very shortly. We issued RDAs with guidance for corporate plans and indicative allocations for 2001–02 just before Christmas. RDAs are now preparing their proposals for submission by 23 February 2001 and I look forward to receiving these for consideration.

Driving Licences

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what statutory powers the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Authority has to withdraw from a driver the provisions of a certificate of passing a test of competence to drive, issued under the Road Traffic Act 1972; [147200]

(2) what powers he uses in deciding that the validity of a certificate of passing a test of competence to drive has expired through the passage of time. [147201]

Mr. Hill: The Secretary of State, acting through the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, has power to revoke a test pass certificate only under the provisions of paragraphs 5 and 8 of schedule 1 to the Road Traffic (New Drivers) Act 1995. However, by virtue of section 89(1)(a) of the Road Traffic Act 1988 (which replaced the 1972 Act) a test pass certificate may be produced as evidence of entitlement to the granting of a full driving licence only if the test was passed during a period of two years ending with the date of the licence application.

A driving test must be passed in two parts, the theory test being taken first. By virtue of regulation 47(6) of The Motor Vehicles (Driving Licences) Regulations 1999—made under the 1988 Act—a theory test pass certificate has a validity period of two years.

Motorway Service Areas

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to make an announcement on the outstanding planning appeals in respect of motorway service areas on the M25 south-western quadrant, following the decision of Mr. Justice Richards. [147416]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department issued statements to the interested parties on 24 January inviting representations on the matter the Secretary of State wishes to consider further in redetermining the outstanding proposals on the M25 western quadrant and the M4.

Waste Disposal

Mr. Temple-Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when Worcestershire county council submitted a draft plan for dealing with its waste; and what assessment he has made of it. [147505]

Mr. Raynsford: Worcestershire county council placed a draft Structure Plan on deposit in January 2000, part of which contains strategic policies on waste management. The Secretary of State made three objections on waste matters. He was concerned about matters of self-sufficiency at County and Regional levels and the need to take account of the draft national waste strategy and the recent guidance on waste planning in Planning Policy Guidance Note 10, particularly the application of the principal of Best Practicable Environmental Option (BPEO). He also wished for clarification on when it is necessary to demonstrate need in relation to landfill sites. The county council's proposed modifications to its plan are expected shortly. In addition, the county council has a duty under Section 38 (2) of the Planning and Compensation Act 1992 to prepare a Waste Local Plan, which will set out detailed policies for the management of waste.

Mr. Temple-Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has issued to waste disposal authorities and planning authorities considering applications connected with waste disposal to ensure that waste is generally disposed of as near to its place of production as possible; and if he will make a statement. [147507]

Mr. Meacher: Waste Strategy 2000 and Planning Policy Guidance Note 10 set out the principles on which the Government wish to see waste management decisions based. One of these principles is that waste should generally be disposed of as near as possible to its place of production, because transporting waste itself has an environmental impact.

Countryside and Rights of Way Act

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what commencement orders he intends to make under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. [147701]

Mr. Meacher: Section 103(2) of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 provides for a number of the Act's provisions to come into force on 30 January 2001. I have now made the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (Commencement No. 1) Order 2001 (SI 2001 No. 114(C.4)) which brings additional provisions into force in England on 30 January 2001 and certain other provisions on 1 April 2001. Further commencement orders will be made in due course.

I will shortly be issuing a circular to local authorities explaining the implications for local authorities of the provisions that have now commenced. I will place copies of both the order and the circular in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce regulations under section 68 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000; and if he will make a statement. [147809]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Officials are currently drafting the regulations. Although we have a good overview of the provisions to be included, considerable work is needed on the detail. Provided no unforeseen

problems arise, we expect to publish draft regulations for public consultation in March, and lay these before Parliament for approval in May.

Pinewoods

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has held with English Nature regarding the felling of pinewoods around Formby in Lancashire. [147482]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* My Department has not specifically discussed with English Nature its proposals to fell pinewoods on a nature reserve near pinewood. This is a nature reserve management issue for English Nature to take forward.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will assess the report of the Centre for Marine and Coastal Studies, regarding the felling of pinewoods around Formby in Lancashire; and if he will issue new guidance to English Nature regarding protection of the red squirrel habitats. [147483]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* The Centre for Marine and Coastal Studies, on behalf on English Nature, has carried out a review and consultation considering the management of the Ainsdale Sand Dunes National Nature Reserve. The review, commissioned by English Nature to inform its work managing the nature reserve, considered the overall objective of dune restoration in areas of existing frontal woodland to be appropriate and makes detailed recommendations.

It is not a report to Government and therefore I have no plans to assess the report. It is for English Nature, on the Government's behalf, to take this issue forward.

There are no plans at present for new guidance on protection of red squirrel habitats.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received regarding the felling of pinewoods in red squirrel habitats around Formby in Lancashire. [147481]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* I understand English Nature is reviewing the management of the Ainsdale Sand Dunes National Nature Reserve and has commissioned a consultation exercise on its proposals to fell pinewoods within a nature reserve. However, my Department has not been able to trace any representations made specifically on this issue.

English Nature

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has held with English Nature regarding increasing transparency and public accountability of its activities. [147484]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* I met the Chairman and Chief Executive of English Nature in July and October last year for discussions including the Corporate Plan, plans for greater openness, increasing availability of information, more e-communication and e-commerce.

Red Squirrels

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on the level of the red squirrel population in the UK. [147487]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* My Department occasionally receives representations from members of the public about red squirrel populations. This species is afforded full protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Temple Sowerby Bypass

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to start work on the Temple Sowerby bypass on the A66. [147545]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Tim Matthews, to write to the right hon. Member.

Letter from John Kerman to Mr. David Maclean, dated 29 January 2001:

The Transport Minister, Keith Hill, has asked Tim Matthews, Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, to reply to your recent question about the timing of the start of works for the A66 Temple Sowerby Bypass. I am replying in the absence of Tim Matthews.

The Temple Sowerby Bypass is listed in the Government's strategic review of the roads programme 'A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England' as a scheme to be progressed through its preparatory stages so that, if after full appraisal and subject to the views of the regional planning conference and statutory procedure, it is eventually endorsed it can be taken forward without delay. We are currently carrying out detailed survey work for the scheme with a view to starting the necessary statutory procedures around Spring 2002. Beyond then, progress will be subject to the satisfactory completion of those statutory procedures, including, if necessary, a Public Inquiry.

I am enclosing a leaflet which was circulated locally last year describing the background and current position on the bypass.

If you would like any further information, please contact the Highways Agency's Project Manager for the scheme, John Yellowley, at Sunley Tower, Piccadilly Plaza, Manchester, M1 4BE (telephone 0161 930 5685).

A66

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when he expects to complete the safety study of the A66; [147540]

(2) what the expected total cost is of the safety study of the A66. [147541]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Tim Matthews, to write to the right hon. Member.

Letter from Tim Matthews to Mr. David Maclean, dated 29 January 2001:

A66 Safety Study

The Transport Minister, Keith Hill, has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions on when the A66 Safety Study is expected to be completed and what is the expected total cost.

The draft final report of the study is to be submitted to the Study Steering Group in Spring, following which it will be presented to the Regional Planning bodies for their consideration.

In respect of the cost this is an ongoing commission and the final amount will be dependent on the amount of work ordered. Based on actual payments made to date plus outstanding work currently envisaged, it is anticipated that the final outturn will be in the region of £200,000.

Should you require any further information, please contact the Team Leader for this project, Francis Carlyle at our Leeds office, on 0113 283 5358.

Endangered Species

Sir Paul Beresford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people have been prosecuted in respect of a failure to uphold international obligations on the protection of endangered species in each of the last five years. [147712]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Endangered species are protected under the provisions of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). This convention is implemented throughout the European Union under EC regulations and enforced in the UK under the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 and the Control of Trade in Endangered Species (Enforcement) Regulations 1997 (COTES).

There is no central record of prosecutions or convictions for offences under the COTES regulations. However the number of prosecutions we are aware of in each of the last five years is as follows:

Year	*Number*
1996	6
1997	5
1998	3
1999	6
2000	8

I have been advised by HM Customs and Excise that the number of prosecutions in respect of endangered species under the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 in each of the last five years is as follows:

Year	*Number*
1996	1
1997	0
1998	0
1999	0
2000	1

Sir Paul Beresford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what obligations the United Kingdom has under international treaties to police the protection of endangered species. [147713]

Mr. Meacher: The United Kingdom, as a Party to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, is required under Article VIII of the convention to take appropriate measures to enforce the provisions of the convention and to prohibit trade in specimens in violation of those provisions. Council Regulation (EC) No 338/97 sets out the requirements on member states to implement the convention. The Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 and the Control of Trade in Endangered Species (Enforcement) Regulations 1997 (Statutory Instrument 1997 No. 1372) provide the means for enforcement in the United Kingdom.

Wildlife Crime Unit

Sir Paul Beresford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the achievements and future of the Wildlife Crime Unit of the Metropolitan police. [147714]

Mr. Meacher: I have been impressed by the achievements of the Metropolitan police in the fight against wildlife crime. They have investigated a number of significant cases, including the recent successful prosecution of a north London taxidermist for illegally trading in large numbers of endangered species. The Metropolitan police have also worked with London's Chinese community in "Operation Charm"—an ongoing initiative to raise awareness of, the consequences for conservation of the use of endangered species derivatives in traditional medicines.

How they structure and manage their responsibilities for enforcing wildlife legislation in future is, as now, entirely a matter for the Commissioner to decide.

Biocidal Products Directive

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the extent to which toilet soaps will be included within the terms of reference of the regulations relating to the Biocidal Products Directive. [146307]

Mr. Meacher: Generally, toilet soaps are controlled under the Cosmetic Products (Safety) Regulations 1996. However, some manufacturers make specific biocidal claims on their soap products.

The forthcoming Biocidal Product Regulations will exclude cosmetic products from scope. Cosmetics are defined as products which "exclusively or mainly" perform certain functions among which is cleaning the skin. Where a cosmetic product has a minor use as a biocide, it will be excluded from the forthcoming Biocidal Products Regulations.

The Environment Directorate of the European Commission (DG Env) has produced a discussion paper revisiting the interface between the Biocidal Products and Cosmetic Products Directives, and suggesting a different view from the current UK position. If DG Env's position gains wide support among member states it could ultimately lead to the need to amend the Biocidal Products Regulations.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for consultation with representatives of soap and detergent manufacturers on the forthcoming regulations relating to the Biocidal Products Directive. [146308]

Mr. Meacher: The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has led for the Government on implementing the Biocidal Products Directive in Great Britain. A full public consultation on implementing Regulations was carried out in the second half of 1999. During the last five years HSE officials have regularly met with trade associations representing the biocides industry, including the Soap and Detergent Industry Association. They and the Department

of Trade and Industry continue to have informal discussions with representatives of the soap and detergent manufacturers.

St. Leonard's Hospital, Dorset

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what date his Department received the planning appeal in respect of St. Leonard's hospital, Dorset, Ref. 3/99/0861; on what date he expects it to be determined; and if he will make a statement. [147819]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Planning appeal by the Secretary of State for Health was received on 1 June 2000. The Planning Inspectorate are currently waiting for the submission of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) from the appellant. As soon as the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has been received, arrangements will be made for a public inquiry. It is anticipated the appeal will be determined by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in the autumn.

Vehicle Excise Duty

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* telephone calls and *(b)* letters have been received by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency from keepers of vehicles inquiring about the implementation of the new excise duty rates for vehicles of 1500 cc and less announced in the pre-Budget report; and what the estimated cost to public funds is of responding to them. [147822]

Mr. Hill: In the period 9 November 2000–19 January 2001, DVLA staff handled *(a)* some 9,100 telephone and *(b)* some 600 written (including E-mail) inquiries concerning the 1500 cc proposal. In addition some 32,000 inquiries covering both the 1200 cc and 1500 cc schemes, were handled by the agency's automated VOICE system.

These volumes represent a small proportion of the inquiry work handled by the agency, and no additional resources were needed to deal with them.

Circulatory Disorders

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent research he has commissioned into the level of risk to *(a)* passengers and *(b)* aircrew of circulatory disorders associated with commercial flying; and if he will make a statement. [147193]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: When giving evidence to the recent House of Lords Inquiry into Air Travel and Health, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) announced that we would be launching a study to identify those health issues related to air travel which are of most concern. This study will take into consideration the level of risk to both passengers and aircrew and will assess the existing research into circulatory disorders and other health issues that might be associated with air travel. In the light of the findings of this study, which should be published early in the summer, we will commission substantive research to fill any gaps in our knowledge which are revealed.

I am also aware that the CAA has funded some research, on behalf of the Joint Aviation Authorities, to consider the relationship between aircraft seat dimensions and passenger sizes. This research should be published shortly.

Road Fatalities

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many children have been killed in road accidents in each year since 1992–93. [147501]

Mr. Hill: The following table shows the number of children killed in road accidents for all available years since 1992.

Accident year	*Number of deaths*
1992	310
1993	306
1994	299
1995	270
1996	270
1997	255
1998	206
1999	221

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the largest number of people killed in a single road accident was in each year since 1992–93. [147498]

Mr. Hill: The highest numbers of fatalities recorded in a single road accident each year are shown in the table. However, some accidents involving numerous vehicles may be reported by the police to DETR as a series of individual accidents. Hence, in some instances, the figures shown might represent an underestimate.

Fatalities: Great Britain 1992–99

	Number
1992	6
1993	13
1994	5
1995	13
1996	6
1997	5
1998	5
1999	5

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many public inquiries have been held into road accidents in each year since 1992–93. [147499]

Mr. Hill: None; other than regular Coroners' Inquiries (or Fatal Accident inquiries in Scotland).

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the average number of people killed at weekends in road accidents in each year since 1992–93. [147494]

Mr. Hill: The information requested is shown in the table.

Average weekend fatalities: Great Britain 1992–99

	Average number
1992	24
1993	20
1994	21
1995	22
1996	21
1997	22
1998	21
1999	20

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the largest number of people killed in road accidents was in a single day in each year since 1992–93. [147495]

Mr. Hill: The information requested is shown in the table:

Fatalities in a single day: Great Britain 1992–99

Year	*Fatalities*
1992	34
1993	23
1994	24
1995	22
1996	27
1997	22
1998	21
1999	23

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many child pedestrians have been killed in road accidents in each year since 1992–93. [147500]

Mr. Hill: The following table shows the number of child pedestrians killed in road accidents for all available years since 1992.

Accident year	*Number of deaths*
1992	180
1993	165
1994	160
1995	132
1996	131
1997	138
1998	103
1999	107

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the daily average number of people killed in road accidents in each year since 1992–93. [147493]

Mr. Hill: The following table shows the daily average number of people killed in road accidents for all available years since 1992.

Accident year	*Daily average number of deaths*
1992	12
1993	10
1994	10
1995	10
1996	10
1997	10
1998	9
1999	9

Rail Fatalities

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many children travelling by train have been killed in rail accidents in each year since 1992–93. [147496]

Mr. Hill: The information requested is shown in the table, which covers fatalities on the national railway and the London Underground. Two of the fatalities were on the national railway and one on the London Underground. "Children" is defined as passengers under the age of 16. Further data can be found in the Chief Inspector of Railways Annual Reports on Railway Safety, copies of which are available in both Libraries of the House.

Fatalities to children while travelling by train 1992–93 to 1999–2000

	Number
1992–93	0
1993–94	0
1994–95	0
1995–96	1
1996–97	0
1997–98	1
1998–99	1
1999–2000	0
Total	3

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many children have been killed on railway lines in each year since 1992–93. [147497]

Mr. Hill: The information requested is shown in the table. Further data including details of the prevention of child trespasser fatalities can be found in the Chief Inspector of Railways Annual Reports on Railway Safety. Copies are available in both Libraries of the House. "Children" is defined as persons under the age of 16.

Year	*Passenger*	*Level crossing user*	*Other member of the public*	*Trespasser/ Suicide*	*Total*
1992–93	0	0	0	5	5
1993–94	0	1	0	8	9
1994–95	0	1	0	6	7
1995–96	1	0	0	7	8
1996–97	0	0	0	10	10
1997–98	1	0	1	5	7
1998–99	1	0	0	7	8
1999–2000	0	0	0	6	6
Total	3	2	1	52	58

Local Government Finance

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on the local government finance settlement for 2001–02; and what conclusions he has reached. [147872]

Ms Armstrong: I have today laid before the House the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2001–02 and the Special Grant Report (No. 72). These reports establish the amounts of revenue support grant (RSG) and non-domestic rates (NDR) to be paid to local authorities

in 2001–02, and the basis of their distribution; and provide for Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) Reduction Grant and Central Support Protection Grant to be paid to certain authorities for 2001–02. Drafts of these reports were issued for consultation on 27 November 2000, and updated information on grant allocations was published on 15 December. The Department received a total of 315 written representations within the consultation deadlines from the Local Government Association and the Association of London Government, as well as from 224 local authorities, local authority groups and hon. Members.

Having considered the views of the local authority associations and others who have commented on my initial proposals, I have decided to confirm in virtually all respects my original proposals on grant distribution. The final figures published today may be slightly different from those issued on 15 December, generally reflecting more accurate data that have become available since then. I am therefore confirming my proposal to set a floor of 3.2 per cent., and a ceiling of 6.5 per cent., on general grant increases for authorities with responsibilities for education and social services. This will set limits on what would otherwise be a very wide range of grant increases, which would have made service planning very difficult for authorities. A 6.5 per cent. increase in general grant should be sufficient for most ceiling authorities, even after allowing for the fact that they have growing populations to cater for. And a 3.2 per cent. increase is reasonable for floor authorities, taking into account the fact that most of them face reductions in population. In each case, these increases will be accompanied by substantial increases in ring-fenced grant.

The ceiling will help support the cost of introducing the floor, but cannot cover the whole cost. I therefore also confirm my proposal to scale back marginally the grant increases of authorities who are neither at the ceiling or the floor.

Following careful consideration, I propose to make one exception to the ceiling rule. Quite exceptional circumstances apply to the Isles of Scilly Council. Their annual budget is extremely small, and they cannot avoid substantial capital expenditure to maintain essential waste disposal services. I shall therefore not limit their grant increase this year.

This year's settlement provides an increase of 7.2 per cent. in total Government grant and a 4.9 per cent. increase in general grant. This is on top of substantial increases each year since 1997–98: in the four years since then, Government grant to local government has gone up by 14 per cent. in real terms, compared with a 7 per cent. cut in the previous four years.

Given these good increases in grant, I would therefore expect the majority of local authorities to be setting a lower Council Tax increase this year than last year, when the increase was 6.1 per cent.

Local authorities also made representations on council tax benefit subsidy limitation. I have considered these carefully but decided to make no change to the scheme I proposed on 27 November, as amended on 15 December.

I shall be sending copies of these reports and the Plain English guide to all authorities, together with tables showing each authority's Standard Spending Assessment and its entitlement to RSG, NDR and special grant. I have placed copies of the reports in the Journal Office; and copies of the reports, tables, and the guide in the Vote Office and the Library.

However, the local government finance settlement should not be seen in isolation. The Government have identified four specific problem cases, and have responded to these.

We have looked again at the funding position of authorities in areas with the most serious deprivation problems. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced on 24 January a doubling of the provision for the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund in 2001–02, from £100 million to £200 million. These additional resources will help local authorities improve services in the most deprived neighbourhoods and therefore to improve the outcomes that are achieved in these areas.

In some areas where there have been serious floods this year, authorities faced the prospect of an increased levy from the Environment Agency to cover the costs that it had incurred in dealing with this year's floods. My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food announced on 26 January that he will provide an additional £11.6 million for the Agency to limit the burden falling on local authorities.

My right hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security is today announcing additional funding of £25 million to help local authorities facing significant increases in the cost of housing homeless households in temporary accommodation.

Finally, my right hon Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is today announcing a new £52 million grant to help some education authorities manage funding changes and deal with particular education spending pressures.

National Air Traffic Services

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 23 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 529–30W, how much the X factor will be tightened to reflect the proposed delay term; who will be responsible for its enforcement; if there will be discretion in the application of such tightening; and what risk assessment of the proposal has been made. [147770]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The formula by which the delay factor will be incorporated in the charge cap for National Air Traffic Services (NATS) will be set out in the licence for en route services which will be issued to NATS when the public/private partnership is established. A draft of that licence is in the Library of the House.

The delay term will reduce the maximum charges which NATS can derive from its UK en route business where the delays attributable to NATS in a preceding period exceed a defined standard. This standard will be based initially on the level of delays in 1999 and be specified to improve by 1 per cent. per annum thereafter. The detailed figures to be inserted in the formula will be calculated in such a way as to limit the penalty for delays to £2.0 million a year in respect of delays arising in 2001

and 2002 and to £5.7 million a year in respect of delays arising in the remainder of the first five-year regulatory period.

The delay term will be enforced by the Civil Aviation Authority as the economic regulator of NATS. Its enforcement will not be discretionary. The term has been set at a level designed to give NATS an incentive to reduce delays without in any way undermining the primacy of safety as a factor in NATS' operations.

Water Meters

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which water companies have informed their customers of their duty to install a free water meter; and what sanctions exist for those that have not. [147754]

Mr. Meacher: I understand that all companies include details of their free meter options within their Charges Schemes and associated leaflets which are available to customers. As part of its examination of companies' Charges Schemes for the year beginning 1 April 2001, Ofwat wrote to companies which it considered did not contain sufficient information. Most companies also promote the availability of the free meter option either on the bill or in accompanying literature.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what targets he has set for the take-up of free water meters. [147756]

Mr. Meacher: No targets have been set for the take-up of free water meters. The option is left to the free choice of customers.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from *(a)* water companies and *(b)* consumer groups about the provision of free water meters. [147755]

Mr. Meacher: Most water companies and several consumer groups made representations about various aspects of the free meter option in response to public consultation papers and at other times during our review of water charging in 1997 to 1998, during the passage of the Water Industry Act 1999 and during and since the introduction of regulations and guidance under the Act.

Cyclists

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to reduce the incidence of deaths and injuries to cyclists; and if he will make a statement. [147589]

Mr. Hill: The Government's Road Safety Strategy, "Tomorrow's Roads—Safer for Everyone", was launched by the Prime Minister on 1 March last year. It sets a new target to reduce the number of people killed and seriously injured on the roads by 40 per cent. by the year 2010, a separate target of 50 per cent. for children, and a 10 per cent. reduction in the slight casualty rate.

Special measures for cyclists are detailed in chapters two and nine of the strategy, but measures described elsewhere, particularly our driver training, will be to their benefit.

Copies of "Tomorrow's Roads—Safer for Everyone" are in the Library and the Vote Office.

Mobile Homes

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to introduce legislation to regulate the sale of park and mobile homes; and if he will make a statement. [147587]

Mr. Raynsford: Proposals to amend the provisions of the sale of park homes were included in the recommendations of the Park Homes Working Party. We have consulted on, and are considering, the Working Party's recommendations.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions who is responsible for enforcing the provisions of *(a)* the Mobile Homes Act 1983, *(b)* the Energy Act 1983 and *(c)* the Electricity Act 1947. [147588]

Mr. Raynsford: The information requested is as follows:

(a) Residents or site owners of park homes who are in dispute about the operation of the Mobile Homes Act 1983 can ask a court or arbitrator to settle the issue.

(b) and *(c)* The Electricity Act 1947, and Part I and Schedules 1–3 of the Energy Act 1983, were repealed by the Electricity Act 1989. Responsibility for enforcing Parts II and III of the Energy Act 1983 rests with the Department of Trade and Industry.

Rural White Paper

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what additional money for the redevelopment of rural towns he expects to provide following the publication of the Rural White Paper; and if he will make a statement. [147586]

Mr. Meacher: We will be increasing funding by £37 million over three years to create a £100 million regeneration programme with partnership funds for 100 towns in or near the most deprived rural areas. The £37 million is pump-priming money which will help towns themselves start the process of regeneration and fund some new projects.

National Forest Company

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to undertake a review of the National Forest Company. [147948]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: My Department has today launched a review of the National Forest Company. The Company was established as a non-departmental public body in April 1995 and, in line with Cabinet Office guidelines for all such bodies, must be reviewed at least every five years.

The review will consider all the organisational options for the Company, but will concentrate on the effectiveness of its delivery mechanisms.

The review will be led by DETR, but the Review Group will also include representatives from Forestry Commission and the Company itself. The Company's partners and other interested parties will be consulted.

The review is expected to be completed within four to five months.

Chester Street Insurance Holdings Ltd.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reports he has received from the Health and Safety Executive on the consequences of the collapse of Chester Street Insurance Holdings Ltd. for those suffering from asbestos-related diseases; and if he will make a statement. [147311]

Mr. Meacher: None. Neither the Health and Safety Executive nor the Health and Safety Commission has any direct responsibility in relation to the consequences mentioned. However, I feel sure that the Health and Safety Commission will share the Government's concern that such victims should receive what compensation they are due in a fair and speedy manner. I am in close touch with my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Threatened Species

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Government will implement fully the EU regulation 338/97 on certain threatened species. [147758]

Mr. Meacher: Council Regulation (EC) No. 338/97 sets out the requirements on member states to implement the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The United Kingdom already fully implements these Regulations, under which all commercial trade in critically endangered species is prohibited and trade in less endangered species is strictly regulated. In the United Kingdom the Regulations are enforced by means of the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 and the Control of Trade in Endangered Species (Enforcement) Regulations 1997 (S. I. No. 1372).

Cellular Telephone Network

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to promote an improvement in the cellular telephone network coverage of the mainline rail network. [147530]

Ms Hewitt: I have been asked to reply.

Government policy is to promote competition in the cellular radiocommunications market. The UK has licensed four cellular operators—BT Cellnet, Vodafone, One-2-One and Orange. The operators have coverage obligations in their licences to serve 90 per cent. of the UK population. Competitive pressure between the operators has resulted in coverage levels of 98–99 per cent. The Government have introduced further competition into the market by the award of a 3G licence to a new entrant—Hutchison 3G. This competition drives coverage and capacity improvements which will benefit travellers using the mainline rail network.

Oftel is participating to produce quality of service measurements for mobile phone networks to assist customers in making an informed choice. Details are available on the Oftel website at www.oftel.gov.uk.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if BNFL this year has disposed of any form of depleted uranium at the Clifton Marsh tip in Lancashire. [146709]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* BNFL is authorised by the Environment Agency (EA) to dispose of material at Clifton Marsh which has not more than 0.2 per cent. of the radioactivity of natural uranium by weight. Because small quantities of depleted uranium have been handled at BNFL's Springfields site, waste may also be contaminated with trace quantities of depleted uranium and this is allowed for in the disposal authorisation. EA have made clear that they have no reason to believe that BNFL has operated outside their authorisation regime.

Statutory Minimum Wage

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the number of people employed on term-time only contracts whose wages, annualised over the year, are below the level of the statutory minimum wage. [147151]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The National Minimum Wage Regulations include special provisions for workers who work only during term-time and whose pay is annualised over the year ensuring that the minimum wage is applied to such cases in a way that is both flexible and fair. I have made no estimate of the number of workers on term-time only contracts who are paid below the national minimum wage.

Sugar Regime

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had on the reform of the sugar regime; and if he will make a statement. [147185]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* The reform of the sugar regime is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. However, I have had frequent discussions with my right hon. Friend the Minister of State and her officials, about the interaction between the proposals from the European Commission for reform of the sugar regime and the proposal to provide duty and quota-free access for all LDC goods except arms. The Government regret the inconsistency between these two proposals and are pressing in Brussels for this issue to be addressed.

Manufacturing Industry

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the sectoral working parties his Department has in connection with different sections of current United Kingdom manufacturing industry. [146920]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My Department works in partnership with manufacturing sectors to help UK manufacturing compete effectively, and has developed strong working relationships with companies, trade associations, trade unions and other business organisations.

There is no precise definition of which of the partnerships concerned constitute a sectoral working party. However, formal groupings include the Shipbuilding Forum, the Textiles and Clothing Strategy Group, the Aerospace Committee and the Electronics Manufacturing Industry Forum.

Small Businesses

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to assist small businesses with management and ITC needs. [147406]

Ms Hewitt: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 24 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 631–32W.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

British Screen Finance

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what income has accrued to date to the Film Council from assets previously owned by British Screen Finance. [147708]

Mr. Chris Smith: Income accruing to the Film Council from assets previously owned by British Screen Finance, for the period 1 October 2000 to 31 December 2000, is £510,850. This includes income of £347,634 received from British Screen, the European Co-production Fund and British Screen Rights, and income of £163,216 received from the National Film Finance Corporation as repayment or profit and interest on film loans.

Television Licences

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many households in the Christchurch constituency have a free television licence under the scheme for pensioners aged over 75 years. [147826]

Janet Anderson: TV Licensing, which administers this concession for the BBC as Licensing Authority, is not able to provide geographical breakdowns of the number of free licences issued. However, estimates based on the 1991 Census indicate that there were approximately 11,100 people aged 75 or over in the Christchurch constituency.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many families in Thurrock will benefit from the introduction of free television licences for households with a member aged 75 years or over. [147086]

Janet Anderson: TV Licensing, which administers this concession for the BBC as Licensing Authority, is not able to provide geographical breakdowns of the number of free licences issued. However, estimates based on the 1991 Census indicate that there were approximately 4,800 people aged 75 or over in the Thurrock constituency.

Subtitling and Signing

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will publish his conclusions concerning his review of the statutory requirements for the provision of subtitling, signing and audio description services; and if he will make a statement. [148090]

Mr. Chris Smith: I am pleased to announce that our conclusions have been published today. We have carefully considered the detailed responses from the Independent Television Commission, broadcasters, groups representing viewers with sensory impairments and those providing subtitling, signing and audio description services. We have concluded that:

> the target for the provision of subtitling on digital terrestrial television (DTT) should be raised from 50 per cent. of programmes by the tenth anniversary of the start of the service to 80 per cent. by the tenth anniversary;
>
> the targets for sign language and audio description services should remain unchanged, but will be kept under regular review; and
>
> the requirements on DTT should be extended to digital cable and satellite services when legislation permits.

A copy of the report has been placed in the House Libraries and is also available on my Department's website at www.culture.gov.uk

Millennium Dome

Jean Corston: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his oral answer of 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 646, if he will make a statement on the involvement of Ministers in the sponsorship of the Faith Zone at the Millennium Dome by the Hinduja brothers. [147442]

Mr. Chris Smith *[pursuant to his reply, 24 January 2001, c. 590W]:* In my reply to the House on 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 646, I stated that my right hon. Friend's 'Private Secretary' had told Mr. Hinduja about his passport application. This was incorrectly recorded in the unbound *Official Report* as 'Parliamentary Private Secretary'. I have asked for the bound volume to be corrected to record what I actually said to the House. The error was unfortunately copied into my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, East (Jean Corston) on 24 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 590W; that answer should of course also have read 'Private Secretary' rather than 'Parliamentary Private Secretary'.

Underwater Cultural Heritage Convention

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which Ministers and officials will represent the UK at the next UNESCO meeting on the Draft Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage; and where, and on what date, the meeting will be held. [147710]

Mr. Battle: I have been asked to reply.

The next UNESCO meeting of governmental experts on the Draft Convention for Underwater Cultural Heritage will be held in Paris on 26 March to 6 April. The UK will be represented by officials from a number of Government Departments and will be led by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Commission of the Bishop's Conference

Mr. Bercow: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, when he last received representations from the Commission of the Bishop's Conferences of the European Community; and if he will make a statement. [147518]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Church Commissioners have received no such representations. It would fall to other organisations within the Church of England to do so. The Church Commissioners' primary responsibility is to manage their assets for the financial support of the Church of England's ministry.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Students

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he last met groups of students, sponsored by his Department for a week-long study of the European institutions; what the nature of that study was; what the role of his Department was; what funds were available to the groups; and if he will make a statement. [144570]

Mr. Wicks: There are no arrangements for the Department for Education and Employment to sponsor students to study European Institutions.

Teacher Numbers

Mrs. Roe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* supply and *(b)* relief teachers work in (i) primary and (ii) secondary schools; how many full-time teachers have left the profession during the last 12 months; and if he will list by country the numbers of teachers from overseas who are teaching in (A) primary and (B) secondary schools. [144862]

Ms Estelle Morris: At January 2000 there were 10,520 nursery and primary and 5,320 secondary school teachers in occasional service (short-term supply) in England.

It is estimated provisionally that 20,800 full-time teachers who were in the maintained schools sector in England in March 1998 were not in service at March 1999 (the latest leavers' figures available). A further 8,100 changed from full-time to part-time service within the maintained sector. These figures exclude teachers who left and re-entered, or entered and left, within the year. All figures are rounded to the nearest 100.

Information about teachers from overseas teaching in primary and secondary schools in England is not available.

The number of regular teachers in maintained schools in England increased by 6,900 between January 1998 and January 2000.

There was a growth of more than 2,000 in the number of people training to be teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many schools in the north-west had a shortage of teachers in 2000. [144910]

Ms Estelle Morris: There were 180 vacancies (0.3 per cent.) in the maintained schools sector in the north-west in January 2000.

The number of regular teachers in the maintained schools sector in England increased by 6,900 between January 1998 and January 2000.

There was a growth of more than 2,000 in the number of people training to be teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

Lone Parents

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many lone parents aged *(a)* under 18, *(b)* 18 to 34, *(c)* 35 to 50, and *(d)* over 50 years have joined the New Deal since 1998 (i) nationally, (ii) in the constituency of Leyton and Wanstead and (iii) the boroughs of (I) Waltham Forest and (II) Redbridge. [146978]

Ms Jowell: Latest figures to the end of October 2000 are summarised in the following table:

Number agreeing to join NDLP to end October 2000

	Great Britain	*Leyton and Wanstead constituency*
Aged		
Under 18	1,310	'—
18–34	112,170	177
35–50	56,400	79
Over 50	2,440	'—

' Numbers too small to preserve client anonymity.

Note:
Information at borough level is not available.

Schools Expenditure

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much revenue expenditure was available for schools in *(a)* Staffordshire and *(b)* Burton constituency for each year from 1990–91 to 2000–01. [146983]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information on education expenditure according to parliamentary constituency is not collected centrally. The following table shows the spending in Staffordshire for the years 1990–91 to 1998–99, the latest year for which this information is currently available. These figures are based on net institutional expenditure, and for 1997–98 and 1998–99 do not include expenditure in Stoke-on-Trent due to local government reorganisation in 1997.

	£ million
1990–91	257.4
1991–92	281.5
1992–93	295.3
1993–94	297.2
1994–95	302.8
1995–96	300.3
1996–97	312.8
1997–98	240.9
1998–99	255.2

The following table sets out the resources made available to Staffordshire local education authority for education of four to 19-year-olds since 1997–98, at 2000–01 prices. These figures are not directly comparable with net institutional expenditure set out above, but they do reflect real terms increases in funding per pupil over the last three years of £300.

£ per pupil

	Standard spending assessment	*Special and specific grants*	*SSA and special/ specific grants*
1997–98	2,350	110	2,460
1998–99	2,470	40	2,510
1999–2000	2,530	80	2,610
2000–01	2,580	170	2,750

Under this Government, funding per pupil has already increased by over £300 nationally in real terms, and it will increase by a further £150 per pupil for 2001–02. Under the last Government, funding per pupil fell by £60 in real terms between 1994–95 and 1997–98. There will be further increases in funding following the year 2000 spending review: a further £370 per pupil over the three-year period, taking the total increase to nearly £700 between 1997–98 and 2003–04.

Standard Spending Assessment

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the SSA per pupil was in *(a)* Staffordshire and *(b)* England for each year from 1990–91 to 2000–01. [146984]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is in the following tables. They show that in the period 1993–94 to 1996–97 SSA per pupil in Staffordshire fell by £80 in real terms. Since 1997–98, total funding per pupil has increased by £330 per pupil in real terms.

Standard spending assessment per pupil

£

	Staffordshire (before local government reorganisation) SSA	*England SSA*
Cash		
1990–91	1,680	1,820
1991–92	1,920	2,100
1992–93	2,040	2,240
1993–94	2,080	2,290
1994–95	2,100	2,300
1995–96	2,070	2,270
1996–97	2,170	2,350
Reûl Terms 2000–01 prices		
1990–91	2,240	2,440
1991–92	2,430	2,650
1992–93	2,490	2,730
1993–94	2,480	2,720
1994–95	2,460	2,700
1995–96	2,360	2,580
1996–97	2,400	2,590

Standard spending assessment and special and specific grants per pupil

£

	Staffordshire (after local government reorganisation)			*England*		
	SSA	*Grant*	*Total*	*SSA*	*Grant*	*Total*
Cash						
1997–98	2,200	30	2,230	2,410	30	2,440
1998–99	2,310	30	2,340	2,540	40	2,580
1999–2000	2,420	80	2,510	2,660	110	2,770
2000–01	2,530	190	2,720	2,780	240	3,020
Real terms 2000–01 prices						
1997–98	2,360	30	2,390	2,590	30	2,620
1998–99	2,410	40	2,450	2,650	40	2,690
1999–2000	2,470	90	2,560	2,710	120	2,830
2000–01	2,530	190	2,720	2,780	240	3,020

Teachers (Greater London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent survey he has undertaken on the problems of the retention of teachers working in schools in the Greater London area. [146942]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Teacher Training Agency contributed to the costs of a study by the University of North London on teacher supply and retention in London. This included surveying those leaving teaching posts in six London boroughs in 1998–99, including those moving into other teaching jobs.

The most commonly cited reasons for leaving were school management, hours worked, pupil behaviour, lack of opportunities for promotion and school resources. The Government are addressing each of these concerns. A new leadership college for headteachers and improved pay for heads have been introduced. We are tackling needless bureaucracy by reducing duplication of data requests and cutting by half the materials sent automatically to schools by the DfEE. The expansion of ICT is assisting in this regard too.

The Government are spending 10 times more than in 1996–97 on tackling poor behaviour and truancy. £174 million in 2001–02 will be used to continue a big expansion in places and standards in pupil referral units and further to improve provision of in-school learning support units. The introduction of performance-related pay will improve opportunities of promotion for tens of thousands of teachers.

Resources that were cut between 1994–97 have been significantly increased since. Schools have more resources for teachers, classroom assistants, computers, books and other priorities than in 1997. Funding per pupil will have increased by over £450 in real terms between 1997–98 and 2001–02. Capital resources this year at £2 billion are three times the level of 1996–97. The Government have made clear that there will be further increases as a result of the 2000 Spending Review in both revenue and capital.

Community Action Pilots

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the ILAs to be accessed through community action pilots as part of the regeneration strategy announced on 15 January will *(a)* be subject to the same criteria as other ILAs and *(b)* be of the same individual value; if the figure announced for take-up of 10,000 is in addition to existing credits; if this figure represents (i) an estimate and (ii) a target; and what arrangements he will put in place for evaluating pilot studies. [146057]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* Individual Learning Accounts accessed through community action pilots will be subject to the same criteria, and of the same value as, other Individual Learning Accounts. The 10,000 accounts announced will be part of the first one million Individual Learning Account holders to benefit from the £150 incentive. Already 560,000 people have opened Individual Learning Accounts.

We are making support costs available to the Community Groups to test out new ideas on reaching those who have not been engaged in learning rather than asking these groups to achieve set targets. The figure of 10,000 is therefore the estimate from the five participating community groups. Information from this pilot work will inform the full Individual Learning Accounts evaluation to be carried out from May 2001.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what directions overriding a note of dissent by an accounting officer have been given by the boards of non-departmental public bodies within his Department since May 1997. [147063]

Mr. Wills: There have been no such directions.

Schools Funding (Birmingham)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the total capital investment in Birmingham's schools in each year since 1992; and what is his forecast for spending in the next three years. [147059]

Jacqui Smith: Birmingham local education authority has received some £123.674 million of funding from central Government for capital investment in school buildings since 1996–97, as shown in the following Table A. Information prior to 1996–97 is not readily available. Table B shows the forecast investment over the next three years.

Nationally, investment in school buildings has tripled from £683 million a year in 1996–97 to over £2 billion in 2000–01. It will be £3.2 billion in 2003–04, including grant, credit approvals and Private Finance Initiative credits. There will be central Government investment of £7.8 billion in school buildings in total from 2001–02 to 2003–04.

Table A: Central Government capital investment in schools in Birmingham local education authority

£000

Funding stream	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–20*	*2000–01*
Basic Credit Approvals	5,384	2,811	3,611	2,229	2,730
Supplementary Credit Approvals	1,381	1,330	262	510	620
Grant to Voluntary Aided Schools	193	514	530	687	1,172
Schools Renewal Challenge Fund	446	—	—	—	—
New Deal for Schools	—	1,193	2,766	6,860	13,816
School Security Grant	—	263	327	357	355
Removal of Outside Toilets	—	—	80	—	—
Energy Efficiency Initiative	—	—	310	—	—
Key Stage 1 Class Size Initiative	—	—	—	298	733
National Grid for Learning Grant	—	—	4,000	4,000	4,000
PFI Credits	—	—	51,000	—	—
Assistance with Asset Management Plans	—	—	—	135	—
Seed Challenge Funding	—	—	—	—	593
Formula Capital for Schools	—	—	—	—	7,501
Renewal of School Laboratories	—	—	—	—	555
Nursery Provision	—	—	—	—	122
Total	7,404	6,111	62,886	15,076	32,197

Table B: Forecast investment in schools in Birmingham local education authority

£000

Funding stream	*2001–02*	*2002–03*	*2003–4*
Basic Credit Approvals	1,245	'—	'—
Grant to Voluntary Aided Schools	2,337	'—	'—
New Deal for Schools Devolved Formula	4,064	5,467	10,562
New Deal for Schools Condition Funding	2,901	8,073	10,257
Seed Challenge Funding	690	1,271	1,271
Renewal of School Laboratories	555	'—	'—
Schools Access Initiative	1,046	'—	'—
Total	12,838	14,811	22,090

' Future years' allocations shown are only those already announced as being attributable to Birmingham Local Education Authority.

In addition to the amounts shown, schools in Birmingham will also benefit from a share of other programmes where allocations have not yet been made. These include over £1 billion of credit approvals, mainly to provide new pupil places; £440 million of grant to governors of Voluntary Aided schools; £555 million grant through the NDS Modernisation fund and £170 million worth of funding under the Schools Access Initiative.

This funding will be augmented by capital receipts and other contributions from Local Education Authority sources, and the contribution which governors of Voluntary Aided schools make to their building work. In addition, more than £1 billion more is available nationally through Private Finance Initiative Credits for projects which will sign in 2002–03 and 2003–04.

Funding specifically ring fenced for the renewal of school laboratories is ending in 2001–02. Local Authorities will be able to prioritise their other increased funding for this purpose, if they wish.

Asset Management Plan

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will list *(a)* by authority and *(b)* as a total, the results of the asset management plan condition data surveys, breaking the data down according to each level of priority; [147254]

(2) if he will list by local authority the total value of the estimates that schools have made of the sums needed for the repairs of school buildings at the latest date for which figures are available. [147253]

Jacqui Smith: We are discussing with local education authorities the outcome of our validation of their asset management plans condition data and will publish data analysis later in the year.

Ministerial Hospitality

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the cost of hospitality given by Ministers was in his Department in each of the last three years. [147233]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* The cost of hospitality given by Ministers in pursuance of Departmental business for the last three full financial years is £8,587, £12,524 and £9,055 respectively.

Teachers' Pay

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has on pay for new teachers designed to fill vacancies. [147396]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* The new teachers' pay arrangements will be based on recommendations contained in a report of the independent School Teachers' Review Body to be published shortly. It is not therefore possible at this stage to say what changes will occur. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will conduct a statutory consultation before implementing any changes.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the average salary for *(a)* primary teachers, *(b)* secondary teachers, *(c)* graduates in all other sectors and *(d)* all employees in each year since 1974. [147301]

Ms Estelle Morris: Average salaries for full-time teachers, for those in employment with an NVQ level 4 or above (or equivalent) and for all full-time employees are contained in the following table:

	Full-time teachers[1]			
	Nursery and primary	*Secondary*	*Employees with NVQ level 4*[2]	*All employees*[3]
1974	2,120	2,390	[4]—	2,170
1975	3,220	3,550	[4]—	2,820
1976	3,790	4,110	[4]—	3,350
1977	4,180	4,460	[4]—	3,660
1978	4,410	4,680	[4]—	4,120
1979	4,900	5,180	[4]—	4,670
1980	5,920	6,220	[4]—	5,750
1981	7,430	7,790	[4]—	6,510
1982	8,090	8,460	[4]—	7,120
1983[5]	8,670	9,050	[4]—	7,730
1983[6]	—	—	—	7,690
1984	9,160	9,580	[4]—	8,310
1985	9,660	10,160	[4]—	8,920
1986	10,490	11,120	[4]—	9,630
1987	11,970	12,740	[4]—	10,370
1988	12,920	13,780	[4]—	11,390
1989	13,850	14,830	[4]—	12,500
1990	14,500	16,020	[4]—	13,720
1991	16,490	17,720	[4]—	14,850
1992	18,450	19,950	[4]—	15,880
1993	19,970	21,470	[4]—	16,520
1994	20,280	21,630	19,000	16,980
1995	20,860	22,200	[4]—	17,540
1996	21,370	22,730	[4]—	18,340
1997	22,080	23,480	[4]—	19,170
1998	22,700	24,130	[4]—	20,050
1999	[5]23,570	[5]25,060	[4]—	20,860
2000	[6]24,390	[6]25,930	24,500	21,530

[1] Average salary of full-time teachers in the maintained nursery, primary and secondary schools sector of England and Wales at 31 March of each year 1974 to 2000. Figures up to 1993 include sixth form colleges. Teacher salary figures for 1999 are provisional, those for March 2000 are estimated by applying the April 1999 pay award of 3.5 per cent. to 1999 data, consequently the March 2000 data does not include the effects of the post-threshold pay scale that will be paid from 1 September 2000.

Source:

DfEE Database of Teacher Records

[2] Average salary of those in full-time employment in GB with a qualification of NVQ level 4 or equivalent or above, in the spring of years shown. Includes teachers with such qualifications.

Source:

Labour Force Survey (as the New Earnings Survey does not include qualifications data)

[3] Average salary of those in full-time employment in GB whose pay for the survey period was not affected by absence, at April of each year. Figures from 1974 to first row for 1983 are compiled on the basis of men aged 21+ and women aged 18+. Figures for second 1983 row and onwards are compiled on the basis of employees on adult rates. Figures for 1997 and 1998 include late receipts.

Source:

New Earnings Survey

[4] Not available

[5] Provisional

[6] Estimated

The number of regular teachers in maintained schools in England increased by 6,900 between January 1998 and January 2000.

There was a growth of more than 2,000 in the number of people training to be teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

An estimated 250,000 classroom teachers in England are eligible for the post-threshold pay scale, of whom 81 per cent. have applied. Teachers moving to the new scale will receive a £2,000 pay increase from 1 September 2000 and can progress on the basis of their performance up to the scale maximum of over £30,000 excluding allowances.

Sure Start

Mr. Lammy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he plans to authorise a further round of local sure start programmes. [148039]

Yvette Cooper: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and I have today invited applications to set up a sure start programme in each of the following 66 districts in England:

Barking and Dagenham
Basildon
Bedford
Bexley
Birmingham
Blackpool
Bolton
Bradford
Brighton and Hove
Bristol
Calderdale
Carlisle
Carrick
Chester
Coventry
Dudley
Ealing
Easington
Exeter
Gateshead
Greenwich
Hackney
Islington
Kirklees
Leeds
Lewisham
Liverpool
Manchester
Newcastle upon Tyne
Newcastle under Lyme
Newham
North East Derbyshire
North East Lincolnshire
North Somerset
North Tyneside
Nottingham
Oldham
Plymouth
Preston
Redcar and Cleveland
Redditch
Rochdale
Sandwell
Sheffield
South Tyneside
Southampton
Southwark
St. Helens
Staffordshire Moorlands
Stockton-on-Tees
Sunderland
Swale
Tameside
Tamworth
Tower Hamlets
Trafford
Wakefield
Walsall
Waltham Forest
West Lindsey
West Somerset
Weymouth and Portland
Wigan
Wirral
Wyre
Wyre Forest.

We will be placing a copy of the guidance for this fourth wave of sure start applications in the Library.

These 66 applications are in addition to the 66 third wave programmes, currently submitting their plans, which should be up and running by the summer; and the 128 first and second wave programmes which are already delivering services to young children and their families in disadvantaged areas.

Education Funding

Dr. George Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on education funding in 2001–02. [148040]

Mr. Blunkett: I am today making an extra £52 million available to provide support to help some English local education authorities manage funding changes in 2001–02. I am making this extra funding available to deal with known pressures in advance of the longer term revision of the distribution of local authority finance. This funding is in addition to the resources provided through the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, and in addition to other Government funding to relieve other specific pressures on authorities.

This funding is on top of the significant increases that have already been announced for 2001–02—increases which mean £150 extra spending per pupil on average in real terms. The increase in funding per pupil is part of a real terms increase of £370 over three years bringing the total to almost £700 per pupil between 1997 and 2004. Total funding per pupil has already increased by over £300 in real terms since 1997. Between 1994–95 and 1997–98 funding per pupil fell by £60 in real terms.

The recent funding increases include: over £1 billion extra in Education Standard Spending Assessments—a 4.8 per cent. increase on 2000–01; a further £250 million in direct grants to schools—a typical primary school will get £20,000, and a typical secondary school £60,000 (up from £9,000 and £40,000 this year for heads to use as they see fit); and an increase of £600 million in the Standards Fund from £1.7 billion to £2.3 billion to support literacy and numeracy in primary and secondary schools, class sizes and tackling truancy.

The distribution of the extra £52 million will take account of authorities' Education Standard Spending Assessment increase, the extra pressure they face from the transfer of Adult Education funding, their allocation from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, and their need to spend on teacher recruitment and retention—particularly in London and the South East.

Each authority's share of the £52 million is set out in the following table.

Number	LEA	Special grant (£ million)
202	Camden	0.76
203	Greenwich	0.91
206	Islington	1.40
209	Lewisham	0.29
212	Wandsworth	0.83
302	Barnet	0.87
303	Bexley	0.10
304	Brent	1.03
305	Bromley	0.10
307	Ealing	0.96
308	Enfield	0.85
310	Harrow	0.10
311	Havering	0.10
312	Hillingdon	0.10
313	Hounslow	0.10
314	Kingston upon Thames	0.10
315	Merton	1.06
317	Redbridge	0.10
318	Richmond upon Thames	0.10
319	Sutton	0.10
330	Birmingham	3.67
333	Sandwell	0.85
334	Solihull	0.29
340	Knowsley	1.21
341	Liverpool	0.57
342	St. Helens	0.65
343	Sefton	0.85
344	Wirral	1.00
351	Bury	0.10
352	Manchester	0.65
355	Salford	0.55
356	Stockport	0.95
357	Tameside	0.46
358	Trafford	0.97
359	Wigan	0.74
370	Barnsley	0.18
371	Doncaster	0.88
372	Rotherham	0.61
373	Sheffield	1.03
380	Bradford	2.14
381	Calderdale	0.10
382	Kirklees	0.66
383	Leeds	0.69
390	Gateshead	0.75
391	Newcastle upon Tyne	0.76
393	South Tyneside	0.47
394	Sunderland	0.69
800	Bath and North East Somerset	0.10
801	City of Bristol	0.70
802	North Somerset	0.10
803	South Gloucestershire	0.10
806	Middlesbrough	0.61
807	Redcar and Cleveland	0.50
808	Stockton-on-Tees	0.42
810	Kingston-upon-Hull	0.59
811	East Riding of Yorkshire	0.10
812	North East Lincolnshire	0.36
813	North Lincolnshire	0.10
815	North Yorkshire	0.10
816	York	0.10
820	Bedfordshire	0.10
825	Buckinghamshire	0.10
826	Milton Keynes	0.10
830	Derbyshire	0.10
835	Dorset	0.10
836	Poole	0.10
837	Bournemouth	0.10
840	Durham	2.76
841	Darlington	0.36
845	East Sussex	0.10
850	Hampshire	0.10
851	Portsmouth	0.52
852	Southampton	0.57
855	Leicestershire	0.10
857	Rutland	0.10
860	Staffordshire	0.41
861	Stoke-on-Trent	0.14
865	Wiltshire	0.10
866	Swindon	0.46
867	Bracknell Forest	0.10
868	Windsor and Maidenhead	0.10
869	West Berkshire	0.10
870	Reading	0.10
871	Slough	0.10
872	Wokingham	0.10
873	Cambridgeshire	0.10
874	Peterborough	0.10
875	Cheshire	0.54
876	Halton	0.59
877	Warrington	0.25
878	Devon	0.10
880	Torbay	0.10
881	Essex	0.10
882	Southend-on-Sea	0.10
883	Thurrock	0.10
884	Herefordshire	0.10
885	Worcestershire	1.35
886	Kent	0.10
887	Medway Towns	0.10
888	Lancashire	0.10
889	Blackburn with Darwen	0.45
891	Nottinghamshire	0.10
892	Nottingham City	1.13
893	Shropshire	0.10
894	Telford and Wrekin	0.31
908	Cornwall	0.10
909	Cumbria	0.10
916	Gloucestershire	0.10
919	Hertfordshire	0.10
921	Isle of Wight	0.10
925	Lincolnshire	0.10
926	Norfolk	0.10
928	Northamptonshire	0.10
929	Northumberland	1.35
931	Oxfordshire	0.10
933	Somerset	0.10
935	Suffolk	0.10
936	Surrey	0.10
937	Warwickshire	0.10
938	West Sussex	0.10
	Total	52.00

Term-time Contracts

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of people employed in schools on term-time only contracts; what proportion of the total workforce this represents; and how many of these workers are women. [147150]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested on people employed in schools on term-time only contracts is not collected centrally.

Information on full-time equivalent of hours worked during Annual Schools' Census week in January is published in a Statistical Volume "Statistics of Education—Schools in England 2000" a copy of which is

available from the Library, or alternatively can be accessed on the Department's statistical website www.dfee.gov.uk/statistics.

Podiatry

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students are *(a)* studying for degrees in podiatry and *(b)* training in chiropody; how many have qualified in each of the last five years; and what the cost of training is. [147269]

Mr. Denham: I have been asked to reply.

Funding for chiropody/podiatry was transferred from the Department for Education and Employment in 1998–99. In 2000–01 we commissioned 364 training places for chiropody/podiatry degrees.

Data are not collected centrally on the numbers of students who qualify.

In 1999–2000, £4.4 million was spent on chiropody/podiatry pre-registration training. The forecast spend for 2000–01 is £5.9 million.

TREASURY

Trust Ports

Mr. Syms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the Office for National Statistics has reached a preliminary view on the treatment of trust ports as part of the PSBR rules; and if he will make a statement. [147146]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Robert Syms, dated 29 January 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the treatment of trust ports as part of the PSBR rules (147146).

The Office for National Statistics (ONS), in conjunction with Her Majesty's Treasury, has been reviewing the classification of bodies that might be classified in the public sector. The classification of trust ports is still under discussion between the ONS, Her Majesty's Treasury and the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

VAT (Home Care Concession)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to implement the extra-statutory concession on VAT for home care, announced in February 2000; and for what reason the concession is linked to proposed changes in Department of Trade and Industry regulations which have yet to be implemented; and if he will make a statement. [147186]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* Customs will implement the Extra Statutory Concession to coincide with the changes in the Department of Trade and Industry regulations on the private recruitment industry. A side effect of these changes could have been an increase in the VAT paid for necessary home care provided by employment bureaux. The concession will mean that the VAT burden on those least able to look after themselves is not increased as a result of the DTI changes, and in many cases will actually go down.

Government Shares (Privatised Companies)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the *(a)* number, *(b)* percentage of the total and *(c)* current value is of shares held by Her Majesty's Government in companies privatised since 1985. [146837]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Information on the number and nominal value of the Government's shareholdings held at 31 March 2000, as reported to the Treasury, is contained in Table B13 of the Supplementary Statements to the Consolidated Fund and National Loans Fund accounts 1999–2000. Since then the Government have disposed of shares in British Telecom, and I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) on 3 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 93W. Information on what proportion of the total these represent is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The market value of these shares can be derived from prices quoted on the London Stock Exchange.

Ahava (UK) Ltd.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what information HM Customs and Excise have received on the origin of cosmetics imported into the UK by Ahava (UK) Ltd. under preference as made in the State of Israel. [147581]

Dawn Primarolo: HM Customs and Excise receives a range of information and representations.

Ahava (UK) Ltd. was one of those companies identified to member states by the European Commission in its communication of April 2000 as warranting investigation.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps HM Customs and Excise have already taken or are planning to take to verify that cosmetics imported to the UK by Ahava (UK) Ltd. under the EC-Israel Association Agreement and labelled 'State of Israel' are produced within the internationally recognised borders of Israel. [147580]

Dawn Primarolo: The trade agreement between the EC and Israel allows the subsequent verification of proofs of origin.

Products imported into the UK by Ahava (UK) Ltd. from Israel have been included in a verification exercise currently being conducted with the Israeli authorities to ascertain the origin of products imported under preference. As yet no results have been received.

Disabled Persons Tax Credit

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people were claiming the Disabled Persons Tax Credit on 1 January. [147277]

Dawn Primarolo: A provisional estimate for the end of August 2000 was given in my answer to the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 196W.

A figure for the end of October 2000 will be included in the DPTC Quarterly Enquiry for October 2000, which is due to be published on 13 March.

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received about the payment method for the Disabled Persons Tax Credit. [145978]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government receive a wide range of representations, including on Disabled Persons Tax Credit, which at the end of August 2000 was received by 25,400 families and individuals. This compares with 18,469 recipients under Disability Working Allowance in August 1999.

Working Families Tax Credit

Helen Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what representations he has received on the difficulties faced by term-time only workers in claiming WFTC; and if he will make a statement; [147152]

(2) how many claims for WFTC have been made by those working on term-time only contracts; and what proportion of such claims has been disallowed because they were made during a holiday period. [147154]

Dawn Primarolo: A small number of representations have been received from and on behalf of term-time workers. Information on the number of claims disallowed because the claim falls within a period where the applicant is not under a contract of employment is not available.

Advance Corporation Tax

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the abolition of advance corporation tax dividend credit; [145958]

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the abolition of advance corporation tax dividend credit. [145992]

Dawn Primarolo: Advance corporation tax and payable tax credits on dividends were abolished as part of a package of reforms to encourage companies to invest for the long term.

Tax Credits

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assumptions about take-up of *(a)* the Children's Tax Credit and *(b)* the Working Families Tax Credit under Chart 5.2 in his pre-Budget report. [147810]

Dawn Primarolo: Chart 5.2 of the November 2000 pre-Budget report shows the impact of children's tax and benefit measures introduced over this Parliament on families. The figures are calculated by comparing the situation after the implementation of the Working Families Tax Credit, Children's Tax Credit, and increases to Child Benefit and income-related benefits with what would have happened if these policy interventions had not taken place.

These figures are consistent with published PBR estimates that 5 million families will benefit from the introduction of the Children's Tax Credit and that up to 1.4 million families will benefit from the Working Families Tax Credit.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what applications *(a)* the Hinduja brothers and *(b)* their companies have made for a UK banking licence since May 1997; and which Ministers were involved in the applications. [147796]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Applications for authorisation of banks have been decided by the Financial Services Authority (FSA) since 1 June 1998, and were previously the responsibility of the Bank of England. The Government have had no role in this process before or after that date. The FSA publishes the list of authorised institutions.

Insurance Actuaries

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what guidance he has offered on the proper role of the appointed actuary in insurance enterprises, with special reference to the issue of internal conflicts of interest. [147250]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The statutory duties of the Appointed Actuary are set out in the Insurance Companies Act 1982.

Euro

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which of his five economic tests for joining the euro have been met; when he expects the others to be met; and if he will make a statement. [147376]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government have said that they will make another assessment of the five tests early in the next Parliament.

Departmental Surveys

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for *(a)* 1992–93, *(b)* 1993–94, *(c)* 1994–95, *(d)* 1995–96, *(e)* 1996–97, *(f)* 1997–98, *(g)* 1998–99, *(h)* 1999–2000 and *(i)* 2000–01, (I) his Department's total spending on quantitative and qualitative surveys of policy issues by focus groups, opinion polling, task forces or other means and (II) the cost of each individual project. [146593]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Detailed information in the form requested is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

ECOFIN

Mr. Hood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the outcome was of the ECOFIN Council held in Brussels on 19 January; and if he will make a statement. [147159]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor attended the meeting of the Economic and Finance Council of Ministers.

In open debate, the Presidency set out its work programme. The Presidency stressed the priority it attached to achieving the Lisbon goals on employment and said it wanted ECOFIN to play a key role in preparing for enlargement. There was broad support for its priorities, particularly on continued labour market reform.

The Chancellor made a strong appeal for completion of the single market, investment in research and development and trade liberalisation.

The Presidency circulated a new compromise proposal on excise duties and mineral oils. The Council invited Coreper to discuss the specific detail further. The intention is to reach agreement at ECOFIN on 12 February.

The contribution of public finances to growth and employment was discussed on the basis of the Commission's Communication. A joint Council-Commission report will be submitted to the Stockholm European Council in March. A draft will be submitted to ECOFIN for agreement on 12 March.

The Council examined and agreed conclusions on Sweden's Convergence Report.

The Economic and Finance Committee (EFC) presented a paper reviewing progress on the action plan on EMU statistical requirements. The aim is to improve the quality of statistics and speed up their provision. The Presidency welcomed progress made so far but noted that further work was planned.

Interest Rates

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if the Treasury has used its econometric model of the UK economy within the last year to estimate the likely size of tax increase needed to reduce interest rates by one percentage point relative to base and the likely cut in public spending needed to achieve this end; [147623]

(2) what simulations the Treasury has undertaken using the Treasury economic model over the previous 12 months which were specifically to model the interaction between monetary and fiscal policy; and if he will make a statement; [147622]

(3) on how many occasions in the previous year the Treasury has performed simulations using its economic model; and what estimate he has made of the cost of doing so on each occasion. [147621]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury economic model plays a role in economic forecasting and informing policy advice. Simulations of fiscal and monetary policy changes are used, but the recording of detailed information on model use in the form requested is not practical.

HEALTH

Hepatitis C

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of whether there are sufficient practising hepatologists to cope with the increasing numbers of patients with hepatitis C. [142247]

Mr. Denham: At national level, we do not plan centrally the numbers of consultants who specialise in hepatology. We plan the numbers of consultants in gastroenterology, taking into account information gathered from a range of sources, including the medical Royal Colleges, regional postgraduate medical deans and National Health Service management, which includes information about consultants specialising in hepatology.

At local level, it is for National Health Service trusts and health authorities, who are accountable for the quality of the services they provide, to determine how their services are configured and delivered, in the light of local circumstances, in order to provide quality services to patients. This includes deciding on the number and grades of posts in their locality.

We are satisfied that there are enough training opportunities in gastroenterology for there to be sufficient candidates qualifying for consultant posts over the next few years. With the current numbers in higher specialist training, it will be possible for the numbers of consultants to increase from around 390 in 1999, to around 610 by 2004.

We will continue to engage in discussions with the Royal College of Physicians and the regional postgraduate medical deans and others responsible for training and career prospects, with the aim of ensuring that all services relating to hepatology are fully supported.

Drugs

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice the Chief Medical Officer of Health has provided regarding the time traces of *(a)* cannabis, *(b)* marijuana, *(c)* Ecstasy, *(d)* cocaine, *(e)* heroin, *(f)* tobacco and *(g)* alcohol remain in the body and cause impairment; and what the estimate of the degree of impairment in each case is of a comparable input after 24 hours. [146463]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* The Department's publication "Drug Misuse and Dependence—Guidelines on Clinical Management" contains information on the approximate duration of detectability of a range of substances in urine, which gives an indication of how rapidly substances are metabolised. Information on the risks and effects of substances, including alcohol and tobacco, is included in several publications produced on behalf of the Department, such as "The Score: Facts About Drugs."

It is not possible to determine with any degree of accuracy a comparable dose of the substances named in order to estimate degree of impairment. But, in general, nervous system depressant-type substances (such as heroin) will tend to impair motor functions and the ability to carry out tasks. Hallucinogenic and stimulant-type substances have problematic effects of their own, which may or may not cause impairment in the short-term.

Impairment in an individual will vary according to a range of factors including metabolism, dose, route of administration, regularity of use, and whether taken in combination with other substances.

Copies of "Drug Misuse and Dependence—Guidelines on Clinical Management" are available in the Library. "The Score: Facts About Drugs" is available from the National Drugs Helpline 0800 776600.

Schizophrenia

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects NICE to give advice on new drugs and therapies for the management of schizophrenia. [147031]

Mr. Denham: On 4 November 1999, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) would produce guidance on schizophrenia. More recently, on 16 November 2000, NICE were asked to conduct an appraisal of anti-psychotic drugs. NICE sets its own timetable and the expected dates of completion for the guideline and appraisal have yet to be announced. Further announcements and NICE's current timetable are available on their website at www.nice.org.uk.

Breast Cancer

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average cost to the National Health Service is of a mastectomy to treat breast cancer. [145598]

Yvette Cooper: In 1999–2000 the average cost of a mastectomy can be classified in a number of ways dependent on whether the mastectomy performed is partial, full, etc. Not all mastectomies are performed due to breast cancer, and no differentiation is made for the reason behind the surgery.

In activity terms, this can be classified using a number of Office of Population, Censuses, and Survey codes, such as

B272: Total mastectomy and excision of both pectoral muscles

B273: Total mastectomy and excision of both pectoralis minor muscle

B274: Total mastectomy

B275: Subcutaneous mastectomy.

In cost terms, these OPCS codes map to Healthcare Resource Groups (HRGs), which put these procedures into clinically similar bands. For the 1999–2000 financial year, the national average cost of the groups, including mastectomy, are:

HRG Code	*HRG narrative*	*National average (£)*
Elective inpatient costs (from waiting lists)		
JO2	Major breast surgery including plastic procedures less than 49 or with complications or comorbidities	2,126
JO3	Major breast surgery including plastic procedures greater than 50 without complications or comorbidities	1,559
Non-elective inpatient costs (urgent/emergencies)		
JO2	Major breast surgery including plastic procedures less than 49 or with complications or comorbidities	2,126
JO3	Major breast surgery including plastic procedures greater than 50 without comorbidities	1,724

Multiple Sclerosis

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if (1) NICE consulted Ministers before the announcement on 22 December 2000 of further research into the cost effectiveness of drugs for multiple sclerosis; [147038]

(2) what discussions took place between health Ministers and the Chief Executive of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence following the institute's appraisal review meeting for multiple sclerosis on 13 December. [147037]

Mr. Denham: There were no discussions between Ministers and the Chief Executive of the National Institute of Clinical Excellence and there was no prior discussion between the Department and NICE about the latter's decision to commission further research into the cost effectiveness of beta interferon and glatiramer following their appraisal committee meeting on 13 December. NICE informed departmental officials of their intentions on 20 December. NICE were advised to make an early announcement in view of the interest and concern surrounding the appraisal.

Flu Treatments

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to issue further guidance on facilitating patient access to influenza treatments. [147204]

Mr. Denham: We have no such plans at present.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons he issued recommendations to implement a patient group direction and a telephone triage system which resulted in the supply of only Relenza treatment. [147074]

Mr. Denham: The intention of the supplementary guidance issued to the National Health Service by the Department was to provide practical advice on implementing the National Institute for Clinical Excellence recommendations on zanamivir. This included advice on arrangements for general practitioners to draw up arrangements to enable pharmacists and nurses to supply zanamivir, provided they are satisfied the patient is in the at-risk group, needs it and meets specified criteria.

This guidance was issued to the NHS in the light of the potential implications for the delivery of GP services over the winter period.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for North Wiltshire of 19 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 143W, on Relenza and Lysovir, what estimates have been made of the annual cost of prescribing *(a)* Relenza and *(b)* Lysovir to at-risk adults when influenza is circulating in the community. [147075]

Mr. Denham: The Department has made no estimate of the annual cost prescribing of *(a)* Relenza and *(b)* Lysovir to at-risk adults when influenza is circulating in the community

However, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence estimates that its guidance on Relenza (zanamivir) will result in between 97,000 and 487,000 at-risk individuals

being prescribed zanamivir in the influenza season, at a cost to the National Health Service in England and Wales of between £2.3 million and £11.7 million.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons his Department endorsed NICE guidance on the use of Relenza for at-risk patients. [147162]

Mr. Denham: The National Institute for Clinical Excellence's (NICE's) task is to appraise the clinical and cost effectiveness of treatments, based on the available evidence.

In response to NICE's guidance on the use of Relenza, the Department issued supplementary implementation guidance to the National Health Service in the light of the potential implications for the delivery of GP services over the winter period. This guidance was not an endorsement of Relenza.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons Lysovir was not used as a comparator by NICE in its technology appraisal of the clinical and cost effectiveness of Zanamivir in the prevention and treatment of influenza. [147073]

Mr. Denham: It is for the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to decide the appropriate comparisons to be used for the appraisals which they are asked to carry out.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will ask for the NICE guidance on Relenza to be enforced when clinicians have in place clinically acceptable alternative arrangements for the treatment of patients. [147076]

Mr. Denham: We expect general practitioners to exercise their clinical discretion in deciding whether and what to prescribe, taking due account of guidance from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. The exercise of clinical discretion is not overridden by NICE guidance.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the comparative cost and clinical effectiveness of Lysovir and Relenza. [147071]

Mr. Denham: The Department has made no such assessment.

Computer Systems

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* final version and *(b)* other full business cases for NHS hospital trust computer systems that have a lifetime contract value in excess of £1 million were first submitted in (i) 1999 and (ii) 2000. [147141]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* Four Full Business Cases (FBCs) for National Health Service hospital trust computer systems with a lifetime contract value in excess of £1 million were first submitted in 1999 and seven in 2000.

These were all final versions of FBCs in that they were all submitted for formal approval. The appropriate regional office of the NHS Executive normally helps a trust to develop its FBC but will only allow the FBC to be submitted for formal approval when it substantially meets the detailed approval criteria laid down by the NHS Executive.

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for each regional office, how many *(a)* final version and *(b)* other full business cases for NHS hospital trust computer systems that have a lifetime contract value in excess of £1 million and that were first submitted since January 1999 have been approved. [147142]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* The National Health Service Executive has approved eight Full Business Cases submitted since January 1999 for NHS hospital trust computer systems that have a lifetime contract value in excess of £1 million. These were broken down by regional office as follows:

North Western Regional Office—4

Northern and Yorkshire Regional Office—3

Computer Systems Eastern Regional Office—1.

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the target turn-around time is for the assessment of full business cases for computer systems of a value in excess of £1 million submitted by NHS hospital trusts from presentation of initial full business case to the approval of final business case. [147140]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* The target time for approval of a full business case, once formally submitted, is two months. The time actually taken will be decided in part by the quality of the FBC and the speed with which the trust responds to any questions about the content of the FBC that the National Health Service Executive may need to ask.

The FBC for a scheme for computer systems is developed by the NHS trust over a period of time, assisted as necessary by their NHS Executive regional office. The FBC may go through a series of drafts over several months, but these drafts are not submitted for formal approval. When the final version of the FBC is prepared, it is submitted to the NHS Executive for formal approval.

NHS Trusts

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the proportion of NHS trusts that will incur lifetime expenditure in excess of £1 million in order to achieve Level 3 EPR. [147143]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* We expect that almost all hospital National Health Service trusts will incur lifetime expenditure in excess of £1 million in order to achieve EPR level 3.

Doctors' Retirement

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 15 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 48W, on doctors' retirement, how many general practitioners practising in England retired in the last five years for which figures are available before the age of *(a)* 60, *(b)* 65, *(c)* 70 and *(d)* 75 years. [147771]

Mr. Denham: The figures in the table show the number of doctors working in GP practices who have received a pensions award in each of the years 1994 to 1999 under the age of 60, 65, 70 years and aged 70 and over in England and Wales. However, a number of GPs who

retire and claim their pension and gratuity may return to practise in general medical services 28 days later and continue working until they fully retire.

Though there is no fixed retirement age for GPs they are removed from the HA medical list on reaching 70 years of age if providing general medical services as a principal. No GP over the age of 70 received a pension award.

Medical staff in GP practices—numbers receiving a pension award, by age

	Number receiving a pension award			
Year	*Under age 60*	*Under age 65*	*Under age 70*	*70 or over*
1995	246	632	730	24
1996	239	559	633	20
1997	229	517	598	13
1998	199	457	518	20
1999	127	284	339	12

Source:
NHS pensions agency

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many and what proportion of named day questions tabled during the current Session have received a substantive reply on the named day; and what the mean and medians were for the number of days elapsed between *(a)* tabling, *(b)* holding answers and *(c)* final answers. [147298]

Ms Stuart: 145 questions tabled for answer on a named day received a reply on the day named. This represents 52 per cent. of the total number tabled. The mean and median number of days elapsed between the day named for answer and a substantive reply were three days and two days respectively. Because hon. Members may name days with differing periods of notice, the calculation of the figures between tabling and answer involve the examination of each parliamentary question and therefore could be supplied only at disproportionate cost.

Medicines Control Agency

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many requests for information were made to the Medicines Control Agency where information was not provided within 20 working days from the request for information; and if he will indicate the length of time taken for each such request. [147773]

Ms Stuart: Of the 204 queries the agency handled where this target is applicable, 13 are currently being dealt with and 41 were not answered within the 20 day deadline. Of these cases, 14 were answered within a week of the deadline, 13 within a month, four within three months, seven within six months, three over six months.

Committee on Safety of Medicines

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the Committee on Safety of Medicines is subject to the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. [147726]

Ms Stuart: No. However, the Committee on Safety of Medicines will be subject to the Freedom of Information legislation when implemented.

St. Leonard's Hospital, Dorset

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when the NHS appealed against non-determination of the planning application in respect of land and buildings at St. Leonard's Hospital, Dorset; for what reason the appeal has been deferred; and if he will make a statement; [147817]

(2) for how long the surplus land and buildings at St. Leonard's Hospital have been identified for disposal; and when he expects a scheme to be completed; [147816]

(3) when he will give instructions for the immediate demolition of the surplus unoccupied buildings at St. Leonard's Hospital, Dorset; and if he will make a statement. [147821]

Ms Stuart: There has been a phased re-provision of patient services from the St. Leonard's Hospital site since the late 1980s. The last patient services were relocated off the site in January 2000.

A number of unsuccessful planning applications for the site have been made over the last 10 years. The latest planning application for a special care housing development on the site was made in September 1999. East Dorset District Council failed to make a decision on this application and National Health Service Estates appealed against the non-determination of the application in April 2000.

In July 2000 the Planning Inspectorate requested that NHS Estates undertake an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the site. Work for the EIA was commenced immediately and is expected to be completed in spring this year when a date for the public inquiry will be set by the Planning Inspectorate.

It would be inappropriate to demolish the buildings until the conclusion of the planning appeal.

Christchurch Health Centre

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for how long the former Health Centre in Christchurch has remained empty; and what action his Department is taking to realise the value of this asset. [147820]

Ms Stuart: The Christchurch Health Centre was last used as a health centre in 1994. The property is held on a long lease but with restricted use. The leasehold interest of the property has been marketed on several occasions and last year was placed in two national auctions but failed to sell due to the restricted use.

Negotiations have been pursued with the landlord for a variation of the user clause which with his agreement would enable a more marketable interest to be offered to the market for sale.

Osteoporosis

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment he has made of the benefits of screening all women aged over 50 years for osteoporosis; and what estimate he has made of the *(a)* cost of such a programme and *(b)* potential savings to the NHS by such early detection and treatment; [147308]

(2) how many bone scans for the detection of osteoporosis were undertaken in each of the last five years; what the estimated cost of this service was in each year; and in how many cases osteoporosis was diagnosed. [147309]

Yvette Cooper: The United Kingdom National Screening Committee (NSC) advises Ministers, the devolved national Assemblies and the Scottish Parliament on all aspects of screening policy.

The NSC considered the subject of osteoporosis screening in June 1999. The committee's recommendation is that population-based screening should not be offered. There is not a simple, reliable test for osteoporosis that would meet the NSC's published criteria to ensure that a screening programme is both clinically and cost effective. The NSC's criteria are available on its website at http://www.nsc.nhs.uk/

The information requested on the number of bone scans is not available centrally.

Training Places

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many extra nurse, midwife and health visiting training places will be created in each year from 2001 to 2004 expressed in the same terms as the figures in NHS Plan; and if he will make a statement. [147557]

Mr. Denham: As a result of the NHS Plan there will be 5,500 more nurses, midwives and health visitors being trained each year than today. Our latest forecast is for 20,325 places in 2000–01, an increase of 1,618 on the 1999–2000 baseline figure of 18,707. We plan to commission a further 1,000 places in 2001–02 and apportion the remaining increase over 2002–03 and 2003–04.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many extra training places for therapists and professional staff will be created in each year from 2001 to 2004 expressed in the same terms as the figures in NHS Plan; and if he will make a statement. [147556]

Mr. Denham: As a result of the NHS Plan there will be 4,450 more therapists and other key professional staff being trained each year by 2004. Our latest forecast is for 6,553 training places in 2000–01, an increase of 576 on the 1999 baseline figure of 5,977. We plan to commission a further 700 places in 2001–02 and to commission the balance in 2002–03 and 2003–04.

Female Genital Mutilation

Ms McCafferty: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if female genital mutilation will be included in the forthcoming sexual health strategy; and if he will make a statement. [147597]

Yvette Cooper: The sexual health and HIV strategy will look at the range of issues within sexual health. In developing the work on the strategy, cultural issues including female genital mutilation have been considered. The strategy will set out actions for the future to improve awareness of these issues, develop programmes of education and provide information on support services.

We hope to publish the strategy for consultation shortly.

Ambulance Volunteers' Scheme

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have been trained as part of the ambulance volunteers' first responders scheme. [147753]

Ms Stuart: The information requested is not collected centrally. First responders are invaluable in providing immediate care until an emergency ambulance arrives. What matters is that patients with life-threatening conditions or injuries get an emergency response as quickly as possible. Clinical evidence proves conclusively that early defibrillation and resuscitation saves more lives. Achievement of the eight minute target could save 1,800 lives each year in people under 75 years suffering acute heart attacks.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Agrimonetary Compensation

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on how many occasions since 1979 his Department has had the opportunity to apply to the European Commission for monetary compensatory amounts; on how many occasions applications were made; and how much was paid out in each successful application. [145839]

Ms Quin: Under the agrimonetary system in existence until 1992, monetary compensatory amounts automatically provided equalisation of currency differences when agricultural products crossed intra-Community borders. No application for the amounts was required.

Fishing Industry

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much he expects will be received by the United Kingdom fishing industry from the EU for the *(a)* 2001 and *(b)* 2002 funding years. [146274]

Mr. Morley: MAFF and the devolved Administrations are making available £18 million in 2001–02 and £22 million in 2002–03 for the UK fishing industry under the new EU fisheries structural funds programmes. These sums include both the amounts available from the EU under the Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance and the national back-up funding from MAFF and the devolved Administrations. Since grant rates and funding packages will vary across the UK and across grant-aided measures, it is not possible to say at this stage how much of the amounts will be EU money and how much national back-up.

A limited number of payments will also be made under the 1994–99 structural funds programmes. Actual amounts paid will depend on the eligibility of the claims received.

In addition the fishing industry has access to intervention funds from the Community's European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund when required.

Farmers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his estimate is of the percentage of farmers in England who are part time and have incomes from other occupations. [146751]

Ms Quin: 51 per cent. of farmers, partners, directors and their spouses in England recorded themselves in the June 2000 agricultural census as part time. There is no information available on what percentage of these have income from other occupations.

For individuals whose main or secondary source of self-employment income comes from agriculture or horticulture, 5 per cent. have other self-employment income and 24 per cent. have other earned incomes. The proportion that have both is not readily available.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what directions overriding a note of dissent by an accounting officer have been given by the boards of non-departmental public bodies within his Department since May 1997. [147061]

Ms Quin: There have been no such directions.

Sugar Regime

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on reform of the sugar regime. [147184]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* I refer the right hon. Lady to the oral answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) on 21 December 2000, *Official Report*, columns 549–51.

Flooding

Mrs. Fiona Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on how the assistance allocated to areas affected by flooding will be distributed. [147448]

Mr. Morley: The Environment Agency, local authorities and internal drainage boards have submitted bids for funds to accelerate river flood defences over the next three years, as part of the package of an additional £51 million announced following the flooding. The bids are being considered and decisions on allocations will be announced shortly.

Agricultural Support

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many recipients of agricultural support received in the most recent financial year for which figures are available *(a)* less than £5,000, *(b)* £5,001 to £10,000, *(c)* £10,001 to £50,000, *(d)* £50,001 to £500,000, *(e)* £500,001 to £2 million and *(f)* more than £2 million [147542]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* The information requested is set out in the table and relates to expenditure on claims for support under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funded from the European Agricultural Guarantee and Guidance Fund (EAGGF) in the Financial Year ended 31 March 2000.

Amount	*Number of payments*[1]
Less than £5,000	381,011
£5,001-£10,000	33,740
£10,001-£50,000	28,476
£50,001-£500,000	3,479
£500,001-£2 million	13
More than £2 million	0

[1] Many of the recipients will have received payments under more than one CAP support scheme. Information on the total amount of support received by individual recipients is not available.

Fallen Stock

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on what discussions he has had with EU counterparts on the financing of the disposal of fallen stock. [147480]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* My right hon. Friend and I have had no such discussions with EU counterparts. However, in negotiations on the draft EU animal by-products regulations, the European Commission has undertaken to produce a report on how member states finance the disposal of animal by-products, including fallen stock.

Farm Waste Plastic

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his policy is regarding the disposal of farm waste plastic; and if he will make a statement. [147279]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* The Government acknowledge the difficulties farmers can face in disposing of waste plastics. This issue will be addressed in a consultation paper on the extension of waste management controls to agricultural waste which is expected to be published soon by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR). The consultation paper will take into account issues raised in a meeting held at DETR on 3 November 2000, attended by officials from my Department, the National Farmers Union, the Country Landowners Association and a wide range of organisations representing the plastics industry and agricultural suppliers.

A voluntary national waste collection scheme, the Farm Film Producers Group, was set up in 1994 and ran until 1997; however, some suppliers were unwilling to pay a levy which undermined its operation. One of the aims of the dialogue with industry is to develop proposals for tackling the issue and to ensure that any future provision is not affected by similar problems.

Start Bay, Slapton

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what provision he intends to make for the erecting of flood defences at Start Bay, Slapton following the recent storm damage. [147288]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* I understand that emergency works have been undertaken by Devon county council, acting as Highway Authority, and Ministry funding is therefore not an issue. If the

relevant coast protection authority, South Hams district council, makes any applications for MAFF funding for studies or works, they will be considered against our normal criteria.

Avon Heath Country Park

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action is being taken by the Forestry Commission to ensure that trees felled at Avon Heath Country Park in breach of a felling licence are replanted. [147824]

Mr. Morley: The Forestry Commission could have used its statutory powers to impose a restocking notice, but decided that this would not be in the public interest as the area is part of a heathland restoration project. Avon Heath Country Park is in a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Protection Area, and this heathland restoration work is an important part of the Government's Biodiversity Action Plan. Nevertheless, I understand that RSPB has decided, after consultation with local people, to plant some replacement trees in other parts of the park.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the outcome of the prosecution by the Forestry Commission of those responsible for breaches of felling licences at Avon Forest Country Park, and the implications of the case for policy on the protection of trees for amenity reasons. [147823]

Mr. Morley: On 16 November 2000 in Poole magistrates court, an RSPB employee pleaded guilty to felling growing trees on land at Avon Heath Country Park between 1 July 1999 and 31 January 2000 without the authority of a felling licence. He was fined £1,000 and ordered to pay £500 towards prosecution costs.

The case has no implications for our policy on controlling the felling of trees. The Forestry Commission will continue to investigate all suspected breaches of the tree felling regulations and will prosecute when it is clear that an offence has been committed.

SCOTLAND

New Deal

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many people *(a)* entered and *(b)* completed the New Deal scheme in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998, (iii) 1999 and (iv) 2000. [145655]

Ms Jowell: I have been asked to reply.

Latest figures from the start of New Deal for Young People in 1998 to the end of October 2000 are summarised in the following table:

	Number of young people starting New Deal	*Number of young people who left New Deal*
1998	214,500	81,100
1999	191,300	193,900
2000	151,600	183,100

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Brenda Searle

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what further discussions he has had with the British Ambassador to Mexico with regard to the disappearance of Miss Brenda Searle. [147085]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* Our Embassy in Mexico City has liaised with the Dutch Embassy to co-ordinate UK/Dutch efforts in this case.

Our Embassy has held meetings with the Mexican police and local authorities. Ms Searle's parents were included in these meetings during their visit to Mexico in autumn last year. During his visit to Mexico in November 2000, Lord Levy raised Ms Searle's case with the then Mexican President Zedillo, who promised to ensure that everything possible would be done to help.

We have maintained regular contact with Mr. and Mrs. Searle. Officials are arranging a further meeting with them in February.

Drugs (Iran)

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the anti-drugs assistance the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is planning to provide to Iran. [148038]

Mr. Battle: Most of the heroin sold on Britain's streets originates in Afghanistan, the world's largest producer of opium. Iran is a key country on the heroin route from Afghanistan to Europe. We share an interest in co-operation against the drugs trade.

The Iranians make the world's largest seizures of opiates—253 tonnes in 1999. But it has been at a cost. Around 3,000 law enforcement officers have been killed in clashes with drug traffickers in the past 20 years. They deserve our help.

The FCO has recently agreed to provide £400,000 towards the UNDCP/Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran Combined Interdiction Unified Strategy (CIRUS) programme in Iran to assist with anti drugs work on their eastern border with Afghanistan and Iran.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office assistance is ring fenced specifically for the established and successful CIRUS project.

Professor Lowry

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the Portuguese Government have informed his Department about their intention to proceed with further charges against Professor Lowry; and what are the new charges likely to be. [146845]

Mr. Hain: The Portuguese Secretary of State for European Affairs told the Minister for Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), on 18 October 2000 of the Swiss authorities' request for extradition in order for them to press charges. The Portuguese Attorney-General has authorised extradition to proceed at the end of Professor Lowry's Portuguese sentence.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports the British Embassy has sent about the daily routine of Professor Lowry while serving his sentence in a Portuguese prison; and how many hours per day he is locked in his cell. [146848]

Mr. Hain: Professor Lowry has freedom of movement between 08.00 and 21.00 hours. He and three others share a cell in the new wing of the prison which has two sets of bunkbeds, toilet, washbasin and shower. Professor Lowry is sports delegate for his wing and supervises the use of the gym. He has access to a television and the library. When he is not working he reads and exercises.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent contact staff from the British Embassy in Portugal have had with Professor Lowry; and what the state of his health is reported to be. [146846]

Mr. Hain: Professor Lowry is visited twice a year; his last visit was on 8 August 2000; his next is scheduled for February 2001. Professor Lowry's welfare officer has confirmed that he appears to be well, both physically and mentally. There has been no reported deterioration in his health and he has not asked for any further treatment.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports the British Embassy in Portugal have sent on access to medical treatment for Professor Lowry; and what treatment he has recently received. [146847]

Mr. Hain: Professor Lowry collapsed in August 2000 and was transferred to the prison infirmary for treatment. He has not reported any recurring symptoms. He has seen his dentist and consultant and undergone appropriate tests. He continues to receive medical treatment from his private doctor. He remains adamant that he will not have surgery while in prison.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what response he has received from the Government of Portugal about Professor Lowry. [146844]

Mr. Hain: Our officials have had regular discussions with the Portuguese authority on this case, in line with normal consular practice.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the British Embassy in Portugal has been informed why Professor Lowry remains in prison in that country despite having served more than half of his original sentence; and what indication there is of when he will be released. [146849]

Mr. Hain: The prison social welfare authorities will automatically begin to prepare a further application for Professor Lowry's release in February 2001 when he has served two thirds of his sentence. Conditional release in Portugal is granted at the discretion of the parole judge and becomes automatic only when five sixths of the sentence has been served.

Asil Nadir

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has recently had, and with whom, regarding Asil Nadir; and if he will make a statement. [146940]

Mr. Vaz: The Secretary of State has had no recent discussions about Asil Nadir.

Kosovo

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will meet Mr. Bernard Kouchner to discuss the protection of the non-Albanian population of Kosovo and Metohija. [146431]

Mr. Vaz: Mr. Haekkerup, the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Representative in Kosovo, called on me and senior officials on 9 January prior to taking up his appointment on 15 January. During his call Mr. Haekkerup emphasised that one of his top priorities was to improve law and order in Kosovo, including tackling ethnic violence. We welcome the priority Mr. Haekkerup has given to this and will give him our full support.

Kindertransport People

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the German Government over the issue of pensions for the Kindertransport people; and if he will make a statement. [146853]

Mr. Vaz: Foreign Office Ministers have not made representations on this issue to the German Government.

The German pensions in question take account of the EU regulations for co-ordinating social security. German officials have advised the Department of Social Security and the British Embassy on a number of occasions that they have no plans to make additional arrangements for this group of claimants.

Sir David Hannay

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the amount of per diem remuneration is of Sir David Hannay. [146605]

Mr. Vaz: Sir David Hannay receives appropriate remuneration commensurate with his expertise, which amounts to £450 per day worked. This is consistent with Treasury guidelines. He works about 20–25 days per quarter.

Nazi Victims

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on progress of payments out of the International Fund for Needy Victims of Nazi Persecution. [146815]

Mr. Vaz: The UK's £1 million contribution to the fund was fully allocated by 1999. Over $41 million of the total $60 million has been contributed to the fund, and over $30 million has been allocated.

All contributing Governments agree that speedy allocation and effective use of resources are top priorities. The UK has continued to urge rapid disbursement by other contributors.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on progress on the compensation scheme promoted by Germany for slave labour victims of the Nazis. [146816]

Mr. Vaz: Final agreement on the fund was reached in July 2000. The German Government have pledged DM5 billion and German industry is expected to contribute the same amount, though there is still a shortfall in the latter category. The German authorities hope disbursement will begin in the first half of this year.

Claims can already be lodged: UK claimants should make their application through the International Organisation for Migration; Jewish claimants should contact the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what contacts have been established between UNAMSIL and RUF in Sierra Leone. [146484]

Mr. Hain: Following the ceasefire agreement singed in Abuja on 10 November 2000 between the Government of Sierra Leone and the RUF, UNAMSIL has held a number of face-to-face meetings with the RUF leadership. These confidence building contacts, which continue, have allowed both sides to explore the detail of the terms of the ceasefire.

Ministerial Visits

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what planned overseas ministerial visits *(a)* he proposes and *(b)* his Ministers propose to make this year; when the visits are scheduled; and if he will make a statement. [146872]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 23 January 2001]:* Visits already announced and agreed with host Governments are as follows.

I plan to visit the United States in February to meet Colin Powell, the Secretary of State, and other members of the new Administration, as well as members of both Houses of Congress. I plan to go to France shortly afterwards for the Franco-British Summit. Other confirmed visits for this year are to Brussels and Sweden to fulfil regular EU commitments, Italy in July for the G8 Summit, and Brisbane in October to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), plans to visit Brussels and Sweden on EU business. He plans to visit India and Bangladesh in February in connection with his specific responsibility for entry clearance issues.

Baroness Scotland is currently visiting the Falklands and Antarctica, and the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), is visiting Mexico.

Further visits will be announced in the usual way, as plans are finalised and agreed with host countries.

Entry Clearance Office (Islamabad)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs at what times of the day the Entry Clearance Office in Islamabad is open for telephone inquiries from the UK; and what the telephone numbers for such inquiries are. [147078]

Mr. Vaz: The Visa Section in Islamabad is open between 02.30 GMT and 09.30 GMT (0730–1430 local time) Monday to Friday. Telephone inquiries can be accepted during those hours. The telephone numbers are those of the British High Commission: 00 92 51 2822131 to 2822135 and 2206071 to 2206075. The telephone numbers and office hours of British diplomatic missions overseas can be found in "HM Diplomatic Service Overseas Reference List", which is available in the House Libraries, and available on the internet at www.fco.gov.uk/directory/posts.asp.

Bertelsmann Foundation Conference

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs by whom Her Majesty's Government were represented at the Bertelsmann Foundation conference on the future development of the EU held in Berlin in January. [147163]

Mr. Vaz: Her Majesty's Government were represented at the conference by the British Ambassador to Berlin, Sir Paul Lever.

Mrs. Nazia Bashir

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when Her Majesty's High Commission, Islamabad, received an application for entry clearance for settlement from Mrs. Nazia Bashir (ISB/H3690); when she can expect to be invited for interview; and if he will make a statement. [147132]

Mr. Vaz: Mrs. Nazia Bashir applied for a settlement visa at our High Commission in Islamabad on 14 June 2000. An Entry Clearance Officer (ECO) interviewed her the same day. Further consideration of the application was delayed to allow Mrs. Bashir to produce further documents to support her application. An Entry Clearance Manager has reviewed the case in the light of the extra documents supplied and has authorised the issue of a settlement visa to Mrs. Bashir.

DEFENCE

Tornado GR4 (Upgrade)

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the RAF Tornado GR4 upgrade programme will be complete; and how many GR4s will then be available for operations. [143334]

Dr. Moonie: On current plans, the RAF Tornado GR4 upgrade programme will be completed by February 2003 when all 142 upgraded aircraft will be available for operational deployment.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to request the Defence Radiological Protection Service to update its 1993 report on the exposure by British military personnel to depleted uranium during the Gulf war. [145300]

Mr. Spellar: My Department's position on the exposure of British military personnel to depleted uranium during the Gulf conflict was set out on 19 March 1999 in a paper entitled, "Testing for the presence of Depleted

Uranium in UK Veterans of the Gulf conflict: the Current Position". Since then the US Department of Defence has published its own assessment of possible levels of depleted uranium to which troops may have been exposed in the Gulf. These levels are lower than those contained in the Defence Radiological Protection Service reports of 1993, and our 1999 paper. We will analyse the differences.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* shells and *(b)* bullets containing (i) uranium and (ii) depleted uranium were fired by the Army on ranges in Surrey in the last 10 years. [147070]

Mr. Spellar: No munitions containing uranium or depleted uranium have been fired on the ranges in Surrey.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what uranium pharmacological tests he proposes should be undertaken on civilians living in areas of depleted uranium debris; [147194]

(2) if he will conduct uranium pharmacological tests on civilians in Kosovo. [147195]

Mr. Spellar: The health of civilians is the responsibility of their Government or, as in the case of Kosovo, the United Nations. Although the UK will provide help and advice if requested, it is up to these relevant authorities to decide what tests, if any, should be carried out.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what evidence he has received on measurements of uranium 235 among Kosovans. [147196]

Mr. Spellar: None. The Ministry of Defence is not aware of any such measurements being taken.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many representations he has received concerning a ban on the use of depleted uranium ammunition by the armed forces. [145937]

Mr. Spellar *[pursuant to his reply, 23 January 2001, c. 537W]:* We have received a petition from the Campaign Against Depleted Uranium.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent representations have been received from the campaign against depleted uranium. [145295]

Mr. Spellar *[pursuant to his reply, 22 January 2001, c. 420W]:* We have received a petition from the Campaign Against Depleted Uranium.

Commercial Exploitation Levy

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage commercial exploitation levy is applied to defence related exports to recover MOD Research and Development costs; and what the percentage was in each of the last 10 years. [146068]

Dr. Moonie: The rates vary according to the type of equipment involved and the extent to which its development was funded by the Ministry of Defence. Higher value sales would normally employ profit-sharing schemes rather than applying levy rates. The circumstances of individual sales may also permit some variation to the levy arrangements which would be negotiated on a case by case basis. I am withholding details of the individual rates used and the circumstances in which they might apply under the exemptions 7 and 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. The rates currently in use have remained unchanged over the period in question.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the research and development levy income was for each of the past 10 years; and in respect of what categories of contracts it was levied. [146070]

Dr. Moonie: There is no calculated contribution in respect of the Ministry of Defence's investment in research and development. The commercial exploitation levy (CEL) is a form of royalty for any commercial sales of a design, use of special tooling or the granting of licences where MOD has contributed wholly, or in part, to research and development costs. There are no restrictions on the categories of contracts to which CEL applies, but the vast majority relate to equipment (including software), since MOD research and development funding is largely in support of the development of equipment. Details of the income derived from CEL over the last nine years are set out in the table. Data for 1990–91 could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Commercial exploitation levy receipts: 1991–2000

Year	*£ million*
1991–92	34.5
1992–93	15.0
1993–94	39.8
1994–95	33.0
1995–96	21.9
1996–97	90.5
1997–98	54.0
1998–99	57.0
1999–2000	17.5

Notes:
1. Figures include all Commercial Exploitation receipts collected by the Defence Bills Agency.
2. Figures exclude: VAT, DTI, France Jaguar/Lynx, MOD IPR licences and receipts from other international programmes not collected through the Defence Bills Agency.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what directions overriding a note of dissent by an accounting officer have been given by the boards of non-departmental public bodies within his Department since May 1997. [147065]

Dr. Moonie: There have been no such directions.

Nurses (Defence Medical Services)

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the establishment requirement for nurses in the Defence Medical Services in the specialties of *(a)* accident and emergency, *(b)* diabetes, *(c)* intensive/coronary care, *(d)* orthopaedic surgeons, *(e)* burns and plastics, *(f)* general nursing duties, *(g)* infection control, *(h)* ophthalmic surgeons, *(i)* midwifery, *(j)* neurology, *(k)* dental, *(l)* operating theatre, *(m)* paediatrics, *(n)* psychiatry, *(o)* otorhinolaryngology, *(p)* renal/urology, *(q)* special baby care, *(r)* stoma care, *(s)* tutors/instructors, *(t)* health care assistants and *(u)* other, indicating in each case the (i) current manning levels and (ii) percentage shortfall; and if he will make a statement. [146155]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 24 January 2001]:* The operational and retained task requirement for nurses in the Defence Medical Services and the trained strength as at 1 October 2000 is as shown by speciality. Recruitment into training is highly satisfactory. However, recruitment of trained nurses remains difficult. We are currently working on measures to improve the recruitment and retention of serving nurses.

Speciality	*Operational and retained task requirement*	*Trained manning*	*Shortfall (Percentage)*
Accident and Emergency	114	44	61
Diabetes	0	1	—
Intensive/Coronary Care	204	75	63
Orthopaedic	46	22	52
Burns and Plastics	40	13	68
General Nursing Duties	1,122	573	49
Infection control	7	5	29
Ophthalmic	15	1	93
Midwifery	18	45	—
Neurology	10	4	60
Operating Theatre	77	64	17
Paediatrics	11	16	—
Registered Mental Nurse	125	78	38
Otorhinolaryngology	0	0	—
Renal/Urology	30	4	87
Special Baby Care	0	3	—
Stoma Care	0	2	—
Tutors/Instructors	34	32	6
Health Care Assistants	136	143	—
Dental Surgery Assistants	412	408	1
Other (Staff and Cmd Posts, Gynaecology, Oncology)	41	25	39

Research and Development

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much his Department spends on research and development in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* Scotland; and if he will break down the Scottish total into (i) DERA's own research and (ii) research funded in academic and non-DERA sites; and what the names of these non-DERA sites are. [147015]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* The information requested is not held centrally. However, for 1998–99, some £2,096 million defence expenditure was categorised for statistical purposes as "research and development". This would cover work undertaken in MOD (including DERA), industry and universities. I regret that it is not possible to state how much of the total figure represents expenditure in Scotland, as our data do not include a regional breakdown. Nor do available data provide the breakdown of research (or research and development) expenditure between DERA and non-DERA sites in Scotland.

Daedalus Site

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the Daedalus site at Lee-on-the-Solent. [147084]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* The Strategy for the defence estate launched in June last year set out our intention to identify the core sites on which we would seek to focus different activities in the longer term. A study is now in progress to this effect.

Along with other major Defence sites not yet sold, the former HMS Daedalus is being considered within this study. While it is still at an early stage and not likely to report for some time, we are looking to form an early view of the implications for the Daedalus site, if any, to avoid further uncertainty or delay. We hope to do this by the end of March and will keep the local authorities concerned informed of the position.

Astute Class Submarines

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he proposes to place an order for the first batch of the Astute class submarines; and if he will make a statement. [147571]

Dr. Moonie: The first batch of Astute class submarines was ordered from GEC-Marconi (now BAE Systems) in March 1997.

HMS Tireless

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what arrangements have been made to ensure the safety of HMS Tireless during its voyage to the United Kingdom for the completion of repairs; and if he will make a statement. [147403]

Mr. Spellar: We plan to complete the repairs to Tireless in Gibraltar. However, stringent safety measures apply to all sailings of nuclear submarines. All crews are trained to meet those exacting standards.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what information he has given to the Spanish Government about the extent of damage to HMS Tireless; and what undertakings he has given the Spanish Government about *(a)* the programme and location of the repairs and *(b)* the date of departure from Gibraltar of HMS Tireless; and if he will make a statement. [147402]

Mr. Spellar: We have maintained a substantial flow of information to both the Spanish Government and the Spanish Council of Nuclear Safety (CSN) throughout the repair, and will continue to do so.

The Spanish Government have been advised of our plans for the repair to HMS Tireless, and that it is our intention to complete the repair in Gibraltar by the end of March and for the submarine to leave Gibraltar as soon as possible thereafter.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what factors underlay his decision to select 19 May 2001 as the deadline for the removal of HMS Tireless from Gibraltar; and if he will make a statement. [147401]

Mr. Spellar: Our intention is to complete the repair by the end of March and for the submarine to leave Gibraltar as soon as possible thereafter. Precise timing will depend on progress with the repair.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what advice the United Kingdom Government have tendered to the Government of Gibraltar about the

implications for the territory of sustained opposition to the presence of HMS Tireless at Gibraltar; and if he will make a statement. [147400]

Mr. Spellar: The United Kingdom Government have had continuing and extensive discussions with the Government of Gibraltar over HMS Tireless, but has not given specific advice on the issue raised by my hon. Friend.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress of work on repairs to HMS Tireless, and the expected date and location of completion of the repairs. [147404]

Mr. Spellar: Preparatory work on HMS Tireless has been completed and the repair is under way. HMS Tireless is alongside in Gibraltar and it is our intention to complete the repairs in Gibraltar by the end of March.

Service Personnel (Deaths)

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the dates and circumstances were of the deaths of each serviceman and woman for each of the last five years. [146774]

Dr. Moonie: Between 1 January 1996 and 31 December 2000, there have been 770 deaths among serving members of the UK armed forces. A copy of a list of circumstances and year of death will be placed in the Library of the House.

Sunken Military Vessels

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of his consultation document on the protection of sunken military vessels. [147709]

Dr. Moonie: The aim of the formal consultation paper, being produced as part of a review of policy towards the protection of Military Maritime Graves, is to seek the views of those with an interest in this issue.

The views of other Government Departments have been sought. I hope to issue the public consultation paper shortly. The consultation paper will run for three months and a copy of the paper will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses at that stage.

Regimental Manpower Establishments

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the *(a)* manpower establishments and *(b)* actual manning levels of (i) the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, (ii) Black Watch, (iii) the Highlanders, (iv) the King's Own Scottish Borderers, (v) the Royal Highland Fusiliers, (vi) the Royal Scots, (vii) the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards and (viii) the Scots Guards. [147761]

Mr. Spellar: The establishments and actual staffing levels as at 1 December 2000 for each of the Scottish Regiments listed are shown in the table. The figures exclude locally employed personnel and Royal Irish (Home Service).

	Scots Dragoon Guards		*One Scots Guards*		*One Royal Scots*		*One Royal Highland Fusiliers*	
	Establishments	*Actual staffing levels*	*Establishments*	*Actual staffing levels*	*Establishment*	*Actual staffing levels*	*Establishment*	*Actual staffing levels*
Royal Armoured Corps	451	375	—	—	—	—	—	1
Infantry	—	—	558	593	558	[1]458	558	[1]492
Royal Logistic Corps	19	20	23	19	23	31	23	21
Royal Army Medical Corps	6	5	4	3	4	3	4	4
Queen Alexandra Royal Auxiliary Nursing Corps	—	—	1	—	1	—	1	—
Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers	91	66	11	10	11	12	11	11
Adjutant General Corps (Staff and Personnel Support)	22	20	22	23	22	22	22	18
Army Physical Training Corps	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total UK Trained Army Personnel	590	487	620	649	620	527	620	548
Gurkha	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Full time Reserve Service	—	3	—	—	—	—	—	1
Total whole Army	590	490	620	649	620	527	620	549

	One Kings Own Scottish Borderers		*One Black Watch*		*One Highlanders*		*One Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders*	
	Establishments	*Actual staffing levels*	*Establishments*	*Actual staffing levels*	*Establishments*	*Actual staffing levels*	*Establishments*	*Actual staffing levels*
Royal Armoured Corps	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—
Infantry	558	[2]532	618	[3]522	587	[4]450	558	541
Royal Logistic Corps	23	20	23	19	23	20	23	22
Royal Army Medical Corps	4	3	4	2	4	3	4	3
Queen Alexandra Royal Auxiliary Nursing Corps	1	—	1	—	1	—	1	—
Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers	11	11	71	56	29	25	11	10
Adjutant General Corps (Staff and Personnel Support)	22	23	23	20	22	20	22	22
Army Physical Training Corps	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total UK Trained Army Personnel	620	590	741	621	667	519	620	599
Gurkha	—	—	—	—	—	[5]105	—	—
Full time Reserve Service	—	36	—	9	—	—	—	4
Total whole Army	620	626	741	630	667	624	620	603

[1] Includes one soldier capbadged Royal Signals.
[2] Includes one soldier capbadged Royal Artillery.
[3] Includes one soldier capbadged Small Arms School Corps.
[4] Includes one UKTAP officer capbadged Royal Gurkha Rifles who is part of the Gurkha Reinforcement Company (GRC).
[5] Total number of GRC officers is four.

Heavy Sea Lift Capability

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which vessels will be used to provide a heavy sea lift capability for the armed forces after the ending of the chartering arrangements for RFAs Sea Crusader and Sea Centurion. [147762]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 21 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 254W.

RFA Sea Crusader is being re-chartered from 1 February 2001 to 1 March 2003.

Motor Vessel Dart 10 is being chartered from 8 March 2001 to 1 November 2002.

A third vessel has yet to be chartered to replace RFA Sea Centurion on 18 April 2001. This vessel cannot be named until contractual negotiations have been concluded.

Harpoon Missiles

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he plans for the Astute class submarine to be capable of launching submarine-launched Harpoon missiles; [147764]

(2) for what reasons submarine-launched Harpoon missiles are being withdrawn in 2003; and if he will make a statement. [147763]

Dr. Moonie: It has been assessed that, beyond 2003, our anti-surface ship capability needs can be met through the use of other platforms and weapons systems. These include air and surface launched Harpoon missiles. Under current plans we intend to withdraw the Royal Navy Sub-Harpoon from service 2003.

We are considering whether RN submarines should retain a capability to fire the new Harpoon Block 2 missile which has increased capability. On current plans the submarines of the Astute class will be capable of launching Harpoon missiles.

The precise mix of weapons and the chosen variants of each which the Astute class will carry is still under review. It will, however, carry the Spearfish torpedo which does have an anti-surface ship capability.

Armoured Vehicles

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will list the *(a)* original in-service date, *(b)* current in-service date, *(c)* estimated or actual cost, *(d)* years of peak expenditure and *(e)* prime contractor for the (i) Armoured Patrol Vehicle, (ii) third line weapons transportation vehicles, (iii) Mine Detection, Neutralisation and Route Marking System, (iv) M3 amphibious bridging, (v) Future Fuel Vehicle, (vi) Future Cargo Vehicle, (vii) Future Wheeled Recovery Vehicle, (viii) Armoured Heavy Wheeled Tractor System and (xi) Engineer Tanks (Trojan and Titan); [147776]

(2) if he will list *(a)* the original in-service date, *(b)* the latest in-service date, *(c)* the estimated or actual cost, *(d)* the years of peak expenditure and *(e)* the prime contractor for (i) bridging for the 1990s, (ii) the major foam vehicle, (iii) the all terrain mobile platform and self loading light-weight pallet trailer, (iv) the all terrain vehicle protected, (v) the future beach recovery vehicle, (vi) the medium battlefield ambulance, (vii) the general purpose motorcycle, (viii) the rapid intervention vehicle, (ix) the modular transportable surgical facility, (x) the heavy equipment transporter and (xi) the multi-role air cargo loader; [147711]

(3) if he will list the *(a)* original in-service date, *(b)* current in-service date, *(c)* estimated or actual cost, *(d)* years of peak expenditure and *(e)* prime contractor for the (i) Tactical Reconnaissance Armoured Combat Equipment Requirement, (ii) Multi-Role Armoured Vehicle, (iii) Terrier, (iv) Armoured Battlefield Support Vehicle and (v) CVR (T) Life Extension Programme. [147775]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

South Jason Island

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received relating to activities by HM armed forces and their effect on wildlife in South Jason Island. [147198]

Dr. Moonie: Although there has been some discussion locally on this subject, my right hon. Friend has received no representations relating to activities by HM armed forces on South Jason Island, and their effect on the wildlife there.

On Friday 12 January, an Explosive Ordnance Disposal team from the British armed forces successfully disposed of a number of items of unexploded ordnance on South Jason Island, located on the north west coast of West Falkland, as part of a programme of clearing an aircraft crash site left over from the Falklands conflict. We have a legal obligation under the Ottawa Convention to remove such unexploded ordnance from the Falkland Islands, and these operations are carried out with every caution to personnel and the environment.

Despite precautions that were taken during the operation, a fire broke out on the island. A joint effort by the British armed forces and the Falkland Islands Fire Service extinguished the fire by the evening of Thursday 18 January, despite a strong, northerly, 40 knot wind which hampered fire-fighting efforts and caused the fire to spread quickly.

HQ British Forces Falkland Islands is currently conducting an investigation to establish how the fire started.

Advice from a conservation expert who has since visited the island is that the damage to the wildlife was significantly less than first reported. Only a small number of dead birds were found whose death can be directly linked to the fire. Therefore, although there has been some regrettable loss of wildlife, the conservationist assessed that this could in no way be classified as an environmental disaster.

Kosovo

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans NATO has for clearing up battlefields in Kosovo [147197]

Mr. Spellar: The primary responsibility for the clearing up in Kosovo is the civilian authority, which is currently the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). The United Nations Mine Action Service (MAS) is responsible for the longer term task of fully clearing Kosovo of unexploded ordnance, and has established a UN Mine Action Co-ordination Centre (MACC) in Pristina to this end.

However, when KFOR deployed to Kosovo in June 1999, there was an immediate requirement to clear ordnance (both from Allies and Milosevic's security forces) that would have posed a hazard to peacekeeping forces. British service personnel were engaged in this activity. KFOR also took on the immediate task of making schools safe for the returning population of Kosovo prior to the UN establishing its own clearance programme. The NATO Secretary General's report "Kosovo One Year On—Achievement and Challenge" published on 21 March 2000, explained that KFOR soldiers and the international community have cleared unexploded ordnance and mines from some 16,000 homes, 1,165 schools and almost 2,000 kilometres of roads.

KFOR troops continue to provide mine disposal assistance to UN when requested, to make areas safe for the return of displaced persons.

Departmental Underspends

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) for what reason there were underspends in *(a)* subsections G2 and G3 of the 2 Sea Lord Account, *(b)* subsection H2 of the Adjutant General Account, *(c)* subsections 12 and 13 of the RAF Officer Commanding-in-Chief RAF Personnel and Training Command, *(d)* subsections J2 and J4 of the Second Permanent Under Secretary of State Account, *(e)* subsection K2 of the Defence Permanent Agency Account, *(f)* subsection L2 of the Defence Systems Procurement Accounts and *(g)* subsections R2 and R4 of the 2 Permanent Under-Secretary of State Account; [147766]

(2) for what reasons there were underspends in *(a)* subsections A2 and A3 of the Commander-in-Chief Fleet Account, *(b)* subsection B3 of the General Officer Commanding (Northern Ireland) Account, *(c)* subsections C3 and C4 of the Commander-in-Chief Land Command Account, *(d)* subsections D2 and D3 of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief RAF Strike Command Account, *(e)* subsections E2 and E3 of the Chief Joint Operations Account and *(f)* subsections F2, F3 and F4 of the Chief of Defence Logistics Account; [147765]

(3) for what reason there were underspends in *(a)* subsection B2 of the General Officer Commanding (Northern Ireland) Account, *(b)* subsection C2 of the Commander-in-Chief Land Command Account, *(c)* subsection H3 of the Adjutant General Account, *(d)* subsection J3 of the 2 Permanent Under-Secretary of State Account, *(e)* subsection K3 of the Defence Procurement Agency Account, *(f)* subsection M2 of the Major Customer's Research Budget Account and *(g)* subsection R5 of the 2 Permanent Under Secretary of State Account. [147767]

Mr. Hoon: The information requested is not held centrally and so the Budget Holders concerned will need to be consulted. I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

PRIME MINISTER

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister on what date *(a)* discussions first took place between a Minister and the Hinduja brothers, *(b)* correspondence was sent by a Minister and *(c)* correspondence was received by a Minister concerning the possible sponsoring of the Faith Zone in the Millennium Dome by the Hinduja brothers; and if he will make a statement. [147176]

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Prime Minister by what date he has asked Sir Anthony Hammond to *(a)* commence his inquiry, *(b)* complete his inquiry and *(c)* submit his report to the Government. [147718]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* Sir Anthony Hammond QC began his review on 25 January. His aim is to complete the work and to submit his report as quickly as possible, consistent with the need to conduct a thorough investigation. I understand that on the information currently available to Sir Anthony, he would hope to complete the review by the end of February.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Prime Minister (1) what the powers and terms of reference are of the inquiry by Sir Anthony Hammond which he announced on 24 January; [147716]

(2) what access Sir Anthony Hammond will have to Government papers and electronic records for the purpose of carrying out the inquiry announced on 24 January. [147717]

The Prime Minister: The terms of reference of Sir Anthony Hammond QC's review, which I announced on Wednesday 24 January, were:

> To establish what approaches were made to the Home Office in 1998 in connection with the possibility of an application for naturalisation by Mr. S. P. Hinduja, and the full circumstances surrounding such approaches and the later grant of that application; and to report to the Prime Minister.

Sir Anthony has no special powers. It is for him to decide how he carries out the review, what papers and files he needs to see to carry out his review and to whom he needs to speak. The Government will provide all the access that he needs.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Prime Minister if he will ensure that the notes of the meeting of 6 October 1998 between the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and Mr. S. P. Hinduja and Mr. G. P. Hinduja are placed in the Library and made available to the inquiry he announced on 24 January. [147818]

The Prime Minister: All relevant papers will be made available to the inquiry being conducted by Sir Anthony Hammond QC including, if he wishes, the note of the meeting on 6 October 1998. The extent to which he discloses the content of papers will be a matter for him to

decide. Subject to that, it is not the normal practice of Government to release details of meetings with private individuals or companies.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Entertainment Expenses

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (1) what arrangements were made for paying for the party at Haymarket House in the summer of 1999 to mark the move of the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) from his Department to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; [147723]

(2) which Ministers were invited to the party which the Lord Chancellor hosted at Haymarket House in summer 1999 to mark the move of the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) from his Department to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; [147725]

(3) which Ministers she informed about the arrangements for paying for the party she hosted at Haymarket House in summer 1999 to mark the move of the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) from his Department to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. [147724]

Jane Kennedy: My hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) became a Parliamentary Secretary in the Lord Chancellor's Department on 17 May 1999. The Hinduja Foundation hosted a reception on 22 September 1999 to mark his becoming the first Asian Minister in recent times. Neither the Lord Chancellor nor his Department had any involvement in organising, hosting or paying for the event.

The Lord Chancellor and my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East attended the reception. The invitation list, which was cross-Party, was the responsibility of the Hinduja Foundation.

On 11 October 1999, my hon. Friend became a Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Jury Service

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will introduce proposals for those who work as housewives to receive an allowance when on jury service. [147439]

Jane Kennedy: The Government have no plans at present to seek a change in the law relating to allowances paid to those who are eligible to perform jury service.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations she has received about housewives attempting to evade jury service. [147440]

Jane Kennedy: This Department has no record of representations on this point.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if there is a daily allowance for those on jury service who are not in paid employment. [147438]

Jane Kennedy: There is no daily allowance for those on jury service who are not in paid employment. However, they are entitled to claim for loss of benefits and fees paid to carers or child-minders, which have been used solely because of jury service. Jurors' are also entitled to claim travelling and subsistence expenses.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Electronic Signatures

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the President of the Council if she will propose to the Modernisation Committee that it examine the feasibility of using electronic signatures by hon. Members for authorising EDMs, parliamentary questions and deferred divisions. [147719]

Mrs. Beckett: As a general rule, hon. Members must be present in person to vote in deferred divisions, as for any other division. I am sure the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons would be interested in any proposals my hon. Friend cared to make about the authentication of EDMs and Questions.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Grant

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how he plans to allocate the police grant in 2001–02; and what the final funding allocations for police authorities will be for that year. [147945]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have today laid before the House the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2001–02 (HC 156). The report sets out my determination for 2001–02 of the aggregate amount of grants that I propose to pay under section 46(2) of the Police Act 1996, and the amount to be paid to each police authority and to the Greater London Authority for the Metropolitan Police Authority.

Funding allocations for each police authority for 2001–02 are set out in the table. The table also shows allocations approved by Parliament for 2000–01.

Police authority	*2000–01 allocation[1] £ million*	*2001–02 allocation[1] £ million*	*Percentage change*
English Shire forces			
Avon and Somerset	173.7	181.4	4.4
Bedfordshire	64	68.0	6.1
Cambridgeshire	77.2	81.3	5.4
Cheshire	111.9	118.6	6.0
Cleveland	84.7	88.8	4.8
Cumbria	62.2	64.8	4.2
Derbyshire	105.4	111.1	5.3
Devon and Cornwall	178.9	187.9	5.0
Dorset	72.4	75.0	3.7
Durham	83.9	87.5	4.3
Essex	174.8	185.3	6.0
Gloucestershire	63.5	67.0	5.5
Hampshire	202.7	213.9	5.5
Hertfordshire	117.2	122.9	4.8
Humberside	116.9	121.1	3.6
Kent	191.2	204.3	6.9
Lancashire	185.3	193.0	4.1
Leicestershire	105.6	110.7	4.9

Police authority	2000–01 allocation[1] £ million	2001–02 allocation[1] £ million	Percentage change
Lincolnshire	65.4	68.6	4.9
Norfolk	86.5	91.5	5.8
North Yorkshire	79.7	84.0	5.4
Northamptonshire	67.7	70.9	4.8
Nottinghamshire	130.0	136.1	4.7
Staffordshire	116.8	121.6	4.2
Suffolk	70.9	75.0	5.8
Surrey	112.8	111.0	-1.6
Sussex	172.4	181.8	5.4
Thames Valley	231.7	245.1	5.8
Warwickshire	54.3	57.0	4.9
West Mercia	117.2	124.3	6.1
Wiltshire	66.7	69.4	4.1
English			
Metropolitan forces			
Greater Manchester	386.1	404.5	4.8
Merseyside	242.3	252.6	4.3
Northumbria	218.4	227.6	4.2
South Yorkshire	177.2	184.8	4.2
West Midlands	392.7	409.7	4.3
West Yorkshire	297.1	310.6	4.6
London forces			
Metropolitan Police[2]	1,731.2	1,822.8	5.3
City of London[3]	56.4	57.4	1.8
English total	7,045.1	7,389.0	4.9
Welsh forces			
Dyfed-Powys	53.2	56.3	5.9
Gwent	71.9	75.1	4.4
North Wales	77.5	82.3	6.2
South Wales	167.6	176.1	5.0
Welsh total	370.2	389.8	5.3
Total	7,415.3	7,778.8	4.9

[1] Rounded to the nearest £100,000. The Allocation is the sum of: Police Grant, Transitional Grant, Police SSA, Capital Finance SSA, SSA Reduction Grant and Central Support Protection Grant.

[2] Figure for the Metropolitan police includes its Special Payment.

[3] Figure for the City includes Police SSA, Grant and SSA Reduction Grant, but excludes other SSAs (e.g. Capital Financing) and Central Support Protection Grant. These are allocated to the Common Council of the City of London as a whole in respect of all its functions.

Terrorism Regulations

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to lay a draft order under paragraph 16 of Schedule 7 to the Terrorism Act 2000; when he intends to make and lay an order to amend the Channel Tunnel Order 1993 to apply the Terrorism Act 2000 to the Channel Tunnel system; and when he intends to make and lay regulations under section 119 of the Terrorism Act. [147968]

Mr. Straw: I have today laid before Parliament a draft order under paragraph 16(1) of Schedule 7 to the Terrorism Act 2000 enabling an examining officer to require certain persons to complete and produce to the officer, if required to do so, a landing or disembarkation card. The persons in question are those who disembark or embark at a sea or airport in Great Britain or Northern Ireland or, as the case may be, on a ship or aircraft travelling between Great Britain, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man, or the Republic of Ireland. As required under paragraph 16(1), the order sets out the information to be contained in the card and the form of the card.

I have also made and today laid an order to amend the 1993 Channel Tunnel Order to ensure that the Terrorism Act 2000 extends to examining officers performing their functions in relation to the Channel Tunnel system; and Regulations under section 119 of the Act applying provisions of the Act relating to terrorist property offences to persons in the public service of the Crown. The Regulations also disapply section 19 of the Act, which imposes a duty to disclose information about suspected offences, in the case of persons performing, or connected with the performance of, regulatory, supervisory, investigative or registration functions of a public nature.

Police Authorities

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the level of funding was for police authorities in *(a)* England and *(b)* Wales for each of the last 10 years. [146007]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The level of funding (police grant and Standard Spending Assessment (SSA)) is given in the table.

Funding in England and Wales

£ million

Year	England	Wales
1991–92	4,792	'123
1992–93	5,333	'133
1993–94	5,605	'139
1994–95	5,862	'142
1995–96	5,957	316
1996–97	6,184	332
1997–98	6,391	341
1998–99	6,607	352
1999–2000	6,784	361
2000–01	6,987	370

[1] Prior to 1995–96 Welsh SSAs were unhypothecated at county level. Details of payments were agreed by constituent counties to police authorities in Wales. Figures for 1991–92 to 1994–95 are Home Office police grant only.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what directions overriding a note of dissent by an accounting officer have been given by the boards of non-departmental public bodies within his Department since May 1997. [147066]

Mr. Straw: There have been no such directions.

Passports (Over 75s)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it his policy to renew passports for those aged over 75 free of charge; and if he will estimate the cost of this. [147300]

Mrs. Roche: There are no plans for a policy to renew passports for those aged over 75 years free of charge. Fees for passports are set to recover the full cost of providing the service and if such a policy were to be implemented, the estimated annual cost would be £5.2 million, equivalent to a £1 increase in the passport fee.

Police

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many policemen were on duty on a typical Saturday evening in London in the last 12 months; [147393]

(2) how many policemen were on foot on the beat on a typical Saturday evening in London in the last 12 months; [147394]

(3) how many policemen were on patrol in cars on a typical Saturday evening in London in the last 12 months; [147397]

(4) how many policemen were carrying out administrative duties on a typical Saturday evening in London in the last 12 months. [147398]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that the information is not immediately available. I shall write to the right hon. Member and place a copy of my reply in the Library.

Citizenship Applications

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions since 2 May 1997 each Minister in his Department personally received an inquiry from an hon. Member about an actual or prospective application for naturalisation; in how many such cases the inquiry was made by an hon. Member who was at that time a Minister of the Crown; in how many cases the inquiry was made on behalf of someone who was not a constituent of the hon. Member concerned; and if he will make a statement. [147768]

Mr. Straw: This information is not readily available and could be provided, if at all, only at disproportionate cost.

I and the Ministers in my Department receive a large number of representations, oral and written, from Members of both Houses of Parliament about a wide range of immigration matters: most of those, in respect of Members of the House of Commons, relate to constituents; some do not.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the backlog of undetermined applications for British citizenship is. [147630]

Mr. Straw: As at 31 December 2000, the number of applications for British citizenship (whether by registration or naturalisation) yet to be decided was 73,000; compared with 84,000 on the same date in 1999.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what dates *(a)* his Department received an application for naturalisation from (i) Mr. G. P. Hinduja and (ii) Mr. Srichand Hinduja, *(b)* each application was determined and *(c)* the outcome was notified to the applicant. [147598]

Mr. Straw: Mr. S. P. Hinduja and Mr. G. P. Hinduja first applied for British citizenship on 21 February 1990. Their applications were decided on 3 April 1991 and they were notified of the outcome on 18 April 1991.

Mr. G. P. Hinduja next applied on 5 March 1997. His application was granted on 4 November 1997 and he received final notification of this when his certificate of naturalisation was sent to him on 5 November 1997.

Mr. S. P. Hinduja's second application was made on 20 October 1998; it was granted on 23 March 1999 and his certificate was issued on 24 March 1999.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Mrs. Betty Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many anti-social behaviour orders have been made in the area of the North Wales police authority. [147479]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* Up to the end of September 2000, the latest date for which such figures are available, one anti-social behaviour order had been made in the North Wales police area.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers serving in the Metropolitan police force have *(a)* up to five years, *(b)* up to 10 years, *(c)* up to 15 years and *(d)* up to 20 years service. [146112]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information in the table has been provided by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis. The data are for the position as at 31 December 2000.

Length of service	*Number of officers*
Up to 5 years	4,810
From 5 up to 10 years	4,064
From 10 up to 15 years	5,171
From 15 up to 20 years	4,557

Note:
The figures exclude officers currently seconded to Surrey, Essex and Hertfordshire under the transitional boundary arrangements.

Drugs

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the per capita level of expenditure on drug-related law enforcement in the (i) UK, (ii) Netherlands and (iii) USA in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [147752]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Precise data on expenditure on drug-related law enforcement are not available. The launch of the Government's drugs strategy, "Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain" (Cm 3945) in April 1998 included the estimate that total Government expenditure for 1997–98 was in the region of £1.4 billion. Of this, 62 per cent. was estimated to be spent on drug-related law enforcement.

Comparable information relating to the Netherlands and the USA cannot be provided.

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were *(a)* arrested and *(b)* imprisoned on charges related to cannabis in the (i) UK, (ii) Netherlands and (iii) USA in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [147751]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The requested information is not available centrally.

Information is not collected centrally on arrests either for drug-related offences or for drug offences such as unlawful possession. Similarly, the number of people actually received into prison on such charges is not collected centrally. The closest information collected on this topic is the number of offenders given sentences of immediate custody by the courts. The latest figure available is for 1998—5,398. Further details are given in Table S2.28 of the Supplementary Tables volume of the Home Office bulletin "Drug Seizure and Offender Statistics, United Kingdom, 1998" a copy of which is in the Library.

Comparable information relating to the Netherlands and the USA cannot be provided.

Asylum Support

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which public and private local bodies are always notified by the NASS of the individual addresses of accommodation into which asylum seekers have been placed. [147304]

Mrs. Roche: The regional consortia and police authorities in the appropriate dispersal areas are notified by National Asylum Support Service (NASS) on a weekly basis of allocated accommodation addresses. A consolidated list is despatched at the end of each month. In addition, allocated accommodation addresses are routinely notified to the appropriate local health and education authorities when NASS allocates asylum seekers to accommodation in their areas.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many units of accommodation procured by the NASS since 1 April 2000 have been procured by the NASS-contracted accommodation providers entering into sub-contracting arrangements with other organisations or individuals. [147302]

Mrs. Roche: The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) has entered into contracts for accommodation services with private sector providers, registered social landlords and local authority consortia. It is a feature of all these contracts that accommodation is provided either from providers own housing stock or through sub-contracts. NASS does not maintain records of the number of units provided through sub-contracts. All accommodation is required to comply with NASS contract specification and is inspected to ensure compliance.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if NASS allows contracted accommodation providers to place persons who do not form a single household into houses with less than six bed spaces in which all facilities are shared. [147306]

Mrs. Roche: National Asylum Support Service (NASS) may allocate persons who do not form a single household to properties with less than six bed spaces in which all facilities are shared. All property used by NASS that is shared by persons who do not form a single household must comply with houses in multiple occupation registration and licensing schemes wherever they exist.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many staff are allocated to the NASS Performance Monitoring Inspection Team; how many of these staff are engaged in personally inspecting accommodation and support arrangements; and where they are based. [147305]

Mrs. Roche: The current staffing level of the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) Performance Monitoring Inspection Team is one Head of Inspections, four Team Leaders, 15 Inspectors and six support staff.

All staff other than the six support staff are engaged in personally inspecting the accommodation and the support services that contractors are required to provide to NASS service users. At the present time, the Performance Monitoring Inspections Team is based at Quest House in Croydon.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many units of accommodation have been procured by NASS since 1 April 2000; and how many asylum seekers have been placed into this accommodation since then. [147303]

Mrs. Roche: As at the end of December 2000, 26,700[1] units of accommodation were contracted by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), of which 16,600[1] units were allocated to asylum seekers and their dependants.

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest 100.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what targets have been set for the proportion of asylum seeker accommodation to be inspected by the NASS Performance Monitoring Inspection Team; and if these targets relate to accommodation of a particular bedspace size. [147307]

Mrs. Roche: The National Asylum Support Service Performance Monitoring Inspection team has no formal targets for the proportion of asylum seeker accommodation to be inspected; however, regular reviews of the management practices in place at accommodation providers are undertaken together with independent property inspections to ensure that accommodation services are provided to the required standard.

In addition, all complaints are resolved within a maximum of 28 days. Serious complaints are acted upon immediately.

Open Prisons

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much was spent in recapturing prisoners who absconded from open prisons in each of the last four years; and if he will make a statement. [147635]

Mr. Boateng: This information can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Graffiti

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many arrests have been made in each of the last 10 years of people for criminal damage by graffiti spraying. [147592]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many official graffiti sites there are in England and Wales. [147591]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The allocation of sites which can be used for graffiti with permission is a matter for local authorities. Information on the number of such sites is not collected.

Terrorism

Mr. Khabra: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to limit the activities of British citizens who receive training in sabotage in the United Kingdom and engage in terrorist activities abroad. [147792]

Mr. Straw: The Government are determined that this country should not be used as a base for supporting terrorism in any way, including terrorism in other countries. Under the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998, it is already an offence to conspire in this country to commit terrorist acts anywhere overseas. In addition, the Terrorism Act 2000, which is due to come into force shortly, includes provisions, applicable throughout the United Kingdom, which make it an offence to provide weapons training for terrorist purposes, and to recruit for such training. This Act also provides powers to proscribe terrorist organisations, under the conditions specified. The investigation of any alleged criminal activity is, of course, a matter for the police.

Female Prisoners

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made with research into the age limit for children remaining with mothers serving terms of imprisonment; what the membership of the working group conducting the research is; what the size of the sample used in the research is; what methods are being employed; and when he expects to publish the results. [147468]

Mr. Boateng: A pilot study is to be set up which will assess the benefits and drawbacks of children remaining in prison with their mothers beyond the current age limit of 18 months. The anticipated start date of the pilot is 1 June 2001. The Steering Group is chaired jointly by the Head of Prison Service Women's Policy Group and the Operational Manager for Women's Prisons. It includes members from the four prison Mother and Baby Units, Social Services, Social Services Inspectorate, Association of Chief Officers of Probation, Prison Service Health Policy Unit and a number of experts on child health care, including a child psychologist and a child psychiatrist. The Steering Group will decide on the size of the sample, the method of evaluation and the length of the pilot. The results of the pilot will be published on completion.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of women sentenced to immediate imprisonment have no previous convictions; and if he will give a breakdown of the type of offences *(a)* such women and *(b)* all women sentenced to imprisonment have committed in the latest year for which figures are available. [147467]

Mr. Boateng: Provisional information shows that in December 2000 there were 628 women in the prison population of England and Wales that had been sentenced to immediate imprisonment.

Information on the number of women in prison in England and Wales, and which types of crimes they have committed is given in the table. This information is also published in successive volumes of "Prison Statistics England and Wales" (chapter one of the 1999 edition, Cm 4805), copies of which are in the Library.

Number of women received into prisons throughout England and Wales in 2000 broken down by offence type and custody

Offence group	*Sentenced women received under immediate custody*	*All sentenced imprisoned women*
Violence against the person	94	345
Frauds and forgery	60	92
Theft and handling	119	316
Drug offences	208	956
Sex offences	9	23
Robbery	26	155
Burglary	23	112
Offence not recorded	36	48
Other offences	53	158
Total	628	2,205

Departmental Policies (Slough)

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Slough constituency, the effects on Slough of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [146927]

Mr. Straw: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report, "Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000", is available in the Library.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects cannot be matched in the way requested, although set out are examples relating to Slough constituency.

Under the Crime Reduction Programme the following amounts have been awarded to Slough:

Reducing Burglary: £119,270

Neighbourhood Wardens Scheme: £179,983

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV): £140,454

Schemes

Reducing Burglary Project—Stoke and Farnham Wards: £119,270.

The project is part of the Crime Reduction Programme Round 2 burglary initiatives. It is based in the Stoke and Farnham wards in Slough. The area is one of the most deprived in Slough with high unemployment, poor facilities and relatively high crime rates. The wards have a young population and high proportions of minority ethnic groups (Farnham 34 per cent. and Stoke 42 per cent.).

The project has a lot of partnership working between the police and other agencies and is based around the following interventions.

Alarms

200 National Approval Council for Security Systems (NACOSS) approved alarms are to be installed over the lifetime of the project, the intended recipients are those who have experienced burglary. The original project had 100 alarms, but with extra Home Office funding (£39,270) and a sponsorship deal with British Gas, this has improved the quality and quantity of the alarms.

Improved fencing in the area.

Improved lighting in agreement with the local authority and Southern Electric. Contracting to improve the lighting in the area has been negotiated.

Informant Fund

Work is progressing on developing a good quality informant.

Neighbourhood Wardens Scheme: £179,983. To improve the quality of life for residents in two deprived estates. Targeted activity will reduce incidents of anti-social behaviour, racial harassment and the fear of crime. This scheme is also looking at ways to link into the Reducing Burglary project.

CCTV—The Farnham Road Slough: £140,454. This covers the second largest shopping area in Slough and associated car parks.

Slough is part of the Thames Valley Police bid for arrest referral. Thames Valley police were awarded £624,278 from March 2000 to March 2002 of which £188,750 is being allocated to a scheme in Slough. This award is to fund an arrest referral worker and contributing to the treatment of those referred by the scheme. Slough has one custody suite with one arrest referral worker. Thames Valley police are matching the Home Office funding. There is also a contribution from Slough Council.

Slough already had a successful arrest referral scheme in existence from November 1999. This was a partnership arrangement between SMART (Substance Misuse Arrest Referral Team), Thames Valley police and Slough Council—an arrangement that continues with Joint Funding Initiative. SMART Criminal Justice services is a registered charity specialising in working with drug related offenders at various points of the criminal justice process. It was set up in 1996 in direct response to the Government's drugs strategy—"Tackling Drugs to Build a better Britain".

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Slough to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established including one covering the Slough Unitary Authority which has undertaken an audit of the levels of crime in Slough and developed a strategy to reduce them;

155 Youth Offending Teams have been set up across the country including one in Slough. They are a key part of the Government's radical reform of the youth justice system which also includes a range of new penalties which make young offenders face up to the consequences of their offending behaviour and make reparation to the victims of their crimes;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 in January 2000 to 69,870 by the end of November 2000; and good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire related deaths in the home. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Winter Fuel Payment

16. **Mr. Sarwar:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the timetable for payment of the winter fuel allowance. [145974]

Mr. Rooker: Our aim is to make sure that this winter elderly people do not worry about turning up their heating in cold weather. As promised, the vast majority of payments were made to elderly households before Christmas.

32. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the number of eligible pensioners whose Winter Fuel Payments in the current financial year *(a)* were delayed and *(b)* have not been paid. [145991]

Mr. Rooker: As promised, for this winter the vast majority of Winter Fuel Payments were automatically made before Christmas to those found to be entitled.

For those who need to claim the payment, this will be paid once entitlement has been established.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action he will take to ensure that people aged 60 years and over will be given prior notification of the £50 reduction in this year's Winter Fuel Payment. [146354]

Mr. Rooker: The Winter Fuel Payment which the hon. Member opposes has proved to be extremely popular. We shall announce our proposals for this winter in due course.

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much it would cost to extend the annual Winter Fuel Payments to those aged under 60 years who receive the middle or higher rates of Disability Living Allowance; and if he will make a statement. [146738]

Mr. Rooker: The estimated cost of my hon. Friend's suggestion is £150 million, each year.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the *(a)* number and *(b)* percentage of (i) male and (ii) female pensioners that would be at a financial disadvantage if the winter fuel allowance and the free television licence for over-75-year-olds was consolidated in the State Pension. [145524]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* We estimate that at least 5.8 million (or 55 per cent. of) pensioners would be at a financial disadvantage. The figure breaks down to 2.2 million (or 56 per cent. of) men, and 3.6 million (or 54 per cent. of) women.

The 5.8 million includes 3.6 million poorer pensioners claiming one or more income-related benefits (Income Support, Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit).

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the total cost of the Winter Fuel Payments scheme in 2000–01 will be; what would be the total additional costs of making these payments to all households eligible for Social Fund cold weather payments; and if he will make a statement. [147814]

Mr. Rooker: The total cost of the Winter Fuel Payment scheme in 2000–01 is expected to be around £1.7 billion.

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The estimated additional costs of making this winter's payment to all households eligible for Social Fund Cold Weather Payments would be around £300 million.

Note:

Figures rounded to the nearest £5 million.

Poverty

19. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the current level of poverty in Great Britain. [145977]

Mr. Bayley: Our assessment of current levels of poverty is set out in our second annual "Opportunity for All" report, alongside the progress we are making. For example, there are now a million more people in jobs than in 1997.

Unemployment in Wiltshire has fallen by over 50 per cent. since May 1997 and long-term youth unemployment (six months plus) has fallen by over 80 per cent.

23. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of poverty, low pay and other indices of deprivation in the eastern region; and if he will make a statement. [145982]

Mr. Bayley: The national strategy to tackle poverty and social exclusion is outlined in the first and second "Opportunity for All" reports. A central part of that strategy is to focus in on communities and areas that require particular help.

Fraud

25. **Mr. Tynan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to reduce fraud in the social security system. [145984]

Mr. Rooker: After years of neglect, we are getting to grips with Social Security fraud. We have set ourselves firm targets to reduce the losses from fraud and error in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance by 25 per cent. by March 2004, and 50 per cent. by March 2006.

We are implementing a strategy to tighten up the system and make sure that, from the very first claim, the right benefits are going to the right people at the right time. For example, we have implemented tighter checks on new Income Support claimants, and given local authorities an additional £100 million to help them make tougher identity checks on claimants before payments are made. We are also cross-checking DSS records with information from other Government Departments and have allowed all local councils to have access to electronic data from the Benefits Agency.

These are just some of the measures that have already started to make a significant reduction in fraud and error. These will be further strengthened by the new measures proposed in the Fraud Bill currently before Parliament.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if local authority employees in charge of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit fraud investigations may investigate cases where there is suspicion of related Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance fraud. [146342]

Mr. Rooker: We are working in partnership with local authorities in the prevention, detection and deterrence of benefit fraud. Suspected fraud cases in which Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit and Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance are in payment are investigated by whichever investigator, from the Department or the Local Authority, first discovers the fraud.

Stakeholder Pensions

26. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to remind employers of their obligations to inform their employees about the new stakeholder pensions. [145985]

Mr. Rooker: We have sent a guide to all employers with five or more employees and articles have been included in Inland Revenue newsletters which have been sent to all employers.

We will continue to publicise the requirements using further editions of the Inland Revenue newsletter and articles in various trade magazines.

In addition to our own activities, pension providers will be marketing stakeholder pensions to employers.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received about the impact of the recent developments at Equitable Life on the take-up of stakeholder pensions; and if he will make a statement. [145980]

Mr. Rooker: People are naturally concerned about the Equitable Life affair and have made representations about the effect that it might have on their pension savings.

We do not expect that there will be a significant effect on the take up of stakeholder pensions.

Disabled People

27. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what support his Department is giving to help those with disabilities to return to work. [145986]

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement about his Department's involvement in the new deal for disabled people. [145983]

Mr. Bayley: We are committed to helping disabled people who want to work, to do so. The New Deal for Disabled People is a joint initiative of the Department of Social Security and the Department for Education and Employment.

We are setting up a national network of Job Brokers to explore ways of giving those on incapacity benefits the support, guidance and preparation they need to find paid work and move off benefit dependence.

We are also starting job retention and rehabilitation pilots to help people who become ill in work. These pilots will test the effectiveness of early work-focused help, involving health, social security, employment and other services.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the opportunities available to disabled people who are in

receipt of *(a)* Severe Disability Allowance, *(b)* Income Support and *(c)* both, to make appropriate provision for their retirement. [146737]

Mr. Bayley: Up to now, disabled people whose working lives have been interrupted lose the opportunity to contribute to a pension scheme as well as the opportunity to work and are often therefore unable to build up a decent pension for retirement. That is one of the main reasons we are reforming the State Earnings-Related Pension Scheme (SERPS) with the State Second Pension.

People getting Severe Disablement Allowance, and those on Income Support with an underlying entitlement to long-term Incapacity Benefit, will be able to build up entitlement to State Second Pension provided at state pension age they have worked and paid (or have been treated as having paid) Class 1 employee National Insurance contributions for at least one tenth of their working life since 1978 (when SERPS was introduced).

Every qualifying year will be worth £1 a week additional pension at today's rates.

In addition, the majority of these people are likely to qualify for top-up payments through the Pension Credit, on which the Government are now consulting.

Those disabled people unable to qualify for State Second Pension may benefit from the Minimum Income Guarantee from age 60.

Child Support

28. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make it a requirement for both parents in disputed cases before the Child Support Agency to take a second independent test if either party requests it. [145987]

Angela Eagle: The CSA can offer a DNA test to help resolve the issue of disputed parentage but it cannot force any parent to take a test. If either parent does not accept a test result, they may apply to the courts for a declaration of parentage.

From 31 January this year, the CSA will be allowed to make and enforce a maintenance assessment against the person named by the parent with care as the child's parent if that person refuses to take a DNA test. If the non-resident parent continues to dispute parentage, it is up to him to take the test, or to apply to the courts for a declaration of parentage which will be binding on the Agency.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will complete his investigation into the complaint lodged by Ms Nancy Bath of Paignton, Devon against the Child Support Agency; and if he will make a statement concerning the reason for the delays in the Independent Case Examiner beginning an investigation into the complaint and the Plymouth CSA collating the papers required. [147299]

Angela Eagle: The current clearance times for cases in the office of the Independent Case Examiner's office is 29 weeks in total. There are currently 227 cases awaiting investigation. Cases referred currently wait around 11 weeks on average for an investigation to begin.

The information requested about Nancy Bath is confidential. My noble Friend the Baroness Hollis of Heigham will write to the hon. Member separately about the issues raised relating to Ms Bath's case.

New Deal for 50 Plus

29. **Mr. Jim Murphy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what projections he has made of benefits savings as a consequence of the New Deal for 50 plus. [145988]

Angela Eagle: We are committed to the principal of extending opportunity for all to everyone regardless of age, and tackling age discrimination in the workplace. New Deal 50 plus has already helped nearly 25,000 people aged over 50 back into work.

It is known that the economic cost of the drop in work rates among the over 50s since 1979 is high. It has been estimated that about £16 billion a year in GDP is lost and it costs £3–5 billion in extra benefits and lost taxes. Savings in benefit payments from the New Deal 50 plus have not yet been established.

35. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he has taken to evaluate the performance of the New Deal for 50 plus programme. [145996]

Angela Eagle: In the first nine months of the programme nearly 25,000 people got back into work through the New Deal 50 plus.

Evaluation of New Deal 50 plus is currently under way to test the design and delivery of the programme. This will be published later this year. The evaluation includes a mix of quantitative and qualitative work with participants as well as some qualitative research with New Deal personal advisers and Benefits Agency staff.

Evaluation of the pathfinder areas has already been carried out and a report published. Participants' initial impressions of the programme were very positive. Views about the Employment Credit, a key element of the New Deal 50 plus package, were generally very positive, and it was unanimously seen as an incentive to take up work.

Ms Dari Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what discussions he has had with voluntary organisations about the New Deal for 50 plus. [145968]

Angela Eagle: Our New Deal for those aged over 50 has helped nearly 25,000 people move into jobs in the first nine months of national operation. The Department for Education and Employment has developed links with a number of voluntary organisations in order to promote this New Deal and to harness their experience and expertise.

Earnings Disregard

30. **Mr. Cousins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if it is his policy to increase the present levels of earnings disregards in income-related benefits. [145989]

Angela Eagle: From April 2001 we are increasing the higher rate disregard in the income-related benefits, for lone parents, disabled people and other special groups, from £15 to £20 a week (other than for those lone parents

receiving Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit who are already eligible for a disregard of £25 a week). This will benefit over 55,000 people.

We are focusing help on people for whom full-time work may not be an immediate option, to help them keep in touch with the labour market through part-time work.

We also want all children, including those in families on Income Support, to benefit directly from child maintenance paid. As part of the child support reforms we will therefore introduce further changes to enable parents with care on Income Support or Jobseekers Allowance (Income Based) to keep up to £10 a week of any child maintenance paid.

Children

31. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what has been the change in benefits for children in *(a)* single parent and *(b)* two-parent families since 1997. [145990]

Angela Eagle: A lone parent family on Income Support, with two children aged under 11, are nearly £25 a week better off as a result of measures announced this Parliament. A two-parent family with the same aged children are nearly £30 a week better off.

Benefits Agency Staff

33. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on his policy on Benefits Agency staff giving advice to applicants and claimants relating to benefits to which they may be entitled. [145994]

Angela Eagle: We are committed to improving access to benefit information for customers and to ensuring that they get the right information through a choice of communication methods. We are currently running the Minimum Income Guarantee take up campaign—the first time any Government has actively encouraged those who are eligible to claim their entitlements.

As published in the Benefits Agency Customer Charter, Benefits Agency staff are required to provide advice and information that is accurate, clear, full and helpful.

Child Poverty

34. **Mr. Coaker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proposals he has to increase the income of the parents of children living in poverty. [145995]

Mr. Bayley: Measures announced this Parliament mean that all families with children will be on average over £15 a week better off, and the poorest will gain by nearly twice as much.

Pensioners

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the total spending of his Department on pensioners. [145961]

Mr. Rooker: This year we will be spending around £4½ billion a year extra in real terms on pensioners as a result of policies under this Government, rising to over £5 billion in 2002–03.

New Deal for Disabled People

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what discussions he has had with employers' organisations about his Department's involvement with the New Deal for disabled people. [145967]

Mr. Bayley: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash, (Liz Blackman) today, *Official Report*, column 15.

Pensioners (Chorley)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in Chorley will receive the increase in the basic State Pension outlined in the Chancellor's pre-Budget report. [145975]

Mr. Rooker: As at 31 March 2000 (the latest date for which figures are available) there were around 15,000 pensioners receiving the State Pension in the parliamentary constituency of Chorley. They will benefit from an increase in the pension this April and next, as announced in the Chancellor's pre-Budget report.

Homeless People

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he will take to help local authorities with the increased costs of housing homeless people. [148037]

Angela Eagle: The non-HRA rent rebate thresholds and subsidy caps have not kept pace with increases in the costs of temporary accommodation in the private rented sector over recent years. Increasing these thresholds will help local authorities in housing those granted asylum and other homeless persons. This will cost around £25 million.

The effect of this increase will be that the non-HRA rent rebate threshold in London will be increased, from April 2001, by £50 to £200, and the subsidy cap increased by £120 to £300, with corresponding percentage increases elsewhere.

Social Security Budget

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of national income the social security budget represents in the 2000–01 financial year. [145965]

Mr. Darling: Social Security benefit expenditure is expected to amount to just over 11 per cent. in 2000–01 compared with 12 per cent. in 1996–97. Social Security spending this Parliament is now running at its lowest rate since the second world war.

Household Incomes

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the largest margin of uncertainty which applies to estimates within his most recent Households Below Average Income publication which do not appear within brackets. [146314]

Mr. Bayley: Estimates of the margin of uncertainty due to the choice of equivalence scales and sampling error can be found in appendices 4 and 5 of "Households Below Average Income 1994–95 to 1998–99". Copies of the publication are held in the Library. It should be noted that

estimates are also subject to other non-sampling errors, such as non-response, whose magnitude it is not possible to quantify.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of individuals living in households below half average income in the first quarter of the most recent financial year for which he has constructed a data set, according to the Households Below Average Income methodology. [146315]

Mr. Bayley: It is not possible to produce robust Households Below Average Income (HBAI) statistics on a quarterly basis.

Motability

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people were *(a)* on Motability's waiting list and *(b)* waiting to terminate a vehicle in favour of a suitable wheelchair accessible solution in each year since the charity was founded. [146347]

Mr. Bayley: There has never been a waiting list for the Motability scheme.

Income Support

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for what reason the estimate of entitled non-recipients of Income Support for the over-60s for the year 1997–98 published in the revised edition of "Income Related Benefits Estimates of take-up in 1996–97" was different to the estimate for 1997–98 published in "Income Related Benefits Estimates of take-up in 1998–99". [146344]

Mr. Rooker: The relevant information is available in "Income Related Benefits Estimates of take-up in 1998–99" (pages 5, 13, 45 and 46), a copy of which is available in the Library.

Retirement (Women)

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action he is taking to ensure that women born after 1955 are informed of the forthcoming increase in retirement age. [146348]

Mr. Rooker: The Pensions Act 1995 affects all women born after 5 April 1950. Between 2010–20 women's state pension age will rise gradually from 60 to 65. Publicity for this change started under the previous administration.

We have taken action to inform women of the changes through leaflets and in the letters from the Department forecasting State Pension entitlement and displays in local BA offices. We have publicised the changes through advertising features in women's and general interest magazines. A national newspaper and magazine advert on the issue is due to feature in March as part of the wider pensions education marketing campaign. Also there is an interactive table on the Internet at www.pensionguide.gov.uk where a woman can type in her date of birth and learn the date she reaches State Pension age.

The Department will periodically review the effectiveness of the approach.

Pensioner Mailshot Project

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the cost will be of the Pensioner Mailshot Project; what its purpose is; and for what reasons it is not intended to prompt pensioners to contact their local Social Security office. [146623]

Mr. Darling: The Department will shortly be writing to all pensioner households to inform them of the plans we announced to the House on 29 November 2000 for the amount of State Earnings-Related Pension Scheme (SERPS) that widows or widowers can inherit from their spouse.

In the course of consultation last year, a number of organisations including the select committees of the House asked us to explore the possibility of writing directly to the public about this subject.

The plans we announced in November mean that no current pensioner will now be affected by the changes to the inherited SERPS rules originally legislated for in 1986.

The letter is designed to ensure that all pensioners are aware of these new arrangements and that the change will be effected automatically; so there is no need for them to make any special claim or to contact their local Social Security office for this purpose. Of course they are always able to contact the Benefits Agency over any query about their pension entitlement.

For workload reasons the mailing will take place on a phased basis over the next two months.

The cost of the exercise is estimated at £2.5 million. The text of the letter is as follows.

Dear Mr/Mrs/Miss or Mr and Mrs

I am writing to let you know about a recent Government announcement on inheriting SERPS.

As well as your basic state pension, you may also get a State Earnings Related Pension (SERPS) if you, or your husband or wife, paid into the scheme when working. You may also know this as "additional pension". In 1986 the law was changed to reduce the amount of SERPS that people widowed after 5 April 2000 could inherit from their husbands or wives.

However, it became clear that for many years after 1986 some people were given incorrect or misleading information about the change and so the Government recently announced new plans for how much SERPS can be passed on to a widow or widower, when the person who has contributed to the scheme dies.

Under these new plans there will be no change to the current arrangements for the following people.

Those who are already widowed now and are receiving a SERPS pension.

Those who are not widows or widowers now, but whose husbands or wives die between now and 5 October 2002.

Parliament is also being asked to approve plans, which would mean there would also be no change for people who are widowed on or after 6 October 2002 but whose late husband or wife reached state pension age on or before 5 October 2002.

If you fall into one of the groups above, you do not need to do anything now or make any special claim in future.

You can read more about other help and services available to pensioners and how to find them in a new guide for pensioners and from Benefits Agency offices. You will be able to find the local office address and telephone number in the telephone directory. The guide will be available soon, so look out for it in

places like your local social security offices, citizens advice bureau or library. If you have access to the Internet, you can also visit our website on www.dss.gov.uk

Keep us up to date

In future, we want to be able to write to you from time to time to keep you up to date. So we need to have up-to-date details of your address. So, if this letter has had to be redirected to reach you, please fill in the attached change of address form and send it back to us in the enclosed envelope. There's no need for a stamp. Or if you move house, please let us know as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely
Paul Gray
Director of Pensions

Jobseeker's Allowance

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the cost of restoring Jobseeker's Allowance to those employed on term-time only contracts. [147153]

Angela Eagle: Entitlement to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) or Income Support (IS) is dependent on, among other things, a person's pattern of employment and their hours of work.

The current legal position is that those term-time workers with an ongoing contract of employment, who are not entitled to JSA or IS during term-time because of the hours they work, are also not entitled to JSA or IS during the school holidays. This position, which reflects the original intention of the legislation when JSA was introduced in 1996, was confirmed by the Court of Appeal in October 1999 following a series of contradictory decisions by Commissioners. The retrospective effect of the Court of Appeal decision means that there was never any entitlement to JSA during the school holidays for this group of ancillary or term-time workers. Leave to appeal to the House of Lords against the Court of Appeal decision was granted and we understand that the hearing has been listed for 21 March.

We have no accurate data on which to base a reliable estimate of the cost of extending entitlement to JSA or IS to all those employed on term-time only contracts. Term-time workers with low incomes may claim in-work benefits such as Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. Those with children may also be entitled to the Working Families Tax Credit.

War Pensions

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for what reason a decision on a constituent's claim for a War Disablement Pension, reference AB501819C with the War Pensions Agency, has been delayed; when the final decision will be notified; and if he will make a statement. [146635]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of War Pensions is a matter for the Chief Executive of the War Pensions Agency, Gordon Hextall. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Gordon Hextall to Mr. Paul Keetch, dated 29 January 2001:

This Parliamentary Question asked why there has been a delay in making a decision on a claim for War Disablement Pension, reference AB 501819C, and when that decision will be notified.

As individual cases are a confidential matter, I will write to the hon. Member privately.

Council Tax (Pensioners)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of pensioner households paid more than 10 per cent. of their household income in council tax in *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 1998–99. [147827]

Mr. Rooker: The requested information is not available for 1999–2000. The information for 1998–99 is as follows.

It is estimated that 6 per cent. of pensioner households were liable to pay more than 10 per cent. of their gross income in council tax after Council Tax Benefit has been taken into account.

Notes:

1. Pensioner households are defined as any household containing a single person over state pension age (65 for men and 65 for women) or a couple (married or cohabiting) where the man is over state pension age.

2. Estimates "after taking account of Council Tax Benefit" use gross (pre-tax) income excluding Council Tax Benefit/rebates, and use council tax liability net of discounts and net of Council Tax Benefit/rebate.

3. Gross (pre-tax) income and council tax payments have been estimated at the household level. Therefore amounts will include income /payments from all (if any) non-pensioners living in the household.

Source:

Family Resources Survey 1998–99.

Down's Syndrome

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what response he has sent to recent representations from the Down's Syndrome Association in connection with the entitlement to disability allowance of young children with that condition. [147156]

Mr. Bayley: I have recently received a copy of a report published by the Downs Syndrome Association on 22 January 2001 along with a covering letter from the Chief Executive of the Downs Syndrome Association. Today I will place a copy of my response to the Chief Executive of the Downs Syndrome Association in the Library.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in Slough are claiming the Minimum Income Guarantee. [147747]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave her on 25 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 682W.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list *(a)* the number of Housing Benefit claimants, *(b)* the average amount paid, *(c)* the administrative cost of each claim and *(d)* the average number of cases not processed in Islington in each of the last five years. [144520]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 9 January 2001]:* The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables. Information is not collected centrally on the number of cases not processed.

Average Housing Benefit caseload and benefit paid by the London Borough of Islington

Year	Housing Benefit caseload	Average weekly amount of Housing Benefit (£)
1995–96	33,930	55.40
1996–97	33,030	56.80
1997–98	33,130	57.80
1998–99	32,580	58.90
1999–2000	28,350	58.90

Source:
Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Management Information System Quarterly 100 per cent. caseload stock-count taken from May 1995 to August 2000.

Housing Benefit administrative costs in the London Borough of Islington

Year	Reported annual expenditure on Housing Benefit administration (£000)	Housing Benefit caseload	Average cost per case (£)
1995–96	2,733	33,930	81
1996–97	2,470	33,030	75
1997–98	3,814	33,130	115
1998–99	1,586	32,580	49

Notes:
1. The data refer to households, which may be a single person, a couple or a family.
2. The caseload for each year has been calculated by averaging the four quarters in the financial year.
3. Caseload figures have been rounded to the nearest 10 cases and the average weekly amounts have been rounded to the nearest 10 pence.
4. The figures for administrative costs are the cost per case using the authority's total expenditure on administration costs, as reported by the authority to the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions, and the total Housing Benefit caseload.
5. The figure for annual expenditure in 1998–99 replaces the previously reported figure.

Miners' Compensation

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the number of cases being dealt with by his Department in regard to miners' compensation claims. [145993]

Mr. Bayley: To date, the DSS has been asked for—and has provided—information on around 30,000 cases. The DSS is working very closely with the Department of Trade and Industry on administrative changes to speed up the process. I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands) on 26 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 729W.

Energy Payments

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many arrangements *(a)* are and *(b)* were in each of the last five years in place to deduct gas and electricity payments from Income Support and income-based Jobseeker's Allowance; and if he will make a statement. [147813]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the tables.

Deductions from Income Support for gas and electricity, August 1996 to August 2000

Thousand

Year	All cases	Electric only	Gas only	Electricity and gas
1996	168.4	27.0	121.1	20.2
1997	137.6	23.7	98.1	15.8
1998	99.2	20.2	67.7	11.4
1999	71.9	18.9	44.7	8.3
2000	60.4	17.0	35.8	7.6

Deductions from income-based Jobseeker's Allowance for gas and electricity, August 1997 to August 2000

Thousand

Year	All cases	Electric only	Gas only	Electricity and gas
1997	15.4	3.0	11.1	1.4
1998	10.3	2.7	6.7	1.0
1999	5.6	1.8	3.4	0.5
2000	3.5	1.2	2.1	0.2

Notes:
1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample records, taken at August each year, and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred and shown in thousands.
3. Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance replaced Income Support for the unemployed in October 1996.

Source:
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, August 1996 to August 2000.
Jobseeker's Allowance Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, August 1997 to August 2000.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 30 January 2001

DEFENCE

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the recently published report by the United Nations Environment Programme into the environmental and health impact of the use of depleted uranium munitions by NATO forces during the conflict over Kosovo. [145293]

Mr. Spellar: The UN Environment Programme's (UNEP) report has not yet been published, but is expected around March 2001.

UNEP announced its intention in September 2000 to conduct field studies of sites in Kosovo that were struck by ordnance containing depleted uranium during the Kosovo crisis and undertook a field mission during November 2000. The mission to Kosovo took vegetation, soil and water samples and radiological measurements in chosen target sites. The mission also planned to undertake an analysis of the toxicological situation. The samples have been sent to a number of European laboratories for further analysis. UNEP announced some preliminary findings following this field mission, by way of press releases. When the final report is published, we will make an assessment of its findings.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if it remains his policy to sanction the use of munitions containing depleted uranium in future operations in which the United Kingdom is involved; and if he will make a statement. [144736]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 11 January 2001]:* Depleted uranium (DU) ammunition provides a battle winning military capability. Alternative materials are not as effective. Therefore DU will remain part of our arsenal for the foreseeable future because, when this country commits our forces to conflict, we fight to win. Our troops need the best available equipment to enable them to do this. To deny them a legitimate capability would be quite wrong.

Defence Feasibility Studies

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if Russia will participate in the forthcoming NATO theatre ballistic missile defence feasibility studies; and if he will make a statement. [146636]

Mr. Hoon: The Ministry of Defence is not aware of any plans for Russian participation in the forthcoming NATO theatre ballistic missile defence feasibility studies. There have, however, been discussions between NATO and Russia in recent months on the scope for co-operation on theatre missile defence and related issues.

Anti-tank Weaponry

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the anti-tank weaponry available to his Department for purchase, indicating which of these weapons are in use in NATO forces. [147271]

Mr. Hoon: The information requested is not held centrally and can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

As part of the acquisition process we publish details of the capability that we need to acquire. We then invite industry to present potential solutions that they believe will meet our requirements. We do not seek to assess every anti-tank weapon available for potential procurement, though we keep major developments under review.

Interoperability with other NATO forces is an important consideration in deciding which anti-tank equipments to purchase.

Pilots

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* pilots and *(b)* fast jet pilots there are in the armed forces; and how many are women. [147695]

Mr. Spellar: The number of trained pilots currently serving in the armed forces is set out in the table:

	Naval service	*Army*[1]	*RAF*[2,3]
All aircraft	461	761	2,184
Of which:			
Female	1	12	34
Fast jet	41	—	847
Of which:			
Female	0	—	8

[1] These figures do not include non-army air corps officers and soldiers who may have qualified as army pilots in the past but have since returned to their original army or service and are no longer employed as pilots.
[2] 1,492 pilots (including 30 women) currently fill flying posts in the RAF. This figure includes 561 fast jet pilots, five of whom are women. The remaining pilots are employed in ground based posts that require specialist aircraft knowledge and experience.
[3] As at 1 December 2000.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* pilots and *(b)* fast jet pilots are being trained for the armed forces; and how many are women. [147696]

Mr. Spellar: The number of pilots being trained for the armed forces is set out in the table.

	Naval Service	*Army*[1]	*RAF*[2,3]
All aircraft	220	97	552
Of which:			
Female	2	5	19
Fast jet	25	—	46
Of which:			
Female	0	—	2

[1] These figures relate only to those individuals who are in the flying training system and do not include army air corps direct entry officer cadets who are currently under training at Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.
[2] Includes 458 personnel (15 women) who have yet to be assigned to a particular role, 17 of whom (one female) are officer designates undergoing initial officer training.
[3] As at 1 December 2000.

S and T Class Submarines

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the planned dates of decommissioning of each of the Royal Navy's S and T class submarines. [147576]

Mr. Spellar: HMS Swiftsure was operationally decommissioned in 1992. The planned operational decommissioning dates for the remainder of the Royal Navy's S class submarines are as follows:

Swiftsure class SSN	*Planned operational decommissioning date*
HMS Sovereign	2005
HMS Superb	2006
HMS Sceptre	2010
HMS Spartan	2006
HMS Splendid	2003

The planned operational decommissioning dates for the Royal Navy's Trafalgar class submarines are as follows:

Trafalgar class SSN	*Planned operational decommissioning date*
HMS Trafalgar	2007
HMS Turbulent	2008
HMS Tireless	2011
HMS Torbay	2020
HMS Trenchant	2022
HMS Talent	2015
HMS Triumph	2017

Lynx Helicopters

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Lynx helicopters the Royal Navy possesses; and how many of these are fully serviceable. [147564]

Mr. Spellar: As at 26 January 2001, the Royal Navy had a total of 74 Lynx helicopters, of which 48 constituted the Active Fleet. Of these, 33 were fully serviceable. These figures provide a snapshot on a specific date. Numbers can change on a daily basis as aircraft move in and out maintenance.

Astute Class Submarines

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the planned date of entry into service is of the first batch of Astute class submarines. [147577]

Dr. Moonie: The planned in service date for the first Astute class submarine is June 2005.

JSF Aircraft

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the sums to be paid to the US as part of the British contribution to the EMD phase of the JSF project are already provided for in the defence estimates; and if he will make a statement. [147566]

Mr. Hoon: The Future Carrier Borne Aircraft and the new carriers have been a central part of the Government's defence policy since the Strategic Defence Review. The necessary financial priority has been given to providing these capabilities, and they are adequately reflected in our forward plans.

Type 45 Destroyers

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) when he proposes to place a contract for the first Type 45 destroyers; and if he will make a statement; [147572]

(2) what plans he has to ensure that Type 45 destroyers have their own anti-submarine warfare capability; if this will be available from the outset; and if he will make a statement; [147574]

(3) what sonar equipment will be carried by the Type 45 destroyers; [147573]

(4) if he will list the anti-submarine systems carried by the Type 45 destroyers, and the age of the sonars involved. [147575]

Dr. Moonie: As I stated on 21 December 2000, *Official Report*, columns 248–51W, a contract was placed on 20 December with BAE Systems Electronics (the nominated Prime Contractor for the Type 45 programme) for the Demonstration and First-of-Class Manufacture phase covering the completion of the design and build of the first three Type 45 destroyers. Equipped with the Principal Anti-Air Missile System, the primary role of the Type 45 is anti-air warfare, although it will have an anti-submarine capability.

Following contract signature we have been able to accelerate the fitting of a hull-mounted sonar, the top requirement within the Incremental Acquisition Plan (IAP), so that this is now achievable in all Type 45s as they are built. An Invitation to Tender for the sonar system will be issued by the Prime Contractor in February and we envisage that a new, off-the-shelf system will prove to offer best value for money.

The Type 45 has been designed with a much lower acoustic signature than the existing Type 42, and this will reduce the likelihood of its detection by submarines. From the outset, in addition to the sonar, the Type 45's anti-submarine warfare capability will be provided by the Lynx HMA Mark 8 helicopter; the ships will also be fully interoperable with the Merlin HM Mark 1 anti-submarine helicopter. These aircraft will carry Stingray anti-submarine torpedoes. The Type 45s will also be equipped, from build, to carry the Surface Ship Torpedo Defence System (SSTD) towed and expendable acoustic decoys. In the longer term, all the Type 45s will also be fitted to deploy enhanced SSTD countermeasures, and this requirement forms part of the Type 45 IAP.

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if it is a requirement of the ministerial approvals for the current procurement strategy for the Type 45 destroyer that BAE Systems Marine and Vosper Thorneycroft are prepared for effective competition downstream in the programme; [147982]

(2) pursuant to his written answer of 21 December 2000, *Official Report*, columns 249–50W, in what circumstances the DFM contract allows for his Department to withhold its agreement for a significant

sub-contract; how this is affected by the principle of the assumption of risk by the prime contractor; and if he will make a statement; [147984]

(3) pursuant to his answer of 21 December 2000, *Official Report*, columns 249–50W, what obligations the DFM contract places upon BAE Systems Electronics to prepare BAE Systems Marine and Vosper Thorneycroft to compete for later ships of the class; [147983]

(4) pursuant to his written answer of 21 December 2000, *Official Report*, columns 249–50W, if acceptance of BAE Systems Marine's unsolicited proposal would require *(a)* amendment and *(b)* renegotiation of the DFM contract with BAE Systems Electronics. [147985]

Dr. Moonie: In his statement on 11 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 701–12, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence advised the House that, under the control of the Prime Contractor (BAE Systems Electronics), a single design definition is being developed involving the two shipbuilders BAE Systems Marine and Vosper Thorneycroft. This will mean, that from the outset, we have a design that can be efficiently constructed by either company, and that this will assist competition for follow-on ships. This is the basis of the Demonstration and First of Class Manufacture (DFM) contract which covers the design and build of the first three ships only. Our procurement strategy has not changed.

The DFM contract requires all sub-contracts with a value in excess of £500,000 to be competed unless agreed otherwise between the Prime Contractor and the MOD. The Prime Contractor is also required to satisfy the MOD that prices of an sub-contracts to be placed non-competitively are fair and reasonable. The MOD is free to decide in what manner it wishes to be associated with the pricing of sub-contracts and, through the mechanisms described above, will have a close oversight of them. The Prime Contractor is responsible for the selection of his sub-contractors and the risk that the Prime Contractor has accepted in the contract will remain unchanged by this oversight.

The BAE Systems Marine unsolicited proposal is still being assessed but if it is accepted, the DFM contract would need to be re-negotiated.

Parachuting

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many armed forces personnel are qualified to make parachute drops. [147760]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* 4,515 armed forces personnel are currently qualified to make operational military parachute descents. This figure comprises:

	Number
Royal Marines/Royal Navy	195
Army[1]	3,177
Royal Air Force	156
Territorial Army	987

[1] Including Special Forces

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many armed forces personnel have been given parachute training in each of the past five years; and what has been the cost of this training. [147759]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* The number of armed forces personnel given parachute training and the cost, in each of the past five years, is set out in the table:

Year	*Number*	*Cost (£)*
1996	683	1,832,900
1997	796	2,160,600
1998	817	2,221,500
1999	818	2,224,400
2000	822	2,236,000

US National Missile Defence

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 24 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 577W, on US National Missile Defence, if he will make a statement on the content of the discussions between his Department and the previous US Administration. [148022]

Mr. Hoon: We held extensive discussions with the previous US Administration on a wide range of issues relating to their National Missile Defence plans, notably the international security implications of their proposals.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Education Funding (Lancaster)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the extra capital and revenue resources made available to each school in Lancaster and Wyre constituency since May 1997. [145544]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 24 January 2001]:* The information requested is not held centrally.

Teacher Vacancies

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many vacancies for qualified classroom teachers in maintained secondary schools there are in *(a)* England, *(b)* Essex, *(c)* Southend on Sea, *(d)* Kensington and Chelsea, *(e)* Barking, *(f)* Dagenham, *(g)* Lambeth, *(h)* Islington and *(i)* Enfield. [145632]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* The number of vacant, full-time qualified classroom teacher posts in maintained secondary schools in the local authorities specified are shown in the following table.

	Vacancies	*Rate*
Essex	68	1.5
Southend on Sea	16	2.8
Kensington and Chelsea	2	0.9
Barking and Dagenham	9	1.4
Lambeth	9	2.0
Islington	11	2.3
Enfield	12	1.0
England	1,143	0.7

The number of regular teachers in maintained schools increased by 6,900 between January 1998 and January 2000.

There was a growth of 2,000 in the number of people training to be teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many vacancies for teachers in England there are within maintained schools classified by each subject; and what the total shortage in England was in each of the last 10 years. [145633]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* Vacant full-time qualified classroom teacher posts in England in the maintained secondary sector in January 2000, by their main teaching subject, are as follows:

	Posts
Mathematics	230
Information technology	60
Chemistry	10
Physics	30
Biology	20
Integrated or combined science	80
Other science	20
French	40
German	10
French or German	30
Spanish	10
Other languages	20
Welsh	[1] —
English	130
Drama	20
History	10
Social sciences	10
Geography	30
Religious education	40
Design and technology	110
Commercial and business studies	20
Art, craft or design	20
Music	40
Physical education	30
Special educational needs	60
Careers	[1] —
Any other main subjects	30
Combined subjects	40
England	1,140

[1] Less than five

Note:
All figures have been rounded to the nearest 10. The total England figure may not equal the sum of the subject breakdown due to rounding.

Full-time qualified classroom teacher vacancies in maintained secondary schools in England were as follows:

	Vacancies	*Rate*
1991[1]	1,870	1.1
1992	870	0.5
1993	560	0.3
1994	560	0.3
1995	460	0.3
1996	510	0.3
1997	650	0.4
1998	860	0.5
1999	840	0.5
2000	1,140	0.7

[1] Vacancies for 1991 and earlier years used different recording practices and are not directly comparable with later years

Note:
Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.

All the vacancies figures quoted exclude vacancies for heads and deputy heads.

The number of regular teachers in maintained schools increased by 6,900 between January 1998 and January 2000.

There was a growth of 2,000 in the number of people training to be teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the three education authorities in England with the highest number of vacancies for qualified classroom teachers in maintained secondary schools. [145634]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* The three English local authorities with the highest number of qualified classroom teacher vacancies in maintained secondary schools at January 2000 is shown in the following table.

	Vacancies	*Rates*
Essex	68	1.5
Hampshire	49	1.3
Kent	44	0.8

The number of regular teachers in maintained schools increased by 6,900 between January 1998 and January 2000.

There was a growth of 2,000 in the number of people training to be teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

Oxford and Cambridge Universities

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many and what percentage share of *(a)* applicants and *(b)* successful applicants there were to (i) Oxford and (ii) Cambridge University from (1) fee-paying schools, (2) local authority 11 to 18 year comprehensive schools, (3) Sixth Form Colleges, (4) state grammar schools and (5) tertiary and general further education colleges, together with the equivalent figures for each constituent college of each of the two universities, for the academic year 2000–01. [145739]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 24 January 2001]:* The available data for Oxford and Cambridge are shown in the following table. Figures for each constituent college are not available centrally.

UCAS UK-domiciled applicants and acceptances to Oxford and Cambridge universities by previous educational establishment—autumn 2000 entry

	Oxford		*Cambridge*	
	Number	*Percentage*[1]	*Number*	*Percentage*[1]
Applicants				
Independent	3,202	40	3,526	36
Comprehensive[2]	2,665	33	3,702	38
Sixth Form College	782	10	913	9
Grammar	428	5	609	6
FE/HE	497	6	526	5
Other[3]	108	1	136	1
Not known	281	4	413	4
Total	7,963	100	9,825	100

UCAS UK-domiciled applicants and acceptances to Oxford and Cambridge universities by previous educational establishment—autumn 2000 entry

	Oxford		Cambridge	
	Number	Percentage[1]	Number	Percentage[1]
Acceptance applicants				
Independent	1,343	46	1,306	44
Comprehensive[2]	945	32	1,002	33
Sixth Form College	269	9	251	8
Grammar	162	6	210	7
FE/HE	119	4	109	4
Other[3]	27	1	28	1
Not known	63	2	93	3
Total	2,928	100	2,999	100

[1] Constituent parts may not sum to totals because of rounding
[2] Includes former Grant Maintained schools
[3] Includes Sixth Form Centres, Special schools, Other secondary schools, Other educational establishments (Adult Colleges and City Technology Colleges), and students whose previous establishment was not known

Awarding Bodies and Examiners

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what consultations he has held with awarding bodies and examiners in connection with their setting, marking and grading activities this summer; what assessment he has made of the extent to which the new AS levels will be accommodated within their programme of work and staff availability; and if he will make a statement. [146058]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* A greater number of examiners is needed this summer, not least because we are in transition from the old A level qualifications to our new and widely welcomed reforms. The exact number of examiners needed will not be known until Easter, when entries have been made. The awarding bodies have already begun recruiting examiners. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is working with the awarding bodies to ensure that the system will deliver this summer's results on time. We are monitoring this work closely to confirm that all necessary steps have been taken. The Government are committed to maintaining a robust and effective public examination system.

Education Spending (East Sussex)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the level of spending was per pupil in *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools in East Sussex for each year from 1990 to the last year for which figures are available, expressed in today's prices. [146701]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 23 January 2001]:* The following table shows the spending per pupil in real terms, separately for primary and secondary pupils, in East Sussex for the years 1990–91 to 1998–99, the latest year for which this information is currently available. These figures are based on net institutional expenditure at 2000–01 prices.

£

	Pre-primary and primary	Secondary
1990–91	1,660	2,650
1991–92	1,790	2,540
1992–93	1,900	2,730
1993–94	1,950	2,700
1994–95	1,980	2,770
1995–96	1,960	2,730
1996–97	1,900	2,600
1997–98	1,800	2,530
1998–99	1,880	2,530

The following table sets out the resources made available to East Sussex local education authority for primary and secondary education since 1997–98, at 2000–01 prices. These figures are not directly comparable with net institutional expenditure set out in the first table, but they do reflect real terms increases in primary and secondary funding per pupil over the last three years of £420 and £370 respectively.

£ per pupil

	Standard spending assessment	Special and specific grants	SSA and special/specific grants
Primary			
1997–98	2,250	30	2,280
1998–99	2,320	40	2,370
1999–2000	2,380	130	2,510
2000–01	2,440	250	2,700
Secondary			
1997–98	2,960	30	2,990
1998–99	3,040	40	3,080
1999–2000	3,070	80	3,150
2000–01	3,170	190	3,350

Under this Government, funding per pupil has already increased by over £300 nationally in real terms, and it will increase by a further £150 per pupil for 2001–02. Under the last Government, funding per pupil fell by £60 in real terms between 1994–95 and 1997–98. There will be further increases in funding following the year 2000 spending review: a further £370 per pupil over the three year period, taking the total increase to nearly £700 between 1997–98 and 2003–04.

Research Projects

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what research projects commissioned by his Department are expected to report *(a)* within three months, *(b)* in between three and 12 months and *(c)* more than 12 months ahead; and what arrangements he is making for their publication. [147155]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* The results of research are published in line with the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. The Department aims to publish or release for publication at least 90 per cent. of research reports within 16 weeks of receiving a final draft from its contractors.

The Department publishes research in its Research Reports series. Copies are also available on the Department's website on the day of publication. Details of the research projects expected to report in the periods requested are contained in the following table. Details of the Department's research and research publications are published every year in the Department's Annual Report on Research.

Publication/availability within three months

How employers and service providers are responding to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995

Research on Returns to Education and Training

English language as a barrier to employment, training and education

Decision-making and provision within the SEN Code of Practice

Assessing/measuring the Skills Development Fund

Further investigation of a disadvantaged group on pre-vocational training

The effect of ethnicity on adult participation in learning

Recruiting and training young people and adults: research into employers' use of Key Skills and the potential of 'graduation'.

Evaluation of employment and training based pilots for rough sleepers aged over 25

Literature review on adult community-based learning

Integrating self-assessment into inspection procedures: the impact on the quality of group day care provisions

Quality of Work focus groups

Baseline Study of Work-Life Balance Practices in Great Britain

Implementation of the Education Maintenance Allowance Pilots—the first year

Staying Away or Staying On? A qualitative evaluation of Education Maintenance Allowance scheme

Education Maintenance Allowance: the first year—a quantitative evaluation

Final Evaluation of ADAPT and EMPLOYMENT

Transport Sector Skills Dialogue

Research on the cost of Investors in People and related activities

Childcare Quality Improvement and Quality Assurance Practices and Relevant Staff and Parental Attitudes.

Student Support—Transport Mapping, Options and Guidance Exercise.

Learning and Work Bank Project: Mapping Work

Evaluation of Pilot Summer Activities for 16 Year Olds.

Adult:Child Ratios for Early Years Settings in the Private and Voluntary Sector

Learning & Training at Work 2000

Publication/availability between three and twelve months

Parents' experiences of the process of choosing a Secondary school

Barriers to employment for offenders

Out of school study support: evaluation of Playing for Success—stage 2.

Career Development Loans defaults

Employment and the Euro

Employers awareness and use of Open Learning

International schools benchmarking study

Flexible training strategies evaluation

Participation in higher education by mature students.

Reasons for younger worker drop-out from NVQ units and full NVQs.

Research into methods of funding the Community Sector and comparison of Community Champions and the Community Development Learning Fund

Entry, retention and loss: A study of the childcare workforce

Research into the outcomes, in Secondary Education, for children excluded from Primary School.

Identification of strategies to reduce student non-completion in higher education.

Evaluation of pre-16 work experience

Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS) 2

Enhancing the Internal Verifier and Assessor Roles.

National Adult Learning Survey 2000

Research to assess initial response by schools and colleges to Government's "Qualifying for Success" reforms to post-16 qualifications

Economic impact of the Code of Practice on age diversity in employment

Evaluation of the University for Industry development projects

ESF leavers survey 1999

Development of a model to estimate the costs to the Exchequer and economy of social exclusion

Final evaluation of ESF Objective 4

YCS: methodological review

The longer-term impact of capacity building in ESF.

Improving the take-up of free school meals

Feasibility study for a longitudinal survey of the impact of out-of-school childcare on children

Nature of training and motivation to train in small firms

Communal Establishment Survey

Evaluation of INCLUDE

Youth Cohort Study: (Cohort 10, Sweep 1)

Youth Cohort Study: Cohort 9, 18 year olds sweep (Cohort 9, sweep 3)

Womens Unit research on awareness of and attitudes to Government initiatives to help balance work and life outside work

Educationalising the code of practice for trainers in the use of physical interventions and developing a system for accrediting training

Ex-ante evaluation of Objective 2, URBAN & LEADER

Case studies of employer Good Practice in the employment and retention of older workers

Survey of the use of ICT to support the delivery of careers education in schools and colleges

Monitoring the Disability Discrimination Act: stage 2

Research on the relationship between volunteering and employability

Survey of the delivery of career education & guidance in schools

International literature review of New Deal for Disabled People target groups

The gender pay gap—a review of EU literature and secondary analysis

Barriers to employment for disabled people, the employers' perspective

The Youth Cohort Study work programme.

Research to inform the development and implementation of the Connexions service

Young people—money and risk in early adult life.

The validity & transferability of NVQs in the workplace: third phase study

Evaluation of Career Development Loans: Trainee Survey

Further Research on the Returns to Higher Education in the UK

Exploring the Participation of Women in ITCE-related Courses and Careers

Financial Services Skills Dialogue.

Evaluation of the Neighbourhood Support Fund—STAGE ONE.

Preliminary Research into the Endorsement of FENTO standards.

Young People's experiences of the Learning Gateway.

Evaluation of UK Online Computer Training

Ageism—The attitudes and experiences of young people

Beacon Schools—Further external evaluation of the initiative

Skills Information: Statistical Database & Website Development

Independent/State School Partnerships: Sustainability of 1998–99 Funded Projects

Evaluation of the Wired-Up Communities Initiative

EAZ Evaluation

Research on recent developments in Employee Development Schemes

A Survey of Former Childminders

Food and Drink Manufacturing Skills Dialogue

The Army Training Mapping Project: A Joint Study into Possible Areas for Co-operation DfEE and the Army Training and Recruiting Agency

Employers Skill Survey 2000

Associate Professional Skills and Qualifications

Modelling the potential implications of graduation on 16 year olds in three geographical areas

The Event Causes and Implications of Skill Deficiencies (ECISD)—IER, Warwick

Information Technology and Communication Sector Dialogue

Childcare Workforce Surveys 2000

A Research Project to establish the current state of School Leadership in England

Building Basic Skills in the Workplace: Evaluation Proposal

Key Issues in Higher Education.

Evaluation of the Learning and Development Fund

Evaluation of the learning card demonstration projects.

Learning package for A Level Geography

Projections of Occupations and Qualifications

Evaluation of Business Link Exemplar School Clusters.

Qualitative Evaluation of Fully-Fledged Employment Zones: A Study of Local Delivery Agents and Area Case Studies

Evaluation of Millennium Volunteers

Evaluation of Adult Information, Advice and Guidance Partnerships: Progress Towards a Comprehensive Service (SBU)

Research Study into the Operation of Appeal Panels, Use of the code of Practice and Training for Panel Members

International Comparison of Skills, Performance and New Technologies in Matched Engineering Plants

Publication/availability more than twelve months ahead

Evaluation of one-stop mentor pilots

Skills Survey 2

Improving Speech and Language Development of Children in Sure Start Areas

Tracking the Progress of Schools in Investors in People

Monitoring and evaluation of projects funded from the Partners for Study Support: DfEE Grant Scheme

Evaluation of Learning Partnerships and the Partnership Funds.

Long-Term Evaluation of Self Employment Assistance Provided by the Princes Trust—Business Under the Youth Enterprise Initiative

Evaluation of the Progress File Demonstration Projects.

Employment Zones Cohort and Economic Study

Dance and Drama Awards

Evaluation of the Further Education Standards Fund

Evaluation of the CMF ICT Learning Centres

Achievement by ethnic minority pupils in isolated communities

Repeat of "Parents' Demand for Childcare" survey

Update of the Disability Discrimination Act omnibus survey

Best Practice in undertaking Teacher Capability procedures

A longitudinal study of young people with Special Educational Needs

YCS: cohort 8, sweep at age 21

Evaluation of Peers Early Education Partnership Programme

Entry, retention and loss in the day nursery workforce: Part II

The fifth annual survey of parents of three and four year olds

Effective pedagogy in the early years

Effective provision of pre-school education

Administrative support staff—impact on pupil performance

Disability: attitudes and experiences

Creating and building valued businesses: an evaluation of DHP Enterprise Business Start-Up programmes.

Impact of schools transitions and transfer on pupil attainment—Stage II

OECD International Research Project: Programme for Developing Indicators on Student Achievement on a Regular Basis (PISA)

Evaluation of new approaches to work experience and the work related curriculum

Monitoring and evaluation of the Education (National Curriculum) (Exceptions at Key Stage 4) regulations 1998.

Effectiveness of induction of newly qualified teachers

British Social Attitudes Survey: 1999–2002

Working long hours: a review of literature and case studies research

Early years transitions and Special Educational Needs

Evaluation of the Literacy and Numeracy strategies

The contribution of education and training to long-run employability

Evaluation of CRiSS—Crime Reduction in Secondary Schools and AEIs—Alternative Education Initiatives

International comparisons of pupil attainment (PISA): OECD International costs (2000–2001 and 2001–2002)

Analysis of the relationship between training and business performance

International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievements (IEA) Civic Education Project

Contribution to an ILO Action Programme entitled "Enterprise Creation by the Unemployed: The Role of Microfinance"

Refugees: opportunities and barriers to training and employment

Study of children permanently excluded from school

National Adult Learning Survey (NALS) 2001

Time Use survey

A longitudinal study of the changing role of the Local Education Authority in raising standards

Research Policy and Practice Forum on young people (00–01).

A longitudinal study of factors contributing to variation in teacher effectiveness

Research on boys' underachievement

Impact of pupil/adult ratios on educational progress over Key Stage 2

Evaluation of Peers Early Education Partnership Programme for children's development in language and early literacy

Wraparound Care Pilots

New Student Support Arrangements for Access Funds Evaluation.

Evaluation of Educational Maintenance Allowance Pilots.

Effective Provision of Pre-School Education—Tracking Children 2000–2003 & Second Parent Follow up December 2000. 2 Variations

Evaluation of Excellence in Cities policy

Sure Start National Evaluation.

European Trades Union Confederation

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he last met representatives of the European Trades Union Confederation; and if he will make a statement on the issues discussed. [147520]

Mr. Wicks: I have not met with the European Trades Union Confederation. However, during the UK Presidency, the Foreign Secretary chaired a meeting with the European Trades Union Confederation as is customary, followed by a reception; both events were attended by my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), the then Minister for Employment.

New Deal Funding

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the required level of *(a)* outcome-related funding for New Deal for Disabled People programmes and *(b)* other New Deal programmes. [147734]

Ms Hodge: The central focus of New Deal is to secure jobs for unemployed people. Each New Deal aims to provide effective help in tackling the barriers that people face in getting work. In the New Deal for Disabled People we have given job brokers very wide discretion as to how they help people into jobs. In support of this wide flexibility much of the funding is geared to job entries and sustained employment rather than to stages and processes. The precise funding arrangements for other New Deals vary according to the detailed design and objectives for each programme.

New Deal for Schools

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what funding he has given to each school in Hampstead and Highgate under the New Deal for Schools. [147875]

Jacqui Smith: The information showing the schools in the Hampstead and Highgate constituency which benefited under the New Deal for Schools is shown in the following Table A. These allocations formed part of the £3.462 million investment made so far in schools in Camden local education authority under the New Deal for Schools programme.

The New Deal for Schools was introduced as a new additional programme targeted specifically at addressing the backlog of urgent repairs in school buildings that had built up after 18 years of under funding under the previous Administration. It has been in addition to other capital funds made available to Camden local education authority.

In total, since 1996, Camden local education authority has received some £10.66 million of funding for capital investment in school buildings as shown in the following Table B.

Nationally, investment in school buildings has tripled from £683 million a year in 1996–97 to over £2 billion in 2000–01. It will be £3.2 billion in 2003–04, including grant, credit approvals and Private Finance Initiative credits. There will be central Government investment of £7.8 billion in school buildings in total from 2001–02 to 2003–04.

Table A: New Deal for schools. Allocations to schools in the Hampstead and Highgate constituency

Year	*School*	*Project details*	*Grant awarded (£)*
1997–98	Hampstead Secondary School	Refurbishment of ground floor laboratory and conversion into two smaller units	'178,000
	Brookfield Primary School	Creation of additional teaching space as a new classroom	
	Fitzjohn's Primary School	Refurbishment/upgrade and enclosure of external toilets	
1998–99	Christchurch Primary School	Reconstruction of boundary wall	10,067
	Parliament Hill School	Food technology room—full refurbishment	58,432
	Carlton Primary School	Refurbishment of lantern lights to main roof	22,325
1999–2000	Gospel Oak Primary School	Replacement of teaching block	310,764
	Gospel Oak Primary School	Structural works repairing foundation and defective windows	113,405
2000–01	Brookfield primary School	Replacement of temporary classrooms and new library building	173,875
	Included within a two school package: Parliament Hill Secondary School	Conversion and upgrade of science laboratories	'147,609
	Included within a six school package: New End Primary School, Rosary RC Primary School	Replacement of lead supply pipework	'154,889

' Denotes total allocations made to package projects covering more than one school. Camden local education authority will be able to advise the value of projects at schools in the Hampstead and Highgate constituency which benefited from these allocations.

Table B: All capital allocations to Camden local education authority

£000

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Basic Credit Approvals	216	36	284	579	845
Supplementary Credit Approvals	43	183	65	225	211
Grant to Voluntary Aided Schools	89	188	223	374	556
New Deal for Schools	—	178	621	761	1,902
School Security Grant	—	33	42	46	46
Removal of Outside Toilets	—	—	70	—	—
Energy Efficiency Initiative	—	—	51	—	—
Key Stage 1 Class Size Initiative	—	—	—	110	—
National Grid for Learning Grant	—	—	500	384	457

Table B: All capital allocations to Camden local education authority

£000

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
Schools Access Initiative Grant	2	5	3	—	—
Assistance with Asset Management Plans	—	—	—	18	—
Seed Challenge Funding	—	—	—	—	120
Devolved Formula Capital for Schools	—	—	—	—	1,004
Renewal of School Laboratories	—	—	—	—	130
Nursery Provision	—	—	—	—	60
Total	350	623	1,859	2,497	5,331

Adult Education

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) of 24 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 581–84W, on adult education, how much Standard Spending Assessment was withdrawn from each of the local education authorities listed in respect of the switch of Government resources to the Learning and Skills Councils. [147991]

Ms Estelle Morris: No Standard Spending Assessment has been withdrawn from local education authorities for 2001–02. My right hon. Friend announced yesterday that he would be making available an extra £52 million in grant to authorities with lower than average increases in their Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) in 2001–02, and which face pressures from the introduction of the Learning and Skills Council, which will have responsibility for adult education from April. Newcastle local education authority's share of the additional grant will be £760,000.

Pension Liabilities

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the state's total liability at 2001 prices to pay teachers' pensions, assuming that all existing contributors retire and that all pensioners die at the age projected by the scheme's actuaries. [148006]

Mr. Wicks: The latest actuarial valuation of the Teachers' Pension Scheme (England and Wales), carried out as at 31 March 1996, estimated the total value of the accrued liabilities, including pension increases, to be about £76 billion as at 31 March 1996.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Victims of Crime

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Solicitor-General what action the Government have taken since 2 May 1997 to ensure that victims of crime are kept informed of the progress of cases by the Crown Prosecution Service; and what *(a)* statutory and *(b)* non-statutory requirements there are on the service to keep victims so informed. [147445]

The Solicitor-General: The 1996 Victim's Charter commits the police to keeping victims informed of significant developments in the case, including any decision to drop or alter charges substantially.

There is currently no statutory or non-statutory requirement on the Crown Prosecution Service either to inform victims directly of its casework decisions or to inform them of the progress of the case.

The CPS has accepted responsibility to pass on information promptly to the police to enable them to fulfil their Charter obligations.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Solicitor-General on how many occasions in 2000 the Crown Prosecution Service *(a)* downgraded and *(b)* dropped charges; on how many occasions victims were informed of the decision; and what (i) statutory and (ii) non-statutory requirements there are on the service to inform victims in such cases. [147443]

The Solicitor-General: During the period January to September 2000 the Crown Prosecution Service discontinued proceedings in respect of 127,078 defendants, amounting to 12.6 per cent. of all cases completed in magistrates' courts. Proceedings were dropped in respect of a further 7,619 defendants in the Crown court, amounting to 11.9 per cent. of cases completed in the Crown court.

The Crown Prosecution Service does not routinely keep figures for charges downgraded, nor for charges increased in seriousness.

There is currently no statutory or non-statutory requirement on the Crown Prosecution Service either to inform victims directly of its casework decisions or to inform them of the progress of the case.

In 1998, Sir Iain Glidewell's independent review of the CPS recommended that the Service should take responsibility for communicating its casework decisions direct to victims rather than via the police. Similar recommendations followed in Sir William Macpherson's report into the death of Stephen Lawrence.

The CPS has welcomed these recommendations and is currently conducting a study to identify best practice with a view to national roll-out of direct communication with victims, which is due on a phased basis from April 2001.

The CPS will give as much detail as possible of the reasons for its decisions, bearing in mind that in some cases there may be sensitive and important matters which cannot properly be disclosed.

Subject to this initiative, the question of keeping victims and witnesses informed of the progress of the case will remain a matter for the police.

Sentencing Reviews

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Solicitor-General on how many occasions the Attorney General's power to appeal

against unduly lenient sentences has been exercised in respect of the offences listed in the Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Reviews of Sentencing) Order 2000 (S.I., 2000, No. 1924); what the outcome was in each completed case; how many cases are pending; and if he will make a statement. [147446]

The Solicitor-General: With effect from 21 August 2000 the Attorney-General was given the power to refer sentences passed in the Crown court for drugs trafficking offences. These include offences of production or supply of controlled drugs contrary to ss.4 (2) and (3) of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, cultivation of cannabis contrary to s6(2) of the Misuse of Drugs Act and offences contrary to the Customs and Management Act 1979 in connection with a prohibition or restriction on importation or exportation of a controlled drug within section 2 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. One offender has been referred to the Court of Appeal since August. The case has not yet been heard. There are no other pending cases.

WALES

Sports Facilities

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary concerning the provision of *(a)* specialist facilities in north-east Wales for young people, *(b)* more time for physical education in the school curriculum, *(c)* more playing fields in urban areas of Wales and *(d)* more grass roots football in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [147261]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend and I meet the First Secretary regularly to discuss a range of issues, including the promotion of good health and well-being for people in Wales and the role that sport and physical education can play in this.

In May 2000, the National Assembly established a task force to look at ways of improving the effectiveness of PE and sport in schools. The Assembly will shortly be considering the group's recommendations. The National Assembly also works closely with other organisations including the Sports Council for Wales, the Football Association of Wales and local authorities to help promote sport and physical education for people of all ages.

Redundancies (Llanwern)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received from Corus regarding the possible redundancies at the Llanwern plant in south Wales; and if he will make a statement. [147526]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have had a number of meetings with executives of Corus including two meetings with the Chairman, Sir Brian Moffat. In my discussions I have impressed on the company the importance of steel-making in Wales, related employment issues, the dramatic improvements that have been made in productivity, the continued strengthening of the euro and other significant factors which the Government believe underpin the case for the continuation of steel production in the UK.

To date, however, the company has not revealed to the Government its plans for steel plants in Wales.

Credit Unions

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many credit unions there are in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [147260]

Mr. Paul Murphy: There are 47 credit unions in Wales, serving a membership of 12,000. The National Assembly has made a commitment to developing a more effective credit union movement. Their aim, in partnership with the Wales Co-operative Centre and the Association of British Credit Unions Ltd., is to treble credit union membership within the next three years.

Police Numbers

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary concerning the introduction of more uniformed police officers in the North Wales Police Authority; and if he will make a statement. [147262]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet regularly with the First Secretary to discuss a range of matters, including policing in Wales. Between March 1997 and September 2000, the total strength of north Wales police increased from 1,369 to 1,393.

Following its enhancement as part of the 2000 Comprehensive Spending Review, the Crime Fighting Fund will fund the recruitment, training and salaries of 9,000 extra police officers in England and Wales, over and above the numbers which would otherwise have been recruited, during the three years 2000–01 to 2002–03. More than 100 of these officer recruits are expected to be employed in north Wales.

North Wales Police Authority has also benefited from the extra provision, announced in June last year, to enhance the policing of rural areas. It will receive £0.77 million in the current financial year, rising to £1.53 million in 2001–02. The deployment of officers is an operational matter for the chief constable but these measures provide considerable scope for increasing the number of uniformed officers.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Relocation

Mr. Kilfoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many companies have relocated from the north-west of England, to *(a)* London, *(b)* the south-east of England, *(c)* overseas and *(d)* elsewhere in each year from 1989–90 to 1999–2000. [145207]

Mr. Caborn: My Department does not collect information on businesses that relocate from one region to another. An answer would therefore be purely anecdotal and inevitably unrepresentative of the true picture.

Corus

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on how many occasions and on what dates

during the past two years he has met senior executives of Corus Steel to discuss the future of the steel industry in the UK. [144874]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 11 January 2001]:* I have met with senior executives from the Corus Group on seven occasions in the last two years on the following dates:

16 March 1999
8 October 1999
5 May 2000
14 June 2000
8 October 2000
15 December 2000
18 January 2001.

Mineworkers' Pension Scheme

Mr. Illsley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much money the Government have *(a)* become entitled to and *(b)* taken each year since 1994 from the surpluses of the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme. [145691]

Mr. Hain: Under the terms of guarantee/surplus sharing arrangements agreed with the Trustees of the Mineworkers' Pension Schemes (MPS) in 1994, the Government are entitled to receive 50 per cent. of any scheme surpluses. Annual Government entitlements following surpluses at MPS valuations in 1996 and 1999 are as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1997–98	113
1998–99	113
1999–2000	113
2000–01	196

Corresponding Government receipts over the same period were:

Year	*£ million*
1997–98	113
1998–99	113
1999–2000	[1]0
2000–01	[1]257

[1] The timing and size of receipts in these years has been affected by ongoing uncertainty over the tax status of certain MPS sub-funds

Ofgem

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will publish the next draft of his social and environmental guidance to Ofgem. [146382]

Mr. Hain: We propose to undertake a public consultation on draft Social and Environmental Guidance in February.

Electricity

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Government will continue to set price expectations in the competitive electricity markets once the new electricity trading arrangements have been introduced. [146743]

Mr. Hain: The increased competition as a result of the impending replacement of the electricity pool with the new electricity trading arrangement should put significant downward pressure on electricity prices. However, price levels will be determined solely by the markets.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he plans to make of the implications of the electricity crisis in California for UK energy policy. [146950]

Mr. Hain: The underlying cause of the problems in the Californian electricity market appears to be a shortage of generation and transmission capacity. This is not the case in the England and Wales market which currently has a 20 per cent. surplus. In the context of our intention to reform the England and Wales wholesale electricity market we have previously studied the electricity market in California and continue to monitor the situation there closely.

Staff Secondments

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many oil company employees are seconded to his Department by *(a)* appointment, *(b)* grade, *(c)* length of time in appointment, *(d)* planned time of secondment and *(e)* the name of the company from which they are seconded. [146973]

Mr. Hain: At present my Department has two oil company employees seconded to us. The first, from Shell UK Oil Products, is seconded to our Oil and Gas Directorate as a DTI Range 10. His secondment started in May 2000 and is expected to continue until May 2002.

The second from BP Amoco is seconded to our Chemicals and Biotechnology Directorate. He was appointed in January 2001 to a DTI Range 11 post and is expected to serve until March 2002.

Motor Fuels

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what investigations the EU is carrying out into vertical control in the motor fuel industry. [146976]

Mr. Hain: The EU is not currently carrying out any investigations into vertical control in the motor fuel industry. However, the European Commission has said that, if it came across any evidence of anti-competitive practice within its sphere of competence, it would not hesitate to take immediate action and impose the appropriate sanctions.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what investigations he is conducting into the delivery by motor fuel wholesalers to retailers of fuel at temperatures in excess of 15 degrees centigrade. [146968]

Mr. Hain: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) on 26 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 353–54W.

Miners' Compensation

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many former miners in Amber Valley have *(a)* claimed and *(b)* received payments in compensation for vibration white finger. [147390]

Mr. Hain: The Department's claim handling agents, IRISC, have registered 1,410 claims in respect of vibration white finger from claimants in Amber Valley. As at 24 January the Department had settled 162 claims in full, and made a further 265 interim settlements. In total the Department has paid out £2.3 million in respect of vibration related compensation in Amber Valley.

Communications

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the remaining proposals from the EU and European Conference of Postal and Telecommunications Administrations identified in the Communications White Paper. [147612]

Ms Hewitt: The Government's assessment of the proposals from the European Commission identified in the Communications White Paper was set out in the following explanatory memoranda submitted by the Department of Trade and Industry:

EM 10962/00 of 10 October 2000 on a proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on a common regulatory framework for electronic communications networks and services;

EM 10960/00 of 10 October 2000 on a proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on access to, and interconnection of, electronic communications networks and associated facilities;

EM 10979/00 of 10 October 2000 on a proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the authorisation of electronic communications networks and services;

EM 10963/00 of 10 October 2000 on a proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on universal service and users' rights relating to electronic communications networks and services;

EM 10961/00 of 10 October 2000 on a proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the processing of personal data and the protection of privacy in the electronic communications sector;

unnumbered EM of 10 October 2000 on a proposal for a Directive of the European Commission on competition in markets for electronic communications services; and

EM 11117/00 of 2 October 2000 on a proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a regulatory framework for radio spectrum policy in the European Community.

No proposals from the European Conference of Postal and Telecommunications Administrations are identified in the Communications White Paper.

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which proposals from *(a)* the European Union and *(b)* the European Conference of Postal and Telecommunications Administrations to liberalise the licensing regime for communications networks have been (i) assessed, (ii) accepted and (iii) rejected. [147614]

Ms Hewitt: The Government's assessment of a proposal from the European Commission for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the authorisation of electronic communications networks and services was set out in explanatory memorandum 10979/00 submitted by the Department of Trade and Industry on 10 October 2000. The proposed Directive is currently being considered by both the European Parliament and the Council.

A Recommendation from CEPT implementing a "one-stop shop" for licences for satellite systems and services was adopted in October 1999. The procedure allows undertakings seeking licences in more than one country to apply via the internet using a single common application form, greatly reducing red tape within the legal framework established for European Community member states by the Licensing Directive 97/13/EC. Four countries have implemented the Recommendation to date, while several more, including the UK, expect to implement as soon as satisfactory testing of the software is achieved.

A second Recommendation from CEPT adopted in 1999 contained a subset of conditions drawn from the Licensing Directive relevant to the telecommunications satellite environment. The Recommendation encourages CEPT administrations to draw only from the reduced list when attaching conditions to satellite licences. The Recommendation also contains a list of guidelines designed to promote a harmonised understanding of each condition throughout CEPT.

Respiratory Disease and Vibration White Finger

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the locations and *(a)* dates and *(b)* proposed dates of opening are of centres for medical assessment of claims for (i) vibration white finger and (ii) respiratory disease. [147802]

Mr. Hain: The Department currently has 14 vibration white finger assessment centres in operation, with a further centre to open in March, broken down as follows:

Vibration white finger assessment centres

Centre	*Date opened*
Barnsley[1]	November 1999
Birmingham	February 2000
Cardiff[2]	September 2000
Derby	September 2000
Doncaster	To open in March 2001
Edinburgh	October 1999[3]
Glasgow	September 1999
Manchester	January 2000
Mansfield 1[2]	September 1999
Mansfield 2	July 2000
Newcastle[1]	August 1999
Nottingham 1	January 2000
Nottingham 2[1]	May 2000
Sheffield	August 1999
Stoke	March 2000[3]
Swansea	March 2000
Wakefield	December 1999

[1] Three sets of equipment
[2] Two sets of equipment
[3] Mothballed in September 2000

The centres in Edinburgh and Stoke have been mothballed and will re-open when there is a sufficient pool of claimants ready for their medical assessment.

With regard to respiratory disease Medical Assessment Process centres, the Department currently has 27 centres in operation, with a further two centres to open later this year, broken down as follows.

Respiratory disease medical assessment process centres

Centre	*Date opened*
Ammanford	To open in March 2001
Ayr	April 2000
Barnsley 1	March 2000
Barnsley 2	January 2001
Bristol	May 2000[1]
Cannock	April 2000
Chesterfield	February 2000
Coventry	January 2000
Deal	May 2000
Durham	March 2000
Edinburgh	March 2000
Glasgow	March 2000
Huddersfield	February 2000
Leeds	May 2000
Lochore	January 2000
Manchester	February 2000
Mansfield	February 2000
Mexborough	February 2000
Mountain Ash 1	January 2000
Mountain Ash 2	January 2000
Newcastle	January 2000
Newport	January 2000
Nottingham	January 2000
Pontefract	February 2000
Sheffield	January 2000
Sterling	December 2000
Stoke	April 2000
Swansea	January 2000
Wigan	June 2000
Wrexham	March 2000
Ystrad Mynach	To open in February 2001

[1] Mothballed in June 2000, re-opened in January 2001

The centre in Bristol was mothballed and the equipment was transferred to Mountain Ash to cover a shortfall in South Wales. The Bristol centre reopened when a sufficient pool of claimants were ready for their medical assessment.

The MAP centres are also equipped to carry out spirometry assessment.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many claims his Department has received in respect of respiratory disease; and in respect of how many claims spirometry has been completed. [147803]

Mr. Hain: As at 14 January the Department's claim handling agents, IRISC, had registered 130,869 claims in respect of respiratory disease. As at the same date 65,556 of the 86,458 live claimants had undergone spirometry testing, with a further 14,055 being invited to make appointments. Together these total some 92 per cent. of live claimants.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list by region of residence the numbers of *(a)* claims received in respect of respiratory disease, *(b)* interim and expedited awards in respect of respiratory disease by (i) number and (ii) value, *(c)* claims in respect of vibration white finger and *(d)* interim and general damage awards in respect of vibration white finger by (i) number and (ii) value. [147805]

Mr. Hain: The information is as follows:

Respiratory Disease

		Interim payments		*Expedited payments*		*Total amount paid*
Postal region	*Total claims*	*Number of claims*	*£*	*Number of claims*	*£*	*£*
Wales						
South Wales	26,579	5,819	20,237,171.00	753	3,747,038.00	23,984,209.00
Other	1,126	273	931,169.00	4	23,014.00	954,183.00
Scotland						
Fife	2,219	555	1,489,648.00	140	438,057.00	1,927,705.00
Other	8,288	1,565	4,562,413.00	364	1,247,977.00	5,810,390.00
England						
Nottinghamshire	15,651	2,762	9,187,601.00	632	2,927,839.00	12,115,440.00
Yorkshire	35,212	6,185	21,101,636.00	1,986	9,168,084.00	30,269,720.00
North East	18,924	3,352	12,700,838.00	526	2,705,057.00	15,405,895.00
North West	7,624	1,275	4,290,278.00	278	1,474,621.00	5,764,899.00
Midlands	13,689	2,893	9,167,806.00	505	2,545,070.00	11,712,876.00
South	3,440	554	1,833,875.00	87	465,380.00	2,299,255.00
Other	777	21	69,508.00	3	11,194.00	80,702.00
Total	133,529	25,254	85,571,943.00	5,278	24,753,331.00	110,325,274.00

Vibration White Finger

		Interim payments		*Final payments*		*Total amount paid*
Postal region	*Total claims*	*Number of claims*	*£*	*Number of claims*	*£*	*£*
Wales						
South Wales	15,389	2,377	11,141,344.00	2,603	16,471,143.00	27,612,487.00
Other	411	66	261,730.00	35	194,511.00	456,241.00
Scotland						
Fife	1,485	327	1,353,546.00	187	1,103,196.00	2,456,742.00
Other	6,124	1,393	5,712,138.00	1,605	7,135,020.00	12,847,158.00
England						
Nottinghamshire	18,798	3,473	16,272,636.00	2,040	13,935,572.00	30,208,208.00
Yorkshire	37,857	7,322	38,156,122.00	3,965	28,543,021.00	66,699,143.00
North East	19,279	5,090	28,123,557.00	3,433	26,534,030.00	54,657,586.00

Vibration White Finger

Postal region	Total claims	Interim payments		Final payments		Total amount paid
		Number of claims	£	Number of claims	£	£
North West	3,762	867	3,505,691.00	433	2,523,166.00	6,028,857.00
Midlands	10,956	1,861	8,491,824.00	821	4,675,198.00	13,167,023.00
South	1,785	297	1,509,194.00	146	765,367.00	2,247,562.00
Other	268	10	46,979.00	5	40,553.00	87,532.00
Total	116,114	23,083	114,574,762.00	15,086	101,920,778.00	216,495,540.00

Total payments made relating to both compensation for respiratory disease and Vibration White Finger

Postal region	£ million
Wales	
South Wales	51.6
Other	1.4
Scotland	
Fife	4.4
Other	18.7
England	
Nottinghamshire	42.3
Yorkshire	97
North East	70.1
North West	11.8
Midlands	24.9
South	4.6
Other	0.2
Total	327

Sellafield

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the current estimated annual capacity is of the Sellafield MOX plant; what proportion of this capacity is currently contracted for; and what proportion of these contracts is *(a)* Japanese and *(b)* European. [146305]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* These are commercially confidential matters.

Coal Consumption

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the UK *(a)* consumption of coal and *(b)* extra tonnes of carbon dioxide burned between August and October was in (i) 1999 and (ii) 2000. [147815]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* DTI provisional estimates of extra tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions arising from coal consumption between August and October in 1999 and in 2000 are:

	1999	*2000*
Coal consumed (million tonnes)	13.0	14.5
Carbon dioxide emissions arising from coal consumption (million tonnes of carbon)	8.3	9.3

It is therefore estimated that an extra 1.0 million tonnes of carbon dioxide in terms of carbon attributable to coal consumption were emitted between these periods due to an increase of about 3 million tonnes in the amount of coal consumed in the UK in 2000 compared with 1999.

Employment Tribunals (Scotland)

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which Minister has responsibility for the procedure for appointment of chairmen of employment tribunals in Scotland. [147475]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* The Employment Tribunals (Constitution and Rules of Procedure) (Scotland) Regulations 1993 make provision for the appointment of Chairmen by the Lord President of the Court of Session.

Ministerial responsibility for these rules rests with myself as the Minister for Competitiveness.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Departmental Policies (Slough)

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Slough constituency, the effects on Slough of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [146930]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Slough constituency has benefited from a range of Government initiatives since 2 May 1997 including:

Capital allocations for housing

Year	£ million
1998–99	1.140
1999–2000	1.536
2000–01	4.634
2001–02	[1]6.435

[1] Includes £4.713 million major repairs allowance

The capital allocations for housing were made following assessments under the housing investment programme. Slough borough council was assessed as being "above average" in comparison with other south-east local authorities in the 2001–02 housing investment programme. Similarly, in 2000–01 the council was assessed as "above average", and in 1999–2000 and 1998–99 as "well above average".

Single Regeneration Budget

SRB Round 4 (1998–99) "People at the Centre of Slough"

£2 million awarded covering a wide range of projects to tackle social exclusion in the wards of Central, Chalvey and Bayliss.

SRB Round 5—(1999–2000) "Simply Stoke"

£1.6 million towards tackling social exclusion issues in two deprived estates in the Stoke ward in Slough.

SRB Round 6 (2000–01) "PRREDASI"

A bid of £100,000, led by Slough's Racial Equality Council, was successful for funding research and action planning to promote racial equality.

SRB Round 6—Thames Valley Enterprise

Slough in partnership with Oxford, Reading and High Wycombe were awarded £1.7 million towards social enterprise work.

Local Transport Plans

	£ million
1998–99	0.2615
1999–2000	0.863
2000–01	0.884
2001–02	1.312

Local Government Finance Settlement

The following figures show the Government grant to Slough as part of the local Government Finance Settlement.

Total external support [1]

Date	*£ million*
1998–99	85.105
1999–2000	88.324
2000–01	91.955
2001–02	[2]96.036

[1] Revenue Support Grant, National Non Domestic Rates and damping grants

[2] Provisional settlement under "floor" and "ceiling" option

Eurostar

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on Eurostar train services from York directly to Brussels, Paris and Frankfurt; and if he will make a statement. [147081]

Mr. Hill: There has been considerable interest in Eurostar services to the regions but I am not aware that we have received any representations in the last three years referring specifically to the running of Regional Eurostar trains services to York other than from the hon. Member for the Vale of York (Miss McIntosh).

The Channel Tunnel Act 1987 placed a duty on the British Railways Board to prepare and publish a plan for the provision of regional Eurostars. Their original plan was published in 1989 and they have just published a revised plan based on a review. This concludes that regional Eurostar services would be heavily loss making and that there are no economic, environmental or social grounds for providing a subsidy. Copies of their report are available on their website at www.brb.gov.uk. In future the Strategic Rail Authority will have a duty to provide a plan for passenger services through the Channel tunnel.

South West Water

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent communications he has received from Torbay council regarding South West Water's compulsory purchase order of land at Ilsham Valley, Torquay. [147407]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Torbay council has written to my Department as a consequence of being served with notice by South West Water of the making of this compulsory purchase order. The council's letter did not object to the order but raised a number of detailed points about the various parcels of land subject to the order.

Waste Disposal

Mr. Temple-Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has issued about the preferred temperature at which municipal solid waste incinerators are recommended to burn to minimise the harm associated with emissions from such incinerators; and if he will make a statement. [147508]

Mr. Meacher: The following guidance has been issued:

Local Authorities

Processes authorised by Local Authority Environmental Health Departments are regulated by reference to Secretary of State's Process Guidance Note PG 5/4(95) entitled "General Waste Incineration Processes under 1 tonne per hour". It requires that combustion gases shall be maintained at a temperature of 850° C in the presence of 6 per cent. oxygen, for a period of two seconds after the last injection of combustion air

The Environment Agency

The Environment Agency has issued a Technical Guidance Note (S2 5.01) for municipal solid waste incinerators regulated under Part A of the Environmental Protection (Prescribed Processes and Substances) Regulations 1991/SI No. 472. This guidance summarises the statutory requirements of the EU directives on municipal waste incineration and the techniques available for incineration. It requires that combustion gases shall be maintained at a temperature of 850° C in the presence of 6 per cent. oxygen, for a period of two seconds after the last injection of combustion air.

It should be noted that these recommendations are linked also to the residence time of exhaust gases within the secondary combustion zone and sufficient turbulence to circulate the gases.

Mr. Temple-Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) under what powers a county council can take a decision about a major waste disposal development before it has completed its public consultation on its overall plan for disposing of waste; [147502]

(2) what guidance he has given to local planning authorities about the extent of consultation a local planning authority is required to undertake in considering the development of municipal solid waste incinerators; and if he will make a statement. [147503]

Mr. Raynsford: Section 54A of the Town and County Planning Act 1990 requires a local planning authority to determine planning applications in accordance with the adopted development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Material considerations can include national and regional planning policy guidance and policies in emerging development plans.

The Town and Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order 1995 sets out the requirements placed on local planning authorities to consult on planning applications, although the extent of the consultation will depend on the particular circumstances of each case. Guidance on the publicity to be given to planning applications is contained in the Department's Circular 15/92, "Publicity for Planning Applications". This advises that major developments must be publicised through newspaper advertisement and either site notices or neighbour notification. General guidance for waste planning authorities on the consideration of proposals for waste management facilities, including incinerators, is set out in the Department's Planning Policy Guidance Note 10 [PPG10], "Planning and Waste Management".

Mr. Temple-Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment Worcestershire county council is required to carry out before reaching a decision on the development of a municipal solid waste incinerator. [147504]

Mr. Meacher: A planning application will need to be considered on its merits in the light of all material considerations. The principal guidance for planning applications of this kind is contained in Planning Policy Guidance Note 10: Planning and Waste Management (September 1999). Another important consideration is the requirements relating to environmental statements as set out in The Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) (England and Wales) Regulations 1999.

Mr. Temple-Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the research carried out concerning the incidence near municipal solid waste incinerators of soft-tissue sarcoma and non-Hodgkins lymphoma clusters, published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* in July 2000; and if he will make a statement. [147511]

Yvette Cooper: I have been asked to reply.

The paper by Viel and colleagues examined the spatial distribution of some types of cancer around a French municipal solid waste incinerator from 1980–95. For parts of that period, more soft-tissue sarcomas and non-Hodgkin's lymphomas than expected were found in areas close to the incinerator. The emissions from the incinerator were known to contain far higher concentrations of dioxins, dust and hydrogen chloride than are permitted now, and in 1998 the incinerator was therefore partly closed and partly upgraded. The authors advised that:

> caution should be exercised before [these cancer] clusters . . . are ascribed to dioxin released by the . . . incinerator.

In May 1998, the expert advisory Committee on the Carcinogenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment concluded that:

> there are insufficient epidemiological and toxicological data on TCDD [regarded as the most potent dioxin] to conclude a causal link with cancer in humans, but it would be prudent to consider TCDD as a "probable weak human carcinogen".

The Committee's statement "2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin. Consideration of 1997 IARC monograph" COC/99/S1 may be found on the internet at www.doh.gov.uk/coc.htm.

The Committee is commencing a review of the implications of the more recent scientific literature on dioxins, including the Viel study, at its meeting in March.

Mr. Temple-Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the research carried out concerning the reported incidence near municipal solid waste incinerators in Great Britain of cancer cases, published in the *British Journal of Cancer* in March 1996; and if he will make a statement. [147510]

Yvette Cooper: I have been asked to reply.

This Government-funded study, undertaken by the Small Area Health Statistics Unit, found a small excess of primary liver cancer near the older generation of municipal solid waste incinerators. The expert advisory Committee on the Carcinogenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment considered this and follow-up studies and concluded in March 2000 that any potential risk of cancer due to residency near to municipal solid waste incinerators was exceedingly low and probably not measurable by the most modern epidemiological techniques. The Committee agreed that, at the present time, there was no need for any further epidemiological investigations of cancer incidence near municipal solid waste incinerators. The Committee's statement "Cancer incidence near municipal solid waste incinerators in Great Britain" COC/00/S1 may be found on the internet at www.doh.gov.uk/coc.htm.

Bed-and-Breakfast Accommodation

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people were housed in bed-and-breakfast accommodation in Eastbourne in each of the last three years. [147421]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Information reported by Eastbourne district council is given as follows:

At 30 September	*Homeless households resident in bed and breakfast accommodation[1] in Eastbourne*
1998	0
1999	6
2000	38

[1] Includes households being accommodated pending completion of inquiries by the local authority.

Source:
DETR P1(E) housing return (quarterly)

Stakeholder Pensions

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 23 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 527W, if he will list the statutory provisions which prevent local authorities from operating stakeholder pensions. [147385]

Ms Armstrong: Local authorities have no powers under which they can offer stakeholder pensions, therefore it follows that there are no statutory provisions to list as preventing them from operating stakeholder pensions.

Public Footpaths

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will make regulations under Part 2 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 for the closure of public footpaths in urban areas for crime prevention purposes. [147558]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The provisions in Part II of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 enabling local highway authorities to make orders to extinguish or divert public rights of way in designated areas for crime prevention purposes will be brought into force by commencement order. Secondary legislation is required before these, and other provisions relating to the extinguishment and diversion of public rights of way, can operate properly. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment stated on 28 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 886, we expect most of the rights of way provisions in the Act to be implemented in 2002–03.

A66

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* deaths and *(b)* serious injuries arose from accidents on the A66 in each of the last three years. [147544]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* The information requested is shown in the table:

Casualties in accidents on the A66: 1997–99

	Fatal	*Serious*
1997	5	35
1998	14	64
1999	13	60
Total	32	159

UK Ports

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that the proposed designations for the approach channels and ports in the UK under the European Habitats and Birds Directives will not adversely affect the competitive position of the UK ports industry, relative to ports on the European mainland and in Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [147791]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Ports serve the national interest, supporting the competitiveness of national and regional economies. It is in the national interest that our ports remain able to handle current UK trade and its potential development efficiently and sustainably. Government will seek to ensure that all member states' sites, including those in close proximity to ports, put forward as eligible to be designated as special areas of conservation (SACs) have been selected on their scientific merit in accordance with selection criteria at Article 4 and Annex III to the Habitats Directive.

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that the designation of approach channels and ports in the UK under the European Habitats and Birds Directives is consistent with the approach being taken by all other European member states. [147789]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: It is for the European Commission and member states collectively to ensure that a consistent approach is adopted by all member states in the selection and designation of sites under both the Habitats and Birds Directives. If approach channels and ports merit selection on scientific grounds, member states are obliged to put forward these areas.

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will delay confirming designations of approach channels and ports in the Severn and Humber estuaries, under the European Habitats and Birds Directives, until a common approach to such designations has been agreed with all European member states; and if he will make a statement. [147790]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: If sites merit selection on scientific grounds, member states are obliged to transmit them to the Commission (in the case of Special Areas of Conservation) or designate them (in the case of Special Protection Areas). Consultations are continuing on the Humber and Severn and I cannot comment, therefore, on the areas included or the merits of these particular proposals.

Wetlands

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the potential benefit to high flood risk areas of restoring drained wetlands and allowing them to flood. [147978]

Ms Beverley Hughes: No specific assessment has been made but current flood management practices provide a measure of flood relief to urban properties in high-risk areas by allowing undeveloped land to flood. The benefits of managed retreat in coastal and estuarial situations have been recognised for some time and this is one of the options identified for assessment through shoreline management plans.

MAFF and the Environment Agency are currently developing guidance on river catchment assessments that will lead to catchment flood management plans. The restoration of flood-plain functions and washlands is likely to be one of the management options that will be considered in such plans. The revised draft PPG 25, on which we will be consulting shortly, will emphasise the need to consider flooding issues at the river catchment level. It will specifically advise that local plans should identify sites where managed realignment of coastal defences or restoration of functions to flood plains, could contribute to more sustainable flood management, as well as to amenity, landscape and biodiversity objectives.

Mobile Telephone Masts

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue interim planning guidance to local authorities with regard to mobile telephone masts. [147881]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My hon. Friend the Minister for Housing, Planning and Construction wrote to all Council Leaders in England, copied to all Chief Planning Officers, on 29 June 2000. His letter set out what we were doing to take forward the land-use planning recommendations in the Stewart report and indicated that in advance of any possible changes to the planning regime local planning

authorities should treat applications for mobile phone development on the basis of the current legislative arrangements and policy guidance. A similar letter was sent to all hon. Members for constituencies in England on the same day.

On 31 July 2000, we issued a consultation paper to seek views on possible changes to the planning arrangements for telecommunications development. In particular, the consultation paper sought views on how to improve public consultation in the planning process. The consultation paper included a draft revised planning policy guidance note (PPG8—Telecommunications). The consultation period ended on 31 October. The Department is currently analysing the responses. We shall announce our conclusions as soon as practicable.

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research he has assessed on the environmental impact of mobile telephone masts. [147973]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Department has not assessed any research on the environmental impact of mobile phone masts.

Council Tenants

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the right to manage for leaseholders proposed in the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill will be extended to council tenants. [147880]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: There is already a range of options open to all local authority tenants, including leaseholders, who wish to influence or take control of the management of their homes. The Government are working to extend the opportunities for participation in such schemes. We have introduced best value and tenant participation compacts to help improve housing management and tenant participation. We have also broadened the Government's tenant empowerment grants programme to help leaseholders and other tenants look at the options and to help support tenants' groups set up under the existing local authority right to manage.

Winter Road Maintenance

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue guidance to highway authorities emphasising the importance of salting and clearing snow from roads following the ruling of the House of Lords. [147829]

Mr. Hill: Guidance already exists in the local authority Code of Good Practice for Highway Maintenance.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Government will bring forward legislation to amend the Highways Act 1980 to require highway authorities to produce winter road maintenance plans for salting and snow clearance. [147828]

Mr. Hill: No. Local highway authorities are already strongly recommended to prepare comprehensive detailed plans for winter maintenance in the Local Authority Code of Good Practice for Highway Maintenance, which has been in place since 1989.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he is giving to highway authorities regarding salting and clearance of snow from roads following the recent House of Lords ruling. [147831]

Mr. Hill: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) on 15 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 18–19W.

Private Landlords (Deprived Areas)

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his policy with respect to the licensing of private landlords in deprived areas. [147021]

Mr. Raynsford: Our proposals for selective licensing of private landlords are aimed at areas of low housing demand, which are being further destabilised by the unscrupulous and sometimes criminal activities of certain landlords. As we indicated in our Housing Policy Statement, we aim to consult on detailed proposals in the spring.

Millennium Dome (Sale)

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library the offer document for the millennium dome issued to potential bidders between March and December 1998. [147778]

Ms Armstrong: No documents were issued to bidders during the months in question.

Between March 1999 and December 1999 two documents were issued to potential bidders in the competition to find a sustainable long-term use for the dome. These were the Preliminary Information Memorandum and the Information Memorandum. I am arranging for copies to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Government policy on the appointment of members to the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment. [147883]

Mr. Meacher: Members of the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) are appointed in accordance with the "Guidance on appointments to public bodies" from the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. A copy of this Guidance may be found in the House Library.

ACRE is a statutory advisory committee under section 124 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. The main remit of the committee is to advise Ministers, including the devolved Administrations, on the risks to human health and the environment from the release of genetically modified organisms. ACRE members are appointed purely for their science and technical expertise and do not represent particular stakeholder groups.

ACRE was last appointed in June 1999, when approximately half of the members were appointed for three years and the remainder for four years. The next appointments to the committee will therefore be in June 2002. Further details about ACRE and the current members can be found in the committee's annual report, a copy of which is available in the House Library. The report includes the committee's full terms of reference, pen pictures of all members and their declared interests.

GM Seeds

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 23 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 528W, if consignments of imported crop seeds have been tested for the adventitious presence of GM varieties by the officials of a UK statutory body during 2000. [147976]

Mr. Meacher: Further to my previous reply of 23 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 528W, the GM inspectorate at the Central Science Laboratory (CSL) conducted audits of seed importing companies to confirm whether they were operating proper checks and procedures to ensure that no unauthorised GM material was being imported. Under section 115 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, inspectors may carry out tests and take samples from premises but the inspectors must have reason to believe that unauthorised GMOs are being kept or had escaped. The evidence that the GM inspectorate examined satisfied them that no unauthorised GM material was present, and so no additional tests for GM presence needed to be undertaken.

I am not aware that the officials of any other UK statutory body have tested imported seeds for the adventitious presence of GM varieties during 2000.

Local Education Authorities

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the percentage of top slicing is of the education SSA of each local education authority. [147169]

Ms Estelle Morris: I have been asked to reply.

A table showing the percentage of the Local Schools Budget delegated to schools (and hence the percentage retained centrally) by each LEA was published on 29 June 2000 by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, and has been placed in the Library.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

DAB System

Mrs. Fiona Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what radio services are available on the DAB system; and how many regular listeners there are to those services. [147447]

Janet Anderson: National digital radio services are provided on the BBC multiplex and on Digital One's commercial multiplex. In addition, nine local multiplexes are now on air, carrying commercial and BBC programme services. A further three local multiplexes are soon due to launch and are presently conducting test transmissions. Estimates of regular listeners are not available, but more than 20,000 digital radio receivers have been delivered to the UK market to date.

Evening News Bulletins

Mrs. Fiona Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with broadcasters on the scheduling of evening news bulletins. [147420]

Janet Anderson: The scheduling of news bulletins is a matter for the BBC and the Independent Television Commission. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has expressed his misgivings to the broadcasters about the main evening news bulletins on the BBC and ITV going head to head. His main concern is that this could lead to a decline in the quality of the news programmes.

Culture Online

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking in his proposals for Culture Online to ensure compliance with copyrights and royalties. [147618]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The need to protect content providers' intellectual property rights will be a key component of the business model for Culture Online, which is currently under development.

Radio Licensing

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much revenue has been raised through the control of radio licensing by each of the regulatory bodies which are to be replaced by the proposed Ofcom in each of the last three years for which figures are available; and what percentage of this income in each year has been raised through auctions. [147613]

Janet Anderson: Certain radio and television licences are awarded after a process of competitive tender under the Broadcasting Act 1990, but not by auction. Revenue is raised through additional payments in respect of cash bids and qualifying revenue and through any receipts in respect of financial penalties.

The payments to the Exchequer from these sources for each of the last three years are as follows:

£ million

	1999–2000	*1998–99*	*1997–98*
Radio Authority Licensees	10.5	8.9	8.1
Independent Television Commission Licensees	419.9	479.0	439.1

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport under what powers the regulatory bodies which will be succeeded by the proposed Ofcom will issue general authorisations for communications operators. [147616]

Janet Anderson: We shall at the earliest opportunity bring forward legislation to establish Ofcom with the powers necessary to implement the proposals in our White Paper, "A New Future for Communications", including powers necessary to authorise and license providers of communications services.

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the regulatory burdens on communications operators caused by individual licensing; and if he will make a statement. [147611]

Janet Anderson: The policies set out in our White Paper, "A New Future for Communications" include proposals for reducing the regulatory burden upon communications operators by using general authorisations rather than individual licences wherever possible. Details of the new systems are being developed and the benefits will be quantified and made available in due course as part of the regulatory impact assessment.

Concessionary Television Licence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received calling for an extension to the concessionary television licence; and what would be the annual cost if it were extended to those aged *(a)* 65 to 69 and *(b)* 70 to 74 years. [147532]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* We have received a number of representations from hon. Members and from members of the public suggesting extensions to the current concession. The estimated additional cost of extending free television licences to people aged 70 to 74 is £185 million a year with a further £185 million a year for people aged 65 to 69.

Television Licences

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his latest estimate is of the *(a)* number and *(b)* percentage of households in (i) Northern Ireland, (ii) Wales, (iii) Scotland and (iv) England that are evading payment of the television licence fee. [147825]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* The BBC, as Licensing Authority, estimates evasion principally on a United Kingdom-wide basis and estimates of evasion by country cannot be produced on the same basis or to the same level of accuracy. All estimates relate to licensable premises rather than households. As at 31 March 2001, the latest date for which figures are available in the form requested, the estimated evasion figures were:

	(a) Estimated evasion (number of licensable premises)[1]	*(b)* Estimated evasion (percentage)
Northern Ireland	112,000	18.2
Wales	74,000	6.1
Scotland	172,000	7.8
England	923,000	4.8

[1] Estimates calculated by applying the estimated percentage evasion rate to the estimated number of licensable premises

The statistical model used to estimate the evasion rate for the UK as a whole is currently under review and the Government aim to adopt the revised model in the near future.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) when he first was informed of Mr. Robert Bourne's interest in acquiring the Millennium Dome; [147720]

(2) what representations he received prior to 15 December 1999 from Mr. Robert Bourne regarding the future use of the Millennium Dome. [147722]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* The competition for the sale of the Dome was launched on 4 March 1999 with an initial deadline of 26 March 1999 for submitting expressions of interest. On 18 March 1999 I met Robert Bourne and he outlined his initial ideas for the future use of the Dome. On 31 March 1999, I and other Ministers were informed by officials of the names of those 54 organisations, including Legacy plc, who had expressed an interest in bidding for the future use of the Dome. I met Robert Bourne again on 14 June 1999 but the meeting was entirely about the future of theatre in London, and the Dome was not discussed.

Millennium Commission

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money is owed to the Millennium Commission out of the sale proceeds of the millennium dome; and if interest will be paid on this sum. [147777]

Janet Anderson: Under the terms of the revised Grant Memorandum, which came into effect on 30 November 2000, issued by the Millennium Commission to the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC)

> Any surplus achieved by the company from operating revenues, asset disposals or other activities, after the settlement of other liabilities, shall be repaid to the Commission, up to a maximum of the amount of grant previously paid, in cash terms.

Any amount repayable under this grant condition will be calculated following the completion of all that is necessary to achieve the solvent liquidation of NMEC. Additionally, under the terms of the agreement between NMEC and English Partnerships, details of which were reported to the House by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Local Government and the Regions on 17 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 258W,

> Once NMEC has been wound up, it is intended that any remaining share of the proceeds from the sale of the dome will pass to the Millennium Commission.

Interest will not be paid as the Commission will receive all of any surplus funds available and the moneys received from the Commission have been grants, not loans.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Local Elections

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what action he has taken to ensure that the local council elections in Northern Ireland are able to take place on 16 May. [148032]

Mr. George Howarth: There is a statutory requirement, as set down in my answer of 25 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 679W, for local council elections to take place in Northern Ireland on 16 May.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he has requested *(a)* the chief executive of any district council in Northern Ireland and *(b)* the Chief Electoral Officer of Northern Ireland to make provision for local elections to be held on 16 May. [148033]

Mr. George Howarth: I refer the hon. Member to my reply of 25 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 679W, which set down the statutory provision for the timing of local government elections in Northern Ireland. It is the responsibility of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland to set in hand provisions to meet those statutory requirements.

James Alfred Cornhill

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the outcome of the investigation into the shooting of James Alfred Cornhill on 19 April; and what views were expressed by the Independent Commission for Police Complaints. [142332]

Mr. Ingram: The police inquiries are now complete and a full investigation file will be submitted to the Director of Public Prosecutions during January 2001. The investigation was supervised by the Independent Commission for Police Complaints until the Commission was superseded by the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, whose views will not be available until some time after the investigation file is submitted.

David McCombe and Padraig McCracken

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the outcome was of complaints filed against the RUC concerning the arrest of David McCombe and Padraig McCracken in the Glen Road area in December 2000; what action has been taken against the officers concerned; and what guidance is given to the police for the handling of minors. [146772]

Mr. Ingram: The Police Ombudsman's Office is investigating a complaint lodged on 9 January on behalf of David McCombe and Padraig McCracken. The investigation is at an early stage.

Police have at their disposal a number of regulations and forms of guidance when dealing with minors, but the exact form used would depend upon the pertaining circumstances.

Terrorism

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to his answer of 9 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 519W, by what means the police in each district keep records of individuals who have been warned that their personal details, as compiled by security forces, have been found in possession of persons suspected of having been engaged in the preparation, instigation or commission of acts of terrorism; and what statistical information he collates on the number of individuals who are, and who have been, put at risk. [146516]

Mr. Ingram: The police keep manual records at sub-divisional level on each occasion when an individual is informed that he/she is considered to be the subject of a threat regardless of the origins of the information. A nominal record is created for each person and subsequent threats recorded. Following notification of the individual and the updating of local records, details are passed to RUC Headquarters to be collated centrally. This is a manual system based on the individual. Statistics are not maintained and to create such statistics would incur a disproportionate cost.

Police Duties

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many police officers are specifically trained and exclusively employed for *(a)* motorway patrol duties and for *(b)* anti-racketeering duties in Northern Ireland. [144686]

Mr. Ingram: The Royal Ulster Constabulary does not have a dedicated motorway patrol unit, however, there are currently 184 constables within RUC Traffic Branch who are trained to perform these duties.

There is no dedicated RUC Anti-Racketeering Unit although there are a number of officers and civilian support staff from a number of branches including the Economic Crime Bureau and the Analysis Centre whose duties include investigating racketeering. Personnel from the Regional Crime Squads, CID and local uniform police also provide support as necessary.

Police Station, Downpatrick

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what measures he will take to replace the police station in Downpatrick; and if he will make a statement. [145930]

Mr. Ingram: The Police Authority for Northern Ireland and the Royal Ulster Constabulary intend to build a new police station at Downpatrick commencing financial year 2006–07. Progress will be determined by the availability of an appropriate site and adequate funding.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Fishing

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the impact of the quota settlement for 2001 agreed between EU Fisheries Ministers in December, upon *(a)* each fish stock, *(b)* the overall economic future of the UK fishing industry and *(c)* the economic future for members of each UK producer organisation. [144271]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* Most of the total allowable catches agreed by the Fisheries Ministers on December 15 last year reflect closely the advice from scientists. We would therefore expect these stocks to move towards or remain inside safe biological limits over the period to which the advice refers.

The immediate economic effect of the quota reductions will vary according to the extent to which fishermen are able to catch their quota allocations. In some cases the quotas for 2001 are higher than catches in 2000. The purpose of the quota cuts and other measures being adopted is to conserve stocks in the longer term and so protect the economic future of the industry.

We are discussing the implications of the situation with the industry.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what funding the Government have provided as state aid support to the United Kingdom fishing industry in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [146273]

Mr. Morley: The figures shown include expenditure on national schemes and the national element of payments under EU schemes.

They include funding by the four Fisheries Departments, both before and after devolution. The largest element of the expenditure has been the scheme for decommissioning fishing vessels, which ended in 1997–98.

Year	*£ million*
1995–96	12.75
1996–97	10.75
1997–98	13.78
1998–99	6.14
1999–2000	3.85

Farming (State Aid)

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much funding the Government will provide to the United Kingdom farming industry as state aid support in the 2000–01 financial year. [146268]

Ms Quin: The Government are required to provide this information to the European Commission as part of an annual report on state aids. This is an extensive exercise which will be completed at the end of June. The work could be brought forward only at disproportionate cost. I will write to the hon. Member when the figures are available.

Farmers (Compensation)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to implement a compensation package for farmers whose harvests have been destroyed by recent severe weather conditions; and if he will make a statement. [146235]

Ms Quin: We are helping farmers who have lost harvests as a result of recent severe weather through measures agreed with the European Commission to protect payments under the Arable Area Payments Scheme, to which the answer given to the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) on 24 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 594–95W refers. No separate compensation package is envisaged at this time.

Agricultural Holdings Act

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the occasions he has granted permission under section 2(1) of the Agricultural Holdings Act 1986; and what the nature of the permission granted was. [147862]

Mr. Morley: Between 1985 and 1995 a total of 12,742 approvals were granted under section 2(1). No such approvals could be made after 31 August 1995. The terms of each approval were unique to the individual case.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Income Support

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of recipients of Income Support or its equivalent among *(a)* pensioners, *(b)* non-pensioners with children and *(c)* non-pensioners without children for each of the past 30 years. [146009]

Mr. Bayley *[holding answer 18 January 2001]:* The information available has been placed in the Library.

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 18 December 2000, *Official Report*, columns 76–77W, on the winter fuel allowance, on what basis the figure for the number of people entitled to backdated Winter Fuel Payments is estimated to be 1.7 million. [146340]

Mr. Rooker: We estimate there may be up to 1.7 million eligible men aged 60 to 64 and these are estimated to sub-divide into the following categories: 1.2 million aged 60 to 64 during the qualifying week for the winter of 1997–98; 0.25 million aged 60 during the qualifying week for the winter of 1998–99; and 0.25 million aged 60 during the qualifying week for the winter of 1999–2000. All payments for past winters have to be claimed.

Notes:

1. These estimates are based on the 1997–98 Family Resources Survey.

2. The estimates do not include men aged 60 to 64 who were getting Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance as this group would have already been entitled to a Winter Fuel Payment.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioner households have been paid the winter fuel allowance in the London borough of Wandsworth to date. [147243]

Mr. Rooker: Information is not available by household. The latest information on Winter Fuel Payments made to individuals in the three constituencies within the London borough of Wandsworth is set out in the table.

Constituency	*Winter fuel payments made this winter*
Battersea	around 10,000
Putney	around 12,000
Tooting	around 11,000

Uprated Benefits

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the net cost is of *(a)* the increase in the basic state pension from April 2001, including the inflation element, and *(b)* the increase in the Minimum Income Guarantee from April 2001. [146352]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Estimated net costs of uprating selected benefits, 2001–02

£ million

Benefit	*Net costs*
Basic State Pension	2,450
Minimum Income Guarantee	650
Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefits for those aged 60 and over	150
Total cost	3,250

Notes:

1. Figures are in cash terms and are rounded to the nearest £50 million.
2. Estimates relate to Great Britain.
3. Costs include both costs of uprating in line with inflation and costs of discretionary policy measures.
4. Basic State Pension costs include costs of dependency increases and basic pension increments.
5. Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit for those aged 60 and over are included as the applicable amounts for these benefits are the same as those in the Minimum Income Guarantee.

Pensioner Poverty

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* male and *(b)* female pensioners living in households with income below half the national average there were, broken down by five year age group, in the latest year for which figures are available. [147807]

Mr. Rooker: Such information as is available is in the table.

The proportion of male and female pensioners living in households below 50 per cent. mean income broken down by five year age bands

Pensioner sex and age	*Income before housing costs*	*Income after housing costs*
Male pensioners		
Number of male pensioners below 50 per cent. mean	0.9 million	1.0 million
Of which:		
Aged 65 to 70	29%	30%
Aged 71 to 75	30%	30%
Aged over 75	42%	41%
Female pensioners		
Number of female pensioners below 50 per cent. mean	1.5 million	1.9 million
Of which:		
Aged 60 to 65	9%	9%
Aged 66 to 70	20%	20%
Aged 71 to 75	27%	27%
Aged 76 to 80	23%	24%
Aged over 80	21%	21%

Notes:

1. All figures are estimates and are taken from the Households Below Average Income (HBA) data set which is derived from the Family Resources Survey (FRS). The FRS does not include Northern Ireland, and 1998–99 is the latest year for which data are available.
2. Due to small sample sizes, reliable estimates of male pensioners aged 75 and over and female pensioners aged 80 and over, broken down by five year age bands do not exist.
3. The estimates are sample counts, which have been adjusted for non-response using multipurpose grossing factors that control for region, council tax band and a number of other demographic variables. However, they do not control for the population by five year age bands. Estimates are subject to both sampling error and to variability in non-response. All proportions are rounded to the nearest per cent. and numbers to the nearest 100,000.
4. The income measure used is weekly net (disposable) equivalised household income (that is to say income that is adjusted to reflect the composition of the household). The figures may be sensitive to the choice of equivalisation scale used.
5. The estimates are presented on both a Before Housing Costs (BHC) and an After Housing Costs (AHC) basis in line with HBAI conventions.

Source:

Family Resources Survey 1998–99.

Benefit Fraud (Wandsworth)

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of the London borough of Wandsworth. [148159]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report was published today in respect of the London borough of Wandsworth and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as its counter fraud activities.

Inspectors consider that Wandsworth has a strong management structure including comprehensive documentation specifying its relationships with its in-house provider which exhibits good practice and experienced, knowledgeable staff, supported by guidance and procedures on an intra-net. The report notes overall significant improvements have been made to the Revenues and Benefits Service since its transfer in-house in November 1998, but there are still further improvements to be made. Wandsworth has implemented the Verification Framework and inspectors generally found a commendable level of verification but improvements are needed on the level of verification of residency.

The council has tight and well documented reconciliation procedures to help keep claims right, although inspectors consider they need to develop a risk analysis to focus counter fraud work.

The BFI reports that Wandsworth has a strong corporate commitment to counter fraud work and has successfully applied prosecutions and other sanctions. However, inspectors consider the council needs to improve arrangements for the management of overpayment identification, classification and recovery and maximising use of its powers to recover overpayments. Work also needs to be done to strengthen the quality of fraud investigations.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Industrial Injuries Benefits

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the cost was to his Department of benefits relating to industrial injuries; and what the cost was of such benefits paid to individuals living in the Lewes constituency in the last year for which figures are available. [148017]

Mr. Bayley: Expenditure on industrial injuries benefits in 1999–2000 was £756 million. It is not possible to provide a breakdown of this figure by constituency.

Source:

Pre-Budget report, HM Treasury, November 2000.

Unclaimed Benefits

Paddy Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the estimate is of the amount of unclaimed *(a)* Child Benefit, *(b)* Council Tax Benefit, *(c)* Housing Benefit, *(d)* Income Support, *(e)* Invalid Care Allowance, *(f)* Incapacity Benefit, *(g)* Jobseeker's Allowance, *(h)* Retirement Pension, *(i)* Severe Disablement Allowance and *(j)* Disability Living Allowance in (i) the United Kingdom and (ii) the Yeovil constituency, for the latest year for which each figure is available; and if he will make a statement. [146617]

Mr. Rooker: Estimates of the amount of unclaimed income-related benefits in Great Britain (Council Tax Benefit, Housing Benefit, Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance) can be found in "Income Related Benefits Estimates of Take-Up 1998–99", a copy of which is in the Library.

There are no comparable estimates available of the amount of unclaimed Invalid Care Allowance, Incapacity Benefit, Severe Disablement Allowance or Disability Living Allowance.

No precise estimates are available of the amount of retirement pension left unclaimed, although take-up is thought to be between 95 per cent. and 100 per cent. On average around 98 per cent. of families take up their entitlement to Child Benefit. No estimates are available for different parts of Great Britain.

Housing Benefit

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will assess the impact of changes made to the administration of Housing Benefit upon registered social landlords. [147874]

Angela Eagle: We published in December 2000 our response to consultation on the Housing Green Paper. This set out radical measures to bring about improvement to the administration of Housing Benefit. These measures will help us to bring improvements to the performance of struggling councils to raise standards across the board and to streamline Housing Benefit to make it easier for councils to administer and simpler for individuals to claim.

As part of the drive to ease the burden on local authorities the Department is also discussing with representatives of registered social landlords proposals they have volunteered for assisting with elements of Housing Benefit administration.

We have also taken account of representations received from registered social landlords, and others about the appeal rights of third parties against the recovery of overpayments of housing benefit. Our decisions on this were set out in my written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) on 10 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 575W.

TREASURY

Working Families Tax Credit

Paddy Ashdown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the amount of unclaimed Working Families Tax Credit in 2000–01 to date; and if he will make a statement. [146616]

Dawn Primarolo: No such estimate is available.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what period it is permissible to continue receiving Working Families Tax Credit while outside the UK. [147228]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* As set out in the Inland Revenue leaflet WFTC/BK1 "Your guide to Working Families Tax Credit" an award of Working Families Tax Credit will normally last for 26 weeks.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what dates the applications for banking licences were made by the Hinduja brothers; what advice he received on these applications; and if he will make a statement. [148020]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) on 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 42W.

Publicly Owned Assets

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate his Department has made of the impact on Government revenues of the sale of publicly owned assets in the last 20 years. [147312]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Information on receipts of asset sales is published annually in Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses (PESA). Estimates for receipts from general government sales of fixed assets and debt sales from 1994–95 to 1999–2000 were published in PESA 2000–01 (Cm 4601), Table 4.8. Estimates of general government sales of land and existing buildings back to 1982–83 were published in PESA 1998–99 (Cm 3901), Table 3.8; figures for earlier years are available from the equivalent table in earlier editions of PESA. A detailed analysis of privatisation proceeds from 1979–80 to 1996–97 was published in PESA 1997–98 (Cm 3601), Table 3.13.

Departmental Cost Savings

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what savings have been made across Government Departments through cost-saving measures over the last 20 years, based on current prices, expressed *(a)* in cash and *(b)* as a percentage of expenditure. [147313]

Mr. Andrew Smith: This question can be answered only at disproportionate cost.

Tonnage Tax

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he proposes to review the provisions of the tonnage tax. [147706]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government keep all taxes under review.

Red Diesel

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to ensure that red diesel is not

misused; how many prosecutions there have been for misuse in each of the last five years; how many prosecutions were successful; what penalties were levied in each case; and if he will make a statement. [146739]

Mr. Timms: Customs have a network of road fuel testing teams located regionally throughout the UK to ensure that rebated heavy oils, including red diesel, are not misused as fuel by road vehicles. These teams run testing vehicles in the UK which operate as mobile laboratories able to test for the chemical markers present in rebated oil.

Since 1996–97, Customs, excluding Northern Ireland, have prosecuted 20 cases of road fuel offences, involving red diesel, and have been successful in all cases. As a result of these prosecutions a total of £10,850 in penalties and 12 custodial sentences have been imposed. The figures for Northern Ireland are not currently available.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the extent to which the reduced duty on red diesel affects the uptake of liquid petroleum gas and compressed natural gas. [147980]

Mr. Timms: No such assessment has been made.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he last reviewed the criteria for determining *(a)* who is eligible to use red diesel and *(b)* the purposes for which red diesel may be used. [147981]

Mr. Timms: The Hydrocarbon Oil Duties Act 1979 defines the circumstances in which rebated heavy oil can be used. This legislation is regularly reviewed to ensure its application remains relevant.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will calculate the average annual financial value of using red diesel to users of *(a)* standard diesel and *(b)* ultra low sulphur diesel, broken down by economic sector. [147990]

Mr. Timms: The use of rebated gas oil (red diesel) is restricted by Schedule 1 to the Hydrocarbon Oil Duties Act 1979 which defines categories of vehicles allowed to use this fuel. Users of standard diesel and ultra low sulphur diesel do not have the option to use red diesel.

Fuel Prices

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the factors affecting the price charged by oil companies for *(a)* ultra low sulphur diesel and *(b)* unleaded petrol. [147830]

Mr. Timms: The price charged by oil companies reflects the influence of a number of variable commercial and economic factors, including production and distribution costs, supply and demand on world oil markets, conversion rates against the US dollar, and taxation. The Government do not intervene in commercial price-setting.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures he has put in place to ensure that fuel duty reductions on ultra low sulphur petrol, announced in the pre-Budget Statement, will be passed on to motorists. [147832]

Mr. Timms: The Government do not intervene in commercial price-setting. The United Kingdom Petroleum Industry Association (UKPIA) has stated that it anticipates that the 2 pence per litre duty cut will be passed on to the consumer.

Euro (Price Fixing)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his policy towards EU-level investigations into price-fixing in currency transactions within the eurozone; and what estimate he has made of the level of mark up which has occurred. [147529]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government welcome all efforts to enhance competition and deliver better value for consumers.

CABINET OFFICE

Right hon. Member for Hartlepool

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how much severance pay the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), will receive; and if she will make a statement. [148030]

Marjorie Mowlam: Under the terms of the Ministerial and other Pensions and Salaries Act 1991, all Ministers (except the Prime Minister and Lord Chancellor) are entitled to a severance payment equal to one quarter of their final ministerial salary on leaving office, provided that the individual has not attained the age of 65 or been appointed to another paid office within a period of three weeks.

Secondments

Mr. Kilfoyle: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office for each year between 1992 and 2000, how many *(a)* people were seconded to the senior civil service from the private sector and *(b)* senior civil servants were seconded to the private and voluntary sectors; what the average length of their secondment was in each case; and how many (i) senior civil servants and (ii) permanent secretaries were on performance related pay. [145187]

Mr. Stringer: Information on secondments of senior civil servants by sector is not held centrally. Information held by the Cabinet Office Interchange Unit relates to overall instances of Interchange activity across Departments. The Interchange Unit does not hold information on the length of individual secondments.

In 1998–99 there were 343 instances of Interchange (with all sectors) at senior civil service level. In this period there were (at all grades) 905 instances of Interchange between the civil service and the private sector, and 278 instances of Interchange between civil service and the voluntary sector.

In 1999–2000 these figures rose to 354 instances of Interchange at senior civil service level, 981 instances of Interchange with the private sector and 525 instances of Interchange with the voluntary sector.

All senior civil servants are on performance-related pay.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Modernising Government White Paper

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much for each financial year from 1998–99 until the latest date for which sums have been allocated his Department has spent and expects to spend on the implementation of the Modernising Government White Paper. [143701]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 21 December 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, on 21 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 245–46W.

Classified Material (Leak)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library the report on the leak to Russian agents of EU classified material in Helsinki of September 1998; and if he will make a statement. [147521]

Mr. Vaz: This was dealt with primarily as a national matter by the Finns. We are not aware of any publishable official report into it.

The Moluccas

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in the Moluccas regarding *(a)* security and *(b)* religious freedom. [147380]

Mr. Battle: The second anniversary of the outbreak of unrest in the Moluccas on 19 January was marked by renewed violence in Ambon. At least 14 people were killed in clashes between Moslems and security forces. This latest break-down illustrates the fragility of the security situation and has cast a shadow over recent improvements in Ambon, including the calm period over the Moslem and Christian holidays. We remain deeply concerned by reports of attempts to force Christians to convert to Islam in Kesuiu and Tior. The Governor of Maluku led a second mixed-faith mission to the islands on 23 January. If necessary, the mission will arrange to evacuate all those wishing to leave the islands. We continue to urge the Indonesian Government to exercise tolerance and restraint, and remind them of their responsibility to maintain law and order and take immediate steps to bring the perpetrators of the violence to justice. I did so most recently with Foreign Minister Shihab on 12 December.

Immigration

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for how long a person who applied for settlement at *(a)* each post in the Asian sub-continent, *(b)* Accra, *(c)* Lagos, *(d)* Aluja, *(e)* Manila, *(f)* Bangkok, *(g)* Moscow and *(h)* Kingston in December 2000 can expect to wait for interview; and for how long the last people interviewed in each of these posts in December 2000 had waited. [147749]

Mr. Vaz: The settlement queue lengths (in weeks) at the end of December 2000 were:

Sub-continent

Post	*Q1*	*Q2*	*Q3*	*Q4*
Dhaka	14	21	14	35
Islamabad	4	17	20	28
Bombay	0	6	6	6
New Delhi	0	10	10	10

The queue groupings are:

Queue 1—Right of abode cases and Dependent Relatives over 65;

Queue 2—Spouses and Children under 18;

Queue 3—Fiance(e)s and Other First Time Applicants;

Queue 4—Re-applicants.

Other visa sections in the sub-continent have one queue for all settlement applications.

Calcutta—0

Colombo—9

Karachi—11

Madras—7

Other Posts

Accra—27 (latest available information: October 2000)

Lagos—9

Abuja—5

Manila—20

Bangkok—6

Moscow—4

Kingston—2.

We are obtaining from the Posts the answer to the second part of the question. When the information is available, I will write to my hon. Friend and place a copy of my letter in the Libraries of the House.

Iran

Kali Mountford: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent authorisations for the issue of export licences for Iran as exceptions to the national arms embargo there have been. [147699]

Mr. Wilson: The Government have recently issued a licence for the export of industrial gas turbine parts to Iran for civil end use. This particular industrial engine has been developed from a military engine and is commonly used to drive pumps and electric generators. The engine is not subject to export control when it is exported as a complete unit. However, when it is broken down into component form, a very small percentage of its parts are unchanged from their original form and, as military components, come within the scope of the UK's arms embargo and are controlled under Part III of Schedule 1 of the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994.

The Government are satisfied that Iran does not possess any aircraft powered by the original military engine, and that the risk of the components being diverted for use by the Iranian military is minimal.

British Indian Ocean Territory

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the oral

statement by the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), of 9 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 194WH, what is the timetable of his feasibility study relating to environmental problems of BIOT. [146303]

Mr. Battle: We estimate that it will take at least a year to plan, undertake the complete scientific research and report on the work recommended as necessary by the independent consultants who conducted the preliminary study in 2000.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the oral statement by the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), of 9 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 194WH, what analysis he has made of who wants to return from *(a)* Mauritius and *(b)* the Seychelles to Diego Garcia and other atolls. [146304]

Mr. Battle: Our intention is to consult the Ilois during the further phases of the feasibility studies we are undertaking in order to establish how many Ilois, be they based in Mauritius or the Seychelles, may want to return either to visit or to settle in the Territory.

China

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when concerns about the treatment of Falun Gong practitioners were last raised with the Chinese Government; and what actions Her Majesty's Government plan to continue to make in this matter. [147977]

Mr. Battle: We have serious concerns about the treatment of Falun Gong practitioners in China and take every appropriate opportunity to raise these directly with the Chinese authorities. A list of individual cases of concern, including Falun Gong practitioners, was passed to the Chinese authorities during a call by the British Ambassador on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 19 January. Falun Gong was also discussed in detail during the last round of the UK/China human rights dialogue in London between 16–18 October. I personally raised Falun Gong with Chinese Ambassador Ma Zhengang on 20 June and 30 November 2000.

We intend to raise the treatment of Falun Gong practitioners during the forthcoming sixth round of the UK/China human rights dialogue in Beijing between 12–14 February.

Colombia

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the peace process in Colombia and on the support that Her Majesty's Government are making available to *(a)* the Colombian and *(b)* non-governmental organisations. [147023]

Mr. Battle: We fully support the efforts being made for peace and the protection of human rights and democracy in Colombia. The recent announcement of a preliminary agreement between the Colombian Government and the ELN is a welcome development. But we are concerned that peace talks between the Government and the FARC are at a standstill. In a statement issued on 19 January, we and our EU partners urged the FARC to immediately resume negotiations and, to facilitate the peace talks, appealed for the demilitarised zone to be extended beyond the current deadline of 31 January.

EU assistance for the peace process of 105 million euro over the period 2000–06 will support human rights, long-term economic and social development and an end to violence. The UK has played a leading role in helping to ensure that NGOs and civil society groups are fully involved. NGOs and civil society groups made a valuable contribution to meetings attended by the Colombian Government in Costa Rica on 17 October and Bogota on 24 October 2000. We shall continue to encourage this dialogue.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of plans for the international community to engage in efforts to aid the Colombian military with respect to combating drug trafficking. [147024]

Mr. Battle: Peace in Colombia will remain elusive until a concerted effort is made to tackle violence, inequality, poverty and social injustice and illegal drugs cultivation and trafficking. We and our EU partners place particular importance on the defence of human rights and international humanitarian law; assistance for victims of violence and the need to uphold the rule of law; protection of biodiversity and the environment; and support for regional co-operation. The EU package for Colombia of 105 million euro announced in October 2000 will focus on these areas. Our policy also stresses alternative development and voluntary eradication. US support for Colombia places a high priority on an anti-narcotics strategy, although a significant proportion of the US$1.3 billion package will also contribute to institutional-building, human rights and strengthening access to justice.

We will continue to work with the Colombian authorities and local communities for long-term solutions.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he is having with parties to the military conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo; and if he will make a statement. [147019]

Mr. Wilson: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to his question on 24 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 594W.

European Security and Defence Policy

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the Danish Presidency of the EU has placed on the agenda for its next meeting proposals for parliamentary oversight of the ESDP. [146458]

Mr. Vaz: The next Danish Presidency of the EU will not begin until the second half of 2002.

The current Swedish Presidency have no plans for such a debate. The Prime Minister's Warsaw speech proposed a second chamber of the European Parliament, involving

representatives of national Parliaments, which could provide democratic oversight at European level of the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

The Nice Declaration on the Future of the Union agreed another IGC, to be convened in 2004, that would address, among other issues, the role of national Parliaments in the European architecture.

HEALTH

French Beef

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice the Government have given to schools on the safety of French beef. [144310]

Ms Stuart: No specific advice has been issued to schools on this subject. The Government are advised on food safety issues by the Food Standards Agency (FSA). The FSA has assessed the safety of French beef, and has advised that there is virtually no risk from legally sold imported French beef—ie. beef from animals under the age of 30 months at time of slaughter.

Information on the FSA's assessment is available on the agency's website and has been made available through news releases. Its advice to any consumer who may be concerned is to buy meat from reputable sources, and to ask the supplier for details of the origin of the meat.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations the Government have made to the European Commission concerning the safety of French beef. [144315]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* The Government discussed questions on the safety of French beef with the European Commission on several occasions during November and December 2000. These included the meetings of the Council of Agriculture Ministers on November 20 and 21 and December 4, a telephone discussion between Sir John Krebs, Chairman of the Food Standards Agency, and Commissioner Byrne in December and meetings of the Standing Veterinary Committee and of the Beef Management Committee. The meetings discussed not only French beef but the safety of beef in the European Union generally.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice the Government provide to consumers regarding consumption of French beef included in products that are not labelled with the country of origin of their ingredients. [144393]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* Responsibility for the provision of advice on food safety matters rests with the Food Standards Agency (FSA).

The FSA's advice to consumers is that legally sold imported beef from France poses no greater risk than United Kingdom beef. Imported processed meat products from countries with a record of BSE may pose a slightly higher risk than legally sold carcase meat, but that level of risk is considered to be within an acceptable range. The FSA has advised consumers who may remain concerned to buy meat or meat products only from reputable sources, and to ask their supplier about the country of origin of the product and the beef it contains.

The FSA's advice on imported French beef is available on its website, and has been provided in press statements.

BSE (Ireland)

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the decision of the Food Standards Agency to commission research by Dr. Christl Donnelly on the number of cases of BSE in the Republic of Ireland. [144326]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* We welcome the decision by the Food Standards Agency to seek advice from Dr. Donnelly on BSE incidence in the Republic of Ireland. We expect the agency to make assessments of any possible risks on imported foods as well as domestic production, in order properly to advise the Government. Dr. Donnelly is a respected scientist in her field.

In the view of the FSA, the best protection of the United Kingdom consumer continues to be the vigorous enforcement of the controls on specified risk material and of the prohibition on the sale for human consumption of beef from animals aged over 30 months at time of slaughter.

HIV/AIDS

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of the HIV prevention moneys allocated to health authorities in 1998–99 was used for targeted prevention work with *(a)* people with family links or travelling to sub-Saharan Africa, *(b)* injecting drug users, *(c)* women having sex with people in at risk groups and *(d)* gay and bisexual men, based on AIDS Control Act reports submitted by his Department. [146571]

Yvette Cooper: £53.4 million was allocated to health authorities in 1998–99 for HIV prevention. Approximately 24 per cent. was targeted at gay and bisexual men, 13 per cent. at injecting drug users, 6 per cent. at people with links to sub-Saharan Africa and 4 per cent. at women partners of men in high risk groups.

Vaccinations

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many school children *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in Dorset have received BCG vaccinations during the 2000–01 academic year; and if he will make a statement. [147035]

Yvette Cooper: Information about BCG vaccinations is contained in the Statistical Bulletin "NHS Immunisation Statistics, England: 1999–2000". A copy of the bulletin is in the Library and can also be found on the Department of Health website www.doh.gov.uk/public/sb0026.htm.

BCG vaccine is recommended for people at higher risk of exposure to tuberculosis (infants from certain ethnic groups at increased risk, those at occupational risk, and new immigrants from, and those travelling to, high risk areas for tuberculosis) and for previously unimmunised schoolchildren at the age of 10–14 years.

In September 1999, the schools part of this programme was suspended following interruption of supply of vaccine due to problems in the manufacture of the only product licensed for use in the United Kingdom. Vaccine has

remained available for all high risk groups throughout this time, and in July 2000 the schools programme in London was reinstated.

Restoration of the remaining part of the schools programme will be announced in due course when supplies of vaccine allow.

Mrs. Fiona Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to offer parents the choice of having their children vaccinated with individual inoculations for mumps, measles and rubella. [147451]

Yvette Cooper: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Sarwar), on 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 430W.

Alcohol Strategy

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made on a national alcohol strategy; and if he will make a statement. [147879]

Ms Stuart: We remain committed to the publication of a cross Government strategy to tackle alcohol misuse, and we are working with key stakeholders across Government, the alcohol field and the alcohol industry to ensure that this commitment is delivered.

Child Migrants (Zimbabwe)

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment he has made of the situation of former child migrants in Zimbabwe; [142820]

(2) what representations he has received regarding former child migrants in Zimbabwe; and if he will make a statement. [142821]

Mr. Hutton *[pursuant to his reply, 19 December 2000, c. 142W]:* I regret that my previous reply was incorrect. I received representations from one former child migrant in Zimbabwe, in May last year, which were also passed on to me by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) in July. I also understand that the British High Commission in Harare, Zimbabwe has recently received another.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Televised Trials

30. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make it his policy to allow for the televising of trials. [146211]

Mr. Lock: No. My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor has made clear his view that court proceedings should not be televised.

Court Security

31. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment she has made of the adequacy of security measures during court hearings. [146212]

Jane Kennedy: The security of prisoners in custody (or in the dock) is the responsibility of Her Majesty's Prison Service.

Risk in relation to physical security of Crown, county and combined courts is regularly assessed against an agreed set of minimum security standards. Each court is assessed at least every three years but more if circumstances dictate.

Indeed, as a result of the recent incident involving Judge Goddard at the central criminal court, the Lord Chancellor has instituted a departmental security inquiry which will be looking at the reasons behind the incident, including the adequacy of communication and the security measures within the courtrooms themselves.

Responsibility for security in magistrates courts rests with magistrates courts committees (MCCs) and it is expected that every MCC should conduct regular security risk assessments.

35. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when she last discussed the level of policing in the courts with chief constables; and if she will make a statement. [146216]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor has never discussed the level of policing in courts with chief constables. This is, however, something that is regularly undertaken by senior officials from his Department and which Presiding and Resident Judges have discussed with chief constables in the past.

Crown Courts

32. **Mr. Ruffley:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what recent representations she has received regarding the closure of Crown courts; and if she will make a statement. [146213]

Jane Kennedy: None.

Circuit Judges

33. **Ms Ward:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the number of *(a)* women circuit judges and *(b)* ethnic minority circuit judges. [146214]

Mr. Lock: On 1 January this year there were 574 circuit judges; 44 were women, an increase of 52 per cent. since May 1997; six circuit judges were of ethnic minority origin—this figure has remained static since May 1997. The Lord Chancellor is well aware that progress needs to be made so that the judiciary better reflects the society it serves and he is working hard to achieve that. This can only happen progressively as the pool of suitable candidates grows.

Rural Magistrates Courts

34. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will make a statement on his guidelines for funding rural magistrates courts. [146215]

Jane Kennedy: Each magistrates courts committee decides the number and location of courthouses in its area and how it spends the money it has been given.

Family Graduated Fees Scheme

36. **Sandra Gidley:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what progress is being made on the new family graduated fees scheme; and if he will make a statement. [146217]

Mr. Lock: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor and I have considered all the views and suggestions received from respondents to the consultation and have made final decisions on the structure of the scheme and the rates to be paid. A letter was sent on 29 January to the Chairman of the Bar Council and the President of the Law Society setting out our final proposals. A copy of the final structure document and the draft regulations which include a schedule of the fees have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Lay Magistracy

37. **Mr. David Taylor:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what her policy is on the relationship between lay magistrates and district judges. [R] [146218]

Jane Kennedy: We believe that there is bound to be a continuing and major role for the foreseeable future for both lay and professional judges in the criminal courts. Each brings a different approach and a different range of experience to the court; making effective use of that experience can only be to the benefit of the community.

Judges (Training)

38. **Angela Smith:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he last reviewed the procedure for the training of judges. [146219]

Mr. Lock: Judicial training is the responsibility of the Judicial Studies Board, an independent body, chaired by Lord Justice Waller (a Lord Justice of Appeal). The Judicial Studies Board keeps the training it provides under constant review.

Human Rights Act

39. **Dr. Naysmith:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the resource implications for the work of his Department on the Human Rights Act 1998; and if he will make a statement. [146220]

Mr. Lock: The Government have set aside £21 million for additional court sittings if they are required and £39 million for legal aid if it is required. For further detail, I refer my hon. Friend to the replies given on 10 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 21W, and 26 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 430W. In addition to this, training for staff in my Department was met within existing resources.

Mrs. Fiona Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many of the judiciary have undergone training on the implications of the Human Rights Act 1998. [147450]

Mr. Lock: Judicial training is the responsibility of the Judicial Studies Board. In preparation for the implementation of the Human Rights Act, the Judicial Studies Board held a series of one-day training events to which every full-time and part-time judge in England and Wales was invited. 3,491 members of the judiciary (including 67 chairmen and members of tribunals) attended these seminars.

County Courts

40. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on proposed closures of county courts. [146221]

Mr. Lock: The Court Service constantly reviews its estates in the light of workload trends, the state of the available facilities and the local court users' needs.

On 15 February I published a consultation paper, "Modernising the Civil Courts". I hope the hon. Gentleman has read it and will take the time to respond.

Robert Schuman Project

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department which UK bodies receive moneys under the Robert Schuman Project on improving the awareness of community law within the legal professions. [147515]

Mr. Lock: Information concerning UK beneficiaries in the years 1997 and 1998 was contained in my written answer of 3 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 420W. There were no UK beneficiaries in 1999.

In 2000, the following were selected for assistance: The General Council of the Bar of England and Wales, University College Northampton.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Chope: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department on what date the Lord Chancellor was guest of honour at a party at 80 Haymarket given by Mr. Srichand Hinduja and Mr. Gopichand Hinduja; and at whose instigation the party was arranged. [148002]

Mr. Lock: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer given to the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary on 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 71W.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he was first informed that Mr. Srichand Hinduja had submitted an application for citizenship to the Home Office. [148001]

Mr. Lock: Neither I nor the Lord Chancellor were informed at any time, or took any part in the application.

Employment Tribunals

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if Lucy Crone, part-time chairman of an employment tribunal, is a member of the Law Society of Scotland; and if he will make a statement on her credentials with respect to practising in Scottish law and holding the post of chairman of an employment tribunal. [147534]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 26 January 2001]*: I have been asked to reply.

Part-time chairmen of employment tribunals in Scotland are appointed by the Lord President of the Court of Session in accordance with Section 5a of the Employment Tribunals (Constitution and Rules of Procedure) (Scotland) Regulations 1993.

It would not be proper for me to comment on the credentials of a chairman with respect to practising Scottish law or holding office. However, I understand that Lucy Crone is a lawyer of many years standing who effectively carried out the role of a chairman in Scotland. She was not reappointed after 31 December 2000 and, although she is not a member of the Law Society of Scotland, I understand that she has practised in Scotland as a representative in front of employment tribunals for a period in excess of seven years.

SCOTLAND

Anti-drugs Strategy

4. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent discussions she has had with the First Minister concerning the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [146183]

Mr. Foulkes: The Secretary of State and I have already met with the First Minister and discussed a range of topics and will meet with him regularly in the future, starting on Thursday.

Employment (West Dumbartonshire)

5. **Mr. McFall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what progress has been made on the Employment Service initiative 'Action for Jobs' in the West Dumbartonshire council area. [146184]

Mrs. Liddell: Early indications are that Action Teams are proving a success in helping unemployed people back to work. The Action Team in West Dumbartonshire has helped 60 long-term unemployed people find work since it started in October 2000.

Unemployment

6. **Mr. Ernie Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement on the trend in the level of unemployment in Scotland since May 1997. [146185]

Mr. Foulkes: Unemployment in Scotland is at its lowest level since February 1976 and has fallen by 46,900 since spring 1997.

Working Families Tax Credit

7. **Mr. Wray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many people in Glasgow, Baillieston are in receipt of Working Families Tax Credit. [146186]

Mr. Foulkes: In August 2000, there were about 2,000 families receiving Working Families Tax Credit in Glasgow, Baillieston.

Minimum Wage

8. **Mr. Russell Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what impact the national minimum wage has had on wage rates in Scotland. [146187]

23. **Mr. Davidson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement on the effect of the national minimum wage on wage rates in Scotland. [146202]

Mrs. Liddell: The Office for National Statistics' latest estimate of low pay shows that the national minimum wage is having a direct and beneficial impact on the pay of the lowest paid workers in Scotland. The latest data also show that it has helped close the gap between the highest and lowest earners and helped reduce the differential between men's and women's pay. This has been achieved without any discernible adverse impact on the economy. The minimum wage has benefited at least 110,000 workers in Scotland.

Dounreay

9. **Mr. Maclennan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will hold local consultations on the UK Atomic Energy Authority's site restoration plan for Dounreay which was published on 9 October 2000. [146188]

Mrs. Liddell: The UK Atomic Energy Authority has initiated a series of consultation meetings on its proposals with the local and community councils and with other local interests. The authority has also indicated its intention to consult on key elements of the plan as and when individual projects are being considered.

UKAEA's Site Restoration Plan for Dounreay will be subject to approval by the Nuclear Industries Inspectorate, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry over the coming months.

Gaelic Broadcasting

10. **Mrs. Ray Michie:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations she has made to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport about the future of Gaelic broadcasting in Scotland. [146189]

Mr. Foulkes: Our predecessors made a number of representations to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport about the future of Gaelic broadcasting in Scotland. The Communications White Paper published on 12 December set out the Government's commitment to considering the recommendations of the Gaelic Broadcasting Taskforce Report and we will announce our response in due course.

Highlands and Islands Economy

11. **Mrs. Ewing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment she has made of the impact of the level of fuel prices on the economy of the highlands and islands. [146190]

Mr. Foulkes: The level of fuel prices is only one of a number of factors, which impact upon the highlands and islands economy, and needs to be seen in the context of overall UK fiscal policy.

The measures announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his pre-Budget report will bring significant benefits to the highland and islands economy. Notably, the extension of the lower rate of vehicle excise duty to include cars up to 1500cc will benefit over 40,000 motorists in the highlands and islands.

Fuel duty will be frozen for two years and reduced for cleaner fuels. Hauliers will benefit from the proposed reform of vehicle excise duty and the freeze in duty on "red" diesel. The abolition of Vehicle Excise Duty on tractors and other agricultural vehicles will benefit around 9,000 agricultural producers in the highlands and islands.

Civil Service Transfers

12. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what consultation she has had with the First Minister on arrangements made between the Scotland Office and the Scottish Executive regarding Civil Service transfers. [146191]

Mrs. Liddell: My Department is a member of the Scottish Administration Employment Network, which brings together the various departments and agencies with common employment interests, and of the Scottish Interchange Network, which promotes staff loans among Government Departments in Scotland.

New Deal

13. **Mr. Jim Murphy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement about the New Deal 50 plus in Scotland. [146192]

Mrs. Liddell: The introduction of New Deal 50 plus has proved an effective means of helping people over 50 return to work. 3,061 people aged 50 and over have entered work and benefited from the programme in the form of employment credits of up to £60 per week which guarantee a minimum full-time wage of £9,000 per annum.

14. **Mr. Tynan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many people in Scotland have secured jobs in Scotland as a result of the New Deal; and if she will make a statement. [146193]

Mrs. Liddell: The New Deal has been a tremendous success in Scotland with nearly 45,000 people going into jobs as a result of their participation in the New Deal for Young People, New Deal 25 plus, New Deal for Lone Parents and New Deal 50 plus.

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what the total cost of the New Deal Scotland was in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000 and the budgeted cost for (i) 2000–01, (ii) 2001–02 and (iii) 2002–03. [145651]

Ms Jowell: I have been asked to reply.

Expenditure for all New Deals in Scotland is: 1997–98 £1.3 million; 1998–99 £21.0 million; 1999–2000 £48.0 million and anticipated expenditure for 2000–01 £53.5 million. The estimated budget allocation for 2001–02 is £63.6 million. It is not possible to provide an estimate of Scotland's New Deal budget for 2002–03 because this information about future years funding is available only at GB level.

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what the average cost has been of the New Deal scheme per number of jobs created in Scotland. [145652]

Ms Jowell: I have been asked to reply.

New Deal is not a job creation scheme. By the end of October 2000 the cost per person moving into work has been on average approximately £4,000.

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what the average cost has been for an individual to complete the New Deal scheme. [145653]

Ms Jowell: I have been asked to reply.

To the end of October 2000 the New Deal for Young People (NDYP) has cost on average approximately £2,000 for each participant who has started the programme.

Teachers' Pay

15. **Mr. Fallon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what advice she received from the Treasury on the implications of the Scottish teachers' pay settlement. [146194]

Mr. Foulkes: None. This is a devolved matter.

EU Councils

16. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what European Union Councils and other multilateral intervention meetings *(a)* she and *(b)* the Minister of State have attended since 1 July 1999. [146195]

Mrs. Liddell: None. Scottish interests are fully considered in the formulation of the Government's position at such meetings through the normal processes of Cabinet Government in which we play a full part.

Textiles Industry

17. **Mrs. McKenna:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what action she has taken to safeguard the future of the textiles industry in Scotland. [146196]

Mr. Foulkes: I shall be working very closely with the Scottish Executive and with the Scottish textile industry to ensure that the industry achieves the necessary level of competitiveness to succeed in both domestic and world markets.

22. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement about the implications of the trade dispute between the United States of America and the European Union on the Scottish textile industry. [146201]

Mr. Foulkes: We have not yet had any indication of how the new US regime will address this dispute.

However, we will continue to work with the Commission and other member states to achieve a solution to the dispute with the US and to reduce the risk of further retaliatory action by the US authorities which could be particularly damaging to the cashmere industry as well as to other businesses in Scotland.

Fishing Industry

18. **Mr. Salmond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when she last met representatives of the fishing industry to discuss the representation of Scottish fishing interests in the Council of Ministers. [146197]

Mrs. Liddell: I have had no recent meetings with representatives of the Scottish fishing industry. Fisheries are devolved. Representation of Scottish fishing interests in the Council of Ministers falls to Scottish Executive

Ministers as part of the UK team. Scottish Executive Ministers have attended all Fisheries Council meetings since 1 July 1999.

Devolution Costs

19. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate she has made of the additional public expenditure on institutions and administration in consequence of devolution in Scotland. [146198]

Mrs. Liddell: The costs of bodies funded from the Scottish Assigned Budget and of the Scotland Office have been met from within the resources made available under the Barnett Formula.

Asylum Seekers

20. **Mr. Clappison:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many asylum seekers were residing in Scotland in *(a)* May 1997 and *(b)* on the most recent date for which figures are available. [146199]

Mr. Foulkes: Figures for the number of asylum seekers residing in Scotland in May 1997 are not available.

610 principal asylum seekers were being supported by local authorities in Scotland prior to 3 April 2000, when the National Asylum Support Service assumed responsibility for all new asylum seekers under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. This figure is calculated annually, in February, and I understand that there has been no substantial change since then.

In addition, under separate arrangements with London boroughs, before the 1999 Act came into effect, Glasgow placed in accommodation in the region of 140 principal asylum seekers (570 individuals). Such placements ceased in June 2000. As at 16 January 2001, 560 individuals were being accommodated under the London borough arrangements.

Glasgow City is currently the only local authority in Scotland providing services for asylum claimants under the 1999 Act. At 16 January 2001 it was accommodating 785 principal asylum seekers (2,350 individuals) under the new arrangements.

24. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many asylum seekers have been placed in Scotland under the dispersal scheme. [146203]

Mr. Foulkes: At 16 January 2001, 785 principal asylum seekers (2,350 individuals) were being accommodated in Scotland under the dispersal scheme implemented by the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

Oil and Gas Industry

21. **Miss Begg:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement on the future of oil and gas industry businesses in Scotland. [146200]

Mr. Foulkes: The Government and industry are working together through PILOT, of which I am a member, to ensure that Scotland and the UK remain a centre of profitable activity well into the new century.

There is confidence in the UK Continental Shelf as a place to do business, with increased investment intentions, more development projects being brought forward and renewed interest in previously undeveloped fields and the commercial co-operation needed to access them.

Defence Procurement

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when she last met the First Minister to discuss the impact of defence procurement on levels of employment in Scotland. [146180]

Mr. Foulkes: The Secretary of State and I have already met with the First Minister and discussed a range of issues. Defence procurement is significant for employment in Scotland. The Defence Analytical Services Agency estimates 6,000 jobs in Scotland directly resultant from Ministry of Defence equipment expenditure.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

Road Traffic Offences

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Advocate-General for Scotland what advice she has given on the impact of the European Convention on Human Rights regarding the right of the accused to remain silent on the prosecution of road traffic offences; and if she will make a statement. [146205]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: I give advice to Departments on various matters. In November last year I made submissions in the Privy Council about this topic in the "Brown" case to the effect that the current legislation was compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights. The Privy Council decision is now publicly available. No incompatibility was found by the Court.

Criminal Assets

Mr. Browne: To ask the Advocate-General for Scotland if she will make a statement about the implications of the MacIntosh case in relation to the confiscation of criminal assets of convicted offenders. [146206]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: As my hon. Friend will no doubt be aware, their Lordships in the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council heard this case over two days last week. I appeared in person to present arguments which reflected the position of the UK Government. A decision is awaited, and when it is made the implications will be fully assessed.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the provisions of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 will come into force. [148156]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: A number of the provisions came into force on Royal Assent or on dates fixed by the Act. I have today made a commencement order bringing into force the majority of the remaining provisions of the Act.

The controls on donations to political parties and on election campaign expenditure by political parties and third parties will be among those that come into force on 16 February 2001. A registered political party will be required to submit its first quarterly donations report (detailing donations above £5,000 accepted by the party's central organisation and donations above £1,000 accepted at local level) to the Electoral Commission by 30 April 2001, whereupon it will be published. Similar controls on donations will apply to right hon. and hon. Members and other holders of elective office. Returns as to election spending will normally need to be submitted to the Commission within three months of the date of an election, or within six months where the return is required to be audited (because the expenditure exceeds £250,000). Other provisions of the Act will come into force on 16 March and 1 July 2001.

The commencement dates for the provisions covered by the order, or which are already in force, are set out in the table:

Section/Schedule of Act	*Timing of commencement*
Part I (The Electoral Commission) Sections 1 to 3 and Schedules 1 and 2 (The Electoral Commission and Speaker's Committee)	On Royal Assent (ie on 30 November 2000)
Sections 4 (Parliamentary Parties Panel); five (Reports on elections and referendums); six [except subsection (1)(c) & (d)] (Reviews of electoral and political matters); seven (Commission to be consulted on changes to electoral law); eight (Powers with respect to elections exercisable only on Commission recommendation); 10 (Giving advice and assistance); eleven (Broadcasters to have regard to Commission's views in party political broadcasts); 12 (Policy development grants); and 21 (Interpretation of Part I).	16 February 2001
Sections 9 (Involvement of Commission in changes in electoral procedures); and 13 (Education about electoral and democratic systems)	1 July 2001
Part II (Registration of Political Parties) Sections 22 (Parties to be registered in order to field candidates); 23 (The new registers); 24 to 27 (Preliminary requirements); 28 to 35 (Registration) and 37 to 40 (Supplemental) and Schedule 4 (Applications under Part II).	16 February 2001
Section 36 (Assistance by the Commission for existing registered parties)	Two weeks after Royal Assent (ie on 14 December 2000)
Part IV (Control of donations to registered parties and their members etc.)—Sections 50 to 71 and Schedules 6 and 7	16 February 2001
Part V (Control of campaign expenditure)—Sections 72 to 84 and Schedules 8 and 9	16 February 2001
Part VI (Controls relating to third party national election campaigns)—Sections 85 to 100 and Schedules 10 and 11	16 February 2001
Part VII (Referendums)—Sections 101 to 129 and Schedules 12 to 15	16 February 2001
Part VIII (Election campaigns and proceedings) Section 130 and Schedule 16 (Control of donations to candidates), Section 132(2) to (4) and (6) (Financial limits applying to candidates' election expenses); Section 134 (Meaning of "election expenses"); 135 (Meaning of "candidate"); and paragraphs 3 to 5, 7, 10, 11(a), (b) & (d), 15 & 16 of Schedule 18.	1 July 2001
Sections 131 (Election expenses incurred otherwise than by candidate); 132(1) & (5) (Financial limits applying to candidates' election expenses); 133 (Power to vary provisions about election expenses); 136 (Corrupt and illegal practices: consequences for persons convicted of such practices); 137 and Schedule 17 (Corrupt and illegal practices: election petitions etc.); and 138 and paragraphs 1, 2, 6, 8, 9, 11(c), 12 to 14, and 17 to 19 of Schedule 18 (Election campaigns and proceedings: miscellaneous amendments)	16 February 2001
Part IX (Political donations and expenditure by companies)—Sections 139 and 140 and Schedule 19	16 February 2001
Part X (Miscellaneous and General) Sections 142 (Pre-consolidation amendments); 143 (Details to appear on election material); 145 to 148 (Enforcement of Act); 149 (Inspection of Commission's registers etc.); 150 to 154 and Schedule 20 (Provisions relating to offences); 155 (Power to vary specified sums); 157 (Documents for purposes of the Act); 158 (Minor and consequential amendments and repeals); 161 (Interpretation: donations); and 162 (Interpretation: exempt trust donations).	16 February 2001
Section 144 (Broadcasting of local items during election period)	16 March 2001
Sections 156 (Orders and regulations); 159 (Financial provisions); 160 (General interpretation) and 163 (Short title, commencement, transitional provisions and extent) and Part II of Schedule 23 (Other transitional provisions)	On Royal Assent (ie on 30 November 2000)

Section/Schedule of Act	Timing of commencement
Schedule 21 (Minor and consequential amendments) Paragraphs: 1 to 5; 6(1), (5), (6), (7)(b) & (c), (8) & (9); 8 to 11, 12(2) & (3); and 13 to 15.	16 February 2001
Paragraphs: 6(2) & (7)(d) and 16 to 18	1 July 2001
Paragraphs: 12(2) & (3)	On Royal Assent (ie on 30 November 2000)
Schedule 22 (Repeals)	As with corresponding provisions
Part I of Schedule 23 (Transfer of Registration of existing registered parties).	Two weeks after Royal Assent (ie on 14 December 2000)

Those provisions of the Act not listed in the table will be brought into force by means of one or more subsequent commencement orders at a date or dates to be announced.

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what limits will be in place on election expenditure by political parties and third parties for the next general election. [148157]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Paragraph 3 of Schedule 9 to the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 imposes limits on campaign expenditure by registered political parties in the 365 days prior to the date of a parliamentary general election. The maximum amount a party may spend is determined by the number of constituencies contested. A party receives an allowance of £30,000 for each constituency contested, subject to a minimum threshold. A party contesting every constituency in the United Kingdom would therefore be subject to a limit on campaign expenditure of £19.77 million during the normal 365 day period.

I have today made a commencement order bringing Schedule 9 into force on 16 February 2001. As provided for, in section 163(6) of the Act, the order includes transitional provisions specifying a lower limit on campaign expenditure that will apply if the next general election is held less than 365 days after 16 February. In such circumstances, the allowance per constituency contested will be as follows:

Period before date of election	*Revised allowance per constituency contested (£)*	*Limit on party contesting all 659 seats (£ million)*
0–3 months	22,500	14.8275
3–4 months	24,000	15.816
4–5 months	25,500	16.8045
5–6 months	27,000	17.793
6–9 months	28,500	18.7815
9–12 months	30,000	19.77

Paragraph 3 of Schedule 10 to the Act imposes separate limits on controlled expenditure by recognised third parties in each of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Again these limits would normally apply in the period of 365 days before the date of a parliamentary general election. If the next election is held less than 365 days after 16 February, however, the following revised limits will apply.

£

Period before date of election	*Limit on controlled expenditure in England*	*Scotland*	*Wales*	*Northern Ireland*	*Total*
0–3 months	595,125	81,000	45,000	20,250	741,375
3–4 months	634,800	86,400	48,000	21,600	790,800
4–5 months	674,475	91,800	51,000	22,950	840,225
5–6 months	714,150	97,200	54,000	24,300	889,650
6–9 months	753,825	102,600	57,000	25,650	939,075
9–12 months	793,500	108,000	60,000	27,000	988,500

The limits on national campaign expenditure by political parties and third parties complement rather than replace the long-standing local limits on candidates' and third party expenses provided for in the Representation of the People Act 1983.

Police Officers (Working Hours)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the average working hours of police officers in inspecting ranks in each of the last five years. [147069]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Data on the working hours of police officers in inspecting ranks are not held centrally.

Eurojust

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects the judicial co-operation unit of the EU, to be known as Eurojust, to be established. [147164]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The decision to establish Eurojust was taken at the special European Council meeting held at Tampere, Finland in October 1999. The Justice and Home Affairs Council was requested to adopt the necessary legal instrument by the end of 2001.

The objective of Eurojust will be to improve co-ordination and co-operation among national prosecuting authorities, supporting, but not directing, their investigations and prosecutions of serious crime affecting two or more member states.

Negotiations on the draft Council Decision establishing Eurojust are under way. The Government are a full and active participant in these negotiations, supporting the effort to meet the deadline laid down at Tampere.

A Council Decision to establish a Provisional Judicial Co-operation Unit, or "provisional Eurojust", was adopted in December last year. The Provisional Unit will act as a

forerunner to Eurojust, and the experience gained through its activities will be used to inform the negotiations on Eurojust. The Provisional Unit will begin its activities early in March 2001.

European Police College

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects the proposed European Police College to be established. [147165]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The European Police College came into operation on 1 January 2001, in accordance with the Council Decision which was adopted by the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 30 November 2000.

The decision about the location of a permanent Secretariat and the appointment of an Administrative Director will be taken under the Swedish Presidency. The United Kingdom intends to submit a bid to host the Secretariat based on National Police Training premises.

Noise Act

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many successful *(a)* private and *(b)* local authority prosecutions have been brought under the Noise Act 1996 in each year since its enactment. [147208]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Limited information, taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database showing the number of prosecutions and convictions under the Noise Act 1996, is given in the table.

Number of defendants prosecuted for offences under the Noise Act 1996 by type of proceedings and result, 1997–99

	Type of proceedings		
	Summons by police	*Summons other than by police* [1]	*Total*
1997			
Prosecuted	1	4	2
Convicted	—	2	2
1998			
Prosecuted	—	2	2
Convicted	—	2	2
1999			
Prosecuted	—	2	2
Convicted	—	1	1

[1] Limited data and information are held centrally on the Home Office's Court Proceedings Database for summary offences. For these offences, it is not possible to identify further who issued the summons.

Information Technology Projects

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the information technology projects undertaken by his Department, including the date each project started, the planned date for completion, the current expected date of completion, the planned cost of the project and the current estimate of total cost; and if he will make a statement. [145696]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 16 January 2001]:* The current major Information Technology (IT) projects within my Department and its agencies (excluding non-departmental public bodies) are listed in a table that has been placed in the Library. The information in the table covers those IT projects where (a) the cost or value of the project exceeds £5 million or (b) the project is essential for delivery of core objectives or services.

In addition to the projects listed in the table, the National Probation Service Information and Technology Programme also falls within the definition given. It aims to meet the short, medium and long-term needs of the new National Probation Service, including addressing the shortcomings of the existing software applications available to Probation Service areas under the National Probetion Service Information Systems Strategy (NPSISS) programme, which was initiated in 1993, and is now drawing to a close. Implementation of NPSISS is under review by the National Audit Office.

The immediate needs are being addressed through a Service Management Plan, and a project has been initiated to procure a service provider from late 2001–02 as an interim step while strategic arrangements are put in place for the longer term. The programme has not yet been fully costed. The two main procurement projects within it will be subject to review under the Gateway procedures by the Office for Government Commerce.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions since he became Home Secretary he has met *(a)* Mr. Srichand Hinduja and *(b)* Mr. Gopichand Hinduja; and what was discussed. [148000]

Mr. Straw: I may have been present at functions which were also attended by Mr. Srichand Hinduja and Mr. Gopichand Hinduja but to the best of my recollection I have not met either Mr. Srichand Hinduja or Mr. Gopichand Hinduja, nor have I had any official meetings with them.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on which dates since he became Home Secretary he has visited the Hindu Temple in Neasden; at whose instigation the visits were organised; and on how many occasions *(a)* Mr. Srichand Hinduja and *(b)* Mr. Gopichand Hinduja were present. [148003]

Mr. Straw: I have visited the Hindu Temple in Neasden once, on 31 August last year as part of preparations for my official visit to India in September. The suggestion came from my officials, as my itinerary in India included a visit to the Akshadham Swaminarayan Temple in Ahmedabad, a sister temple to the Hindu Temple in Neasden. I do not know whether Mr. Srichand Hinduja or Mr. Gopichand Hinduja were at the temple in Neasden when I visited, but to the best of my recollection I met neither of them there.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he received, on what dates, from the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), concerning the applications for naturalisation from *(a)* Mr. Srichand Hinduja and *(b)* Mr. G. P. Hinduja; and if he will make a statement. [147884]

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if Lord Levy has *(a)* made inquiries, *(b)* made representations and *(c)* submitted material in connection with applications for citizenship made by (i) Mr. G. P. Hinduja and (ii) Mr. S. P. Hinduja. [147988]

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what representations were made to him in relation to the application by Mr. G. P. Hinduja for British citizenship; and if he will make a statement; [147994]

(2) what contact was made with the Indian authorities about Mr. S. P. Hinduja's business dealings before his application for British citizenship was considered; and if he will make a statement; [147993]

(3) when he was first informed of Mr. S. P. Hinduja's application for citizenship; and if he will make a statement. [147992]

Mr. Straw: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced on 24 January that he had asked former Treasury Solicitor, Sir Anthony Hammond QC, to review the full circumstances surrounding approaches to the Home Office in connection with the possibility of an application for naturalisation by Mr. S. P. Hinduja in 1998. Sir Anthony started his review on Thursday 25 January. After an initial reading of the papers, Sir Anthony has decided that, in order to fulfil the terms of reference of his review of the application for naturalisation of S. P. Hinduja, it is appropriate for him to look at the circumstances of the granting of naturalisation in respect of G. P. Hinduja because the circumstances of both applications are closely related. For the same reason, he has also decided that it is appropriate for him to look at the circumstances surrounding the inquiries about naturalisation in respect of Prakesh Hinduja.

Sir Anthony aims to complete his review as quickly as possible, consistently with the need to conduct a thorough investigation. I understand that on the information currently available to Sir Anthony he hopes to complete the review by the end of February. The report will be published and copies will be placed in the Vote Office and the Library. It would be inappropriate for me to pre-empt the outcome of this review.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the applications for naturalisation from *(a)* Mr. Srichand Hinduja and *(b)* Mr. G. P. Hinduja were processed and determined other than by routine date order of application; and if he will make a statement. [147602]

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will place in the Library the note of his Minister's conversation with the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) concerning Mr. S. Hinduja's qualification for British citizenship; [147794]

(2) who made the decision to grant naturalisation to Mr. S. Hinduja; [147808]

(3) if the Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) contacted *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials at the Home Office concerning the Hinduja case. [147793]

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions since 1997 Ministers have made representations to the Home Office on behalf of the Hindujas. [147727]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* My right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister announced on 24 January that he had asked former Treasury Solicitor, Sir Anthony Hammond QC, to review the full circumstances surrounding approaches to the Home Office in connection with the possibility of an application for naturalisation by Mr. S. P. Hinduja in 1998. Sir Anthony started his review on Thursday 25 January. After an initial reading of the papers, Sir Anthony has decided that, in order to fulfil the terms of reference of his review of the application for naturalisation of S. P. Hinduja, it is appropriate for him to look at the circumstances of the granting of naturalisation in respect of G. P. Hinduja because the circumstances of both applications are closely related. For the same reason, he has also decided that it is appropriate for him to look at the circumstances surrounding the inquiries about naturalisation in respect of Prakesh Hinduja.

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Immigration Detainees

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many immigration detainees were held in prison establishments *(a)* in January 2000, *(b)* in January 1997 and *(c)* on the last date for which figures are available; what entitlements detainees have while held in prison; and if he will make a statement. [148010]

Mrs. Roche: We differentiate between those Prison Service establishments where immigration detainees have separate facilities from the rest of the establishment, where it is possible to provide a regime that reflects more closely that which operates inside an Immigration Detention Centre, and mainstream prisons where detainees are afforded the same conditions as remand prisoners. Separate facilities have been provided at Her Majesty's Prison Rochester, Her Majesty's Prison Haslar for some time and since July 2000 at Her Majesty's Prison Lindholme.

Figures relating to the number of immigration detainees in prisons in January 1997 are not available in the same detail as those for 2000. At that time details were recorded of the number of persons detained in prisons who had sought asylum at some stage. I have included these in the table, marked with an asterix.

	January 1997	*January 2000*	*December 2000*
Haslar	*92	156	120
Rochester	*139	193	177
Lindholme	*0	0	105
Mainstream prisons	*93	167	387
Total	*324	516	789

The higher use of prisons in December 2000 is a reflection of the temporary use of 500 Prison Service places, for about 12 months, to support the removals programme.

Within a local prison immigration detainees are entitled to the same rights and privileges, and are managed in the same manner, as unconvicted prisoners. Detainees have access to books, newspapers, writing materials and other means of occupation of their choice and at their own expense. They are permitted to wear their own clothing. They are entitled to an unlimited number of visits, within the capacity of the establishment, and there is no restriction on the number of letters they may receive or send. They have access to legal and consular representatives and are afforded full use of Prison Service medical services. The Immigration Service ensures that Immigration Officers regularly visit prisons to provide information to detainees about the progress of their case.

Asylum Support

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions the NASS has been notified, following an inspection by a local environmental health officer, that NASS-contracted accommodation is of an unacceptable standard; if he will provide details in respect of each case of notification; and if he will make a statement. [148024]

Mrs. Roche: We have received one formal notice that a property is not in compliance with the local authority regulations. This is a preliminary notification received from Liverpool city council of an intention to issue an enforcement notice regarding overcrowding.

The National Asylum Support Service has also been made aware of 17 cases contained in a report received from Manchester city council where the local authority was proposing to issue notices should remedial work not be carried out by the landlord.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the units of accommodation inspected directly by the NASS were found to be *(a)* of an acceptable standard and *(b)* of an unacceptable standard; and if he will make a statement. [148025]

Mrs. Roche: Of the properties inspected 18 have been found to be unacceptable and removed from the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) database until brought up to a standard acceptable to NASS.

2,290 properties have been inspected and found to be either acceptable or requiring remedial works that are not such to render the property unacceptable.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what enforcement action the NASS has taken to ensure that its contractors comply with statutory and contractual standards of accommodation and management; and if he will make a statement. [148026]

Mrs. Roche: The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) has a dedicated team of contract managers to ensure that all providers of accommodation meet their statutory and contractual obligations. A Performance Monitoring Inspections team, which monitors housing management procedures, supplements the work of these officials. NASS has also engaged the services of Property Advisers to the Civil Estate (PACE) to provide professional property advice and support. Where necessary NASS commissions surveys and inspections from third-party building surveyors.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the units of accommodation procured by the NASS have been inspected since 1 April 2000 by *(a)* the NASS performance monitoring inspection teams, *(b)* the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate and *(c)* local environmental health officers; and if he will make a statement. [148023]

Mrs. Roche: *(a)* 445 properties have been inspected by the Performance Monitoring Teams since going live on 1 October 2000.

(b) As of 26 January 2001, 3,308 properties have been inspected by the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate (PACE) which represent 100 per cent. of the private sector contracts that were on the database on 1 October 2000 and 5 per cent. of the public sector provided property.

Of the property that has been added to the database since 1 October, 55 per cent. has been inspected in the private sector and 5 per cent. of the public sector properties.

(c) We are unable to give information on how many properties have been inspected by the local authority environmental health officers since their findings are sent to the landlords and not the National Asylum Support Service.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many complaints have been received by the NASS about the standards of accommodation, management or support provided by the NASS accommodation providers; if he will provide details of each complaint; and if he will make a statement. [148027]

Mrs. Roche: The Performance Monitoring Inspections (PMI) Team of the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) has received 196 complaints about standards of accommodation, housing management or support services. Information on the details of individual complaints could be provided only at disproportionate cost but typical complaints include: quantity/quality/type of food, problems with heating/hot water systems, general condition of accommodation or furnishings and problems accessing local health/education services. NASS has worked with refugee organisations to develop a referral process and form to assist supported persons with raising accommodation related issues with NASS.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what criteria the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate are asked to use when inspecting the standards of accommodation procured by the NASS; if they are asked to take into account the standard of accommodation in relation to the needs of the occupants; and if he will make a statement. [148028]

Mrs. Roche: The criteria used is that contained in the Contract Specification and the requirement of the provider to comply with all Acts of Parliament and regulations made by local authorities. The standard applied is the higher of the two.

There is no brief to take into account the specific needs of individual occupants, the accommodation being general housing provision and not special needs housing.

Police Recruitment

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the estimated net changes in police recruitment are in each force and in total in *(a)* the current year and *(b)* the next two years based on information given by forces in bids for the Crime Fighting Fund and funding allocations made under the fund; and if he will make a statement. [148014]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In their bids for a share of the recruitment scheme of the Crime Fighting Fund (CFF), made in January 2000, forces provided information on their projected recruitment in each of the years 2000–01 to 2002–03.

Net changes to that previously planned recruitment by forces will result from the allocation of extra recruits from the CFF. The net change is expected to total 9,000 recruits over the three years 2000–01 to 2002–03. The table shows the current force allocations from the CFF for each year.

Some forces have asked to defer part of their CFF allocation into the next financial year and other forces have asked to bring forward CFF recruitment from next financial year into this year. In total, forces have been given authority for a net deferral of up to 250 CFF recruits from 2000–01 to 2001–02.

The current allocations for each force vary, however, with changes to the forces' recruitment plans. The latest estimates, shown in the table, include an expected net deferral of 210 CFF recruits from 2000–01 to 2001–02.

	CFF Allocation 2000–01	*CFF Allocation 2001–02*	*CFF Allocation 2002–03*
Avon and Somerset	67	51	77
Bedfordshire	28	31	31
Cambridgeshire	26	34	24
Cheshire	28	69	50
City of London	0	23	15
Cleveland	20	27	27
Cumbria	25	23	26
Derbyshire	65	39	54
Devon and Cornwall	77	79	79
Dorset	46	9	30
Durham	32	27	38
Dyfed-Powys	25	38	16
Essex	0	132	65
Gloucestershire	29	35	22
Greater Manchester	131	256	201
Gwent	46	3	32
Hampshire	20	139	84
Hertfordshire	0	70	37
Humberside	47	41	49
Kent	112	62	76
Lancashire	83	69	74
Leicestershire	46	56	38
Lincolnshire	29	18	29
Merseyside	125	93	114
Metropolitan	548	814	682
Norfolk	41	41	31
North Wales	34	32	38
North Yorkshire	20	23	25
Northamptonshire	64	0	26
Northumbria	71	101	82
Nottinghamshire	52	53	52
South Wales	59	49	50
South Yorkshire	67	61	69
Staffordshire	49	51	46
Suffolk	31	21	31
Surrey	94	0	40
Sussex	51	82	73
Thames Valley	42	177	106
Warwickshire	35	0	24
West Mercia	70	39	43
West Midlands	222	130	171
West Yorkshire	107	91	94
Wiltshire	26	21	29
Total	2,790	3,210	3,000

Note:
Allocations may differ from previously published figures, as they include agreed acceleration or deferral of CFF recruits between 2000–01 and 2001–02. In the case of the Metropolitan police agreement has been given to defer up to 155 CFF recruits from 2000–01 into 2001–02, but the force now expects to defer only 115.

Licensing Laws

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish his response to the consultation document on modernising licensing laws. [147876]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We are grateful to all those who commented on the White Paper, "Time for Reform", which we published last year; and have been considering them with care. We intend to announce within the next few weeks how we propose to proceed.

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what account he will take of local authority administrative costs when formulating new regulations for the proposed new licensing regime. [147877]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Under the proposals for reform of the licensing laws set out in our White Paper, "Time for Reform", the costs of administering the new licensing system would be recovered in full through fees from licensees. We shall continue to discuss fee structures with the Local Government Association and other interested bodies.

Public Interest Immunity Certificates

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many public interest immunity certificates *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers of State, *(c)* junior Ministers and *(d)* civil servants in his Department have signed in each calendar year from 30 May 1997. [147730]

Mr. Straw: In the calendar year from 30 May 1997, I signed seven public interest immunity certificates. In addition, one certificate was signed by a Minister of State at the Home Office.

In the calendar year from 30 May 1998, I signed six such certificates.

In the calendar year from 30 May 1999, I signed seven such certificates.

In the calendar year from 30 May 2000, I have signed four such certificates.

No such certificates have been signed by junior Ministers or civil servants in this period nor, with the exception of one such certificate signed in the calendar year from 30 May 1997, by a Minister of State.

These figures do not include certificates which may, exceptionally, have been issued and considered by the court without notice of their existence being given to the other parties in the case.

Police Volunteers

Mr. Ian Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he has taken on supporting volunteers who work for the police, with special reference to staffing police stations. [147979]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No central support has been provided specifically for volunteers who staff police stations. The staffing of police stations by civilian volunteers is a result of local community initiatives between the police, the civilian volunteers, and civilian volunteer organisations.

The use of such volunteers by the police is an operational issue to be decided by the Chief Officer of a police force. The matter is most effectively addressed at a local rather than national level, as it is local needs that are being served. Many forces make use of civilian volunteers although the work they undertake varies.

I appreciate the work volunteers undertake to support the police. Such work is an excellent example of the community and the police working together.

Fire Service (Communications Systems)

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the appropriateness of digital trunked radio technologies for the Fire Service as a replacement radio system developed specifically to cater for voice communications and data message transfer. [147627]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Home Office has procured specialist consultancy advice on how fire authorities can best meet their future mobile communications and control room requirements. Guidance to fire authorities on control room requirements has already been published; further guidance on radio bearer systems will be published shortly.

Digital trunked solutions to the fire service's requirements have been considered as have other options. Future procurements by authorities are expected to be undertaken on the basis of competition against an output-based specification related to performance.

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what approach will be used in the procurement process for future radio systems for the fire service; and what assistance will be offered to the Fire Service to meet best value targets. [147628]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have recently consulted representatives of the Local Government Association and the Chief and Assistant Chief Fire Officers Association about how to ensure that fire authorities secure value for money in procuring their future communications systems, particularly replacement radio bearer systems. I have since written to those representatives and am now seeking the agreement of the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council at its meeting on 6 February to the strategy that has been proposed. I am sending a copy of that letter, which sets out the intended strategy, to my hon. Friend and am also placing copies in the Library.

Ministers of Religion (House of Commons)

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the categories of ministers of religion who are barred from becoming hon. Members, indicating the statutory basis for their debarment; what plans he has to review the laws to revoke their prohibition; and if he will make a statement. [147703]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The statutory provisions which bar ministers of religion from becoming hon. Members are set out in the House of Commons (Clergy Disqualification) Act 1801 and section 9 of the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829. The clergy referred to in these two enactments are

"person(s) having been ordained to the officer of priest or deacon, or being a minister of the Church of Scotland"

and

"person(s) in holy orders in the Church of Rome."

The House of Commons (Removal of Clergy Disqualification) Bill was introduced in the House on 25 January. It removes disqualification from membership of the House of Commons that arises by reason of a person having been ordained or being a minister of religious denomination, but continues the disqualification of Lords Spiritual.

Public Disorder (Fixed Penalty Notices)

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place the responses to 'Reducing Public Disorder-The Role of Fixed Penalty Notices', in the Library. [147399]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* I am making arrangements for copies of the responses to the consultation paper to be placed in the Library shortly. The responses will be held in the Library for six months.

Criminal Justice and Police Bill

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* the most recent period for which figures are available (i) how many persons aged over 18 years were (1) charged and (2) convicted of each of the offences listed in Clause 1 of the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, (ii) how many persons aged under 18 years were so (1) charged and (2) convicted, and (iii) what was the average age of those so (1) charged and (2) convicted. [147476]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* Information on the number of persons charged is not available centrally.

However, available information taken from the Home Office court proceedings database on the number of persons prosecuted or convicted is given in the tables.

The 'average' age of defendants prosecuted or offenders convicted cannot be determined for summary offences because unreported ages or dates of birth, or incompatible ages for sentences given, are converted to age 25 on the court proceedings database. However, it is possible to make approximate calculations of the 'median' age from the figures available (where an age has been given). These are shown in Table C.

Table A: Number of defendants proceeded against at the magistrates courts and convicted at all courts for offences as listed in Clause 1 of the Criminal Justice and Police Bill by age, England and Wales, 1999

Age and offence description	*Total proceeded against*	*Total convicted*
Aged under 18[1]		
Section 12 of the Licensing Act 1872	71	52
Section 80 of the Explosives Act 1875	15	9
Section 31 of the Fire Services Act 1947	19	16
Sections 55 and 56 of the British Transport Commission Act—not available separately	243	178
Section 169c(3) of the Licensing Act 1964	1	—
Section 91 of the Criminal Justice Act 1967	2,473	1,698
Section 5(2) of the Criminal Law Act 1967	4	4
Section 1(1) of the Criminal Damage Act 1971—summary only	9,323	6,092
Section 43 of the Telecommunications Act 1984—subsection 1.b not available separately	123	75
Section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986—excludes offence of racially aggravated (this section as amended by Crime and Disorder Act)	4,047	2,500
Aged 18 and over[1]		
Section 12 of the Licensing Act 1872	3,442	3,082
Section 80 of the Explosives Act 1875	26	17
Section 31 of the Fire Services Act 1947	57	47
Sections 55 and 56 of the British Transport Commission Act—not available separately	1,664	1,327
Section 169c(3) of the Licensing Act 1964	5	3
Section 91 of the Criminal Justice Act 1967	28,579	23,174
Section 5(2) of the Criminal law Act 1967	69	49
Section 1(1) of the Criminal Damage Act 1971—summary only	31,297	21,796
Section 43 of the Telecommunications Act 1984—subsection 1.b not available separately	1,110	645
Section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986—excludes offence of racially aggravated (this section as amended by Crime and Disorder Act)	20,851	14,452

[1] Information received concerning summary offences does not always record the age or date of birth of the defendant. As such, these data are estimated to be aged 25 on the Home Office court proceedings database.

Table B: Number of defendants proceeded against at the magistrates courts and convicted at all courts for offences as listed in Clause 1 of the Criminal Justice and Police Bill by age, England and Wales, Q1 20001

Age and offence description	*Total proceeded against*	*Total convicted*
Aged under 18[1]		
Section 12 of the Licensing Act 1872	13	13
Section 80 of the Explosives Act 1875	9	6
Section 31 of the Fire Services Act 1947	3	2
Sections 55 and 56 of the British Transport Commission Act—not available separately	46	34
Section 169c(3) of the Licensing Act 1964	—	—
Section 91 of the Criminal Justice Act 1967	563	431
Section 5(2) of the Criminal Law Act 1967	2	1
Section 1(1) of the Criminal Damage Act 1971—summary only	2,529	1,734
Section 43 of the Telecommunications Act 1984—subsection 1.b not available separately	28	23
Section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986—excludes offence of racially aggravated (this section as amended by Crime and Disorder Act)	1,023	691
Aged 18 and over[1]		
Section 12 of the Licensing Act 1872	629	563
Section 80 of the Explosives Act 1875	19	14
Section 31 of the Fire Services Act 1947	17	13
Sections 55 and 56 of the British Transport Commission Act—not available separately	359	283
Section 169c(3) of the Licensing Act 1964	1	1
Section 91 of the Criminal Justice Act 1967	6,446	5,083
Section 5(2) of the Criminal law Act 1967	29	24
Section 191) of the Criminal Damage Act 1971—summary only	8,036	5,682
Section 43 of the Telecommunications Act 1984—subsection 1.b not available separately	226	137
Section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986—excludes offence of racially aggravated (this section as amended by Crime and Disorder Act)	5,657	3,416

[1] Provisional

[2] Information received concerning summary offences does not always record the age or date of birth of the defendant. As such, these data are estimated to be aged 25 on the Home Office court proceedings database.

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Table C: Median age[1] of defendants proceeded against at the magistrates courts and convicted at all courts for offences as listed in Clause 1 of the Criminal Justice and Police Bill by age, England and Wales, 1999 and Q1 2000[2]

	1999		Q1 2000[2]	
Age and offence description	*Prosecution*	*Conviction*	*Prosecution*	*Conviction*
Section 12 of the Licensing Act 1872	39	39	39	39
Section 80 of the Explosives Act 1875	19	18	18	18
Section 31 of the Fire Services Act 1947	23	22	28	28
Sections 55 and 56 of the British Transport Commission Act—not available separately	22	22	22	22
Section 169c(3) of the Licensing Act 1964	18	18	35	35
Section 91 of the Criminal Justice Act 1967	26	26	26	26
Section 5(2) of the Criminal Law Act 1967	29	29	29	29
Section 1(1) of the Criminal Damage Act 1971—summary only	23	23	22	22
Section 43 of the Telecommunications Act 1984—subsection 1.b not available separately	31	30	31	28
Section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986—excludes offence of racially aggravated (this section as amended by Crime and Disorder Act)	24	24	22	22

[1] Information received concerning summary offences does not always record the age or date of birth of the defendant. As such, these data are estimated to be aged 25 on the Home Office court proceedings database.
[2] Provisional

Refugee Status (EU Council Directive)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on Article 41 of the proposed Council Directive on minimum standards on procedures in member states for granting and withdrawing refugee status, with particular reference to *(a)* rights granted to applicants in the context of (i) fundamentalism, (ii) hostile aliens, (iii) questionable social or political views or morals and (iv) use of the NHS and *(b)* contradiction of that article and Article 30 of same directive. [147452]

Mrs. Roche: Article 41 of the proposed Council Directive on minimum standards on procedures in member states for granting and withdrawing refugee status is based on Article 3 of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and Article 13 of the Treaty Establishing the European Community.

Negotiation between member states of the proposed Commission text has recently begun. To date there has been no discussion of Article 41.

Euro

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on planned information campaigns on the euro for the UK police forces to combat forgery. [147462]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand that the European Commission, Europol and others are jointly considering the possibility of training programmes for the police services of member states on the counterfeiting of the Euro.

Organised Crime Forum

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the planned *(a)* budget and *(b)* activities of the European Forum for the Prevention of Organised Crime. [147453]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commission's proposal for a Council Decision, which includes establishing a European Forum on the Prevention of Organised Crime, has been deposited with the Parliamentary scrutiny committees.

The Forum would include officials from the member states and experts from academic institutions and other bodies. It would discuss and advise on crime prevention trends and policies. We support the purposes of the Forum, but attach importance to ensuring that it should not duplicate activities in other European Union fora. We are also seeking information on the likely costs of the Forum and how these would be financed.

Golden Jubilee

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans his Department has to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee. [147617]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to the reply my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister gave my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Mr. Levitt) on 23 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 294W.

Voluntary Organisations (Security Checks)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the Government will provide funds to help voluntary organisations pay the proposed fee for security checks on volunteers. [147372]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Criminal Records Bureau will issue certificates, on application, to individuals. An announcement about the fees that the bureau will charge will be made as soon as possible. It will be a matter for employers (or others, including voluntary organisations) to decide whether to reimburse the cost incurred by individuals. Waiving charges in respect of some or all of those in the voluntary sector would inevitably impose an additional burden on the Exchequer or result in a higher charge for others using the bureau, who may be no less deserving than those in the voluntary sector. But we have made clear our determination to keep the level of fees to a minimum.

Prison and Probation Services

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the change in expenditure was on *(a)* the Prison Service and *(b)* probation (i) in total and (ii) in real terms in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [145697]

Mr. Boateng: The tables set out the total expenditure (revenue and capital) for the Prison Service and probation services for the 10 financial years 1991–92 to 2000–01. The figures for the financial years 1991–92 to 1999–2000 represent expenditure outturn, while the figures for 2000–01 reflect expenditure plans. The tables also show the change in expenditure from one financial year to the next in both cash and real terms.

Prison Service

Financial year	*Total net expenditure (£ million)*	*Percentage change over previous year*	
		Cash terms	*Real terms*
1991–92	1,462	—	—
1992–93	1,470	0.56	–2.62
1993–94	1,509	2.62	–0.03
1994–95	1,598	5.91	4.44
1995–96	1,667	4.32	1.40
1996–97	1,609	–3.50	–6.50
1997–98	1,741	8.22	5.23
1998–99	1,812	4.10	1.21
1999–2000	1,846	1.89	–0.45
2000–01[1]	1,783	–3.54	–5.32

[1] Plans

Notes:

1. The fall in expenditure in 1996–97 of 3.5 per cent. due to the reduction in capital spend following completion of major capital works in 1995–96. Capital spend in recent years is lower due to the introduction of Private Finance Initiative funding for new prisons.
2. The fall in forecast spend this year (2000–01) due to the transfer to the Youth Justice Board. Adjusting for this factor reveals an increase in cash terms in 2000–01 of 2.9 per cent.

Probation service

Financial year	*Total net expenditure (£ million)*	*Percentage change over previous year*	
		Cash terms	*Real terms*
1991–92	335	—	—
1992–93	365	8.96	5.51
1993–94	393	7.67	4.89
1994–95	406	3.31	1.87
1995–96	416	2.46	–0.40
1996–97	468	12.50	8.99
1997–98	481	2.78	–0.06
1998–99	475	–1.25	–3.99
1999–2000	491	3.37	0.99
2000–01[1]	524	6.72	4.63

[1] Plans

Note:

1. Total expenditure figures do not include capital expenditure on probation/bail hostels, nor direct Home Office central expenditure.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Travel Allowance

45. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the President of the Council how many hon. Members have used their travel allowance to visit Europe this Session; and if she will make a statement. [146226]

Mr. Tipping: Ninety one Members used the scheme last Session; six Members have used the scheme so far this Session, and a number of visits have been approved, but claims have not yet emerged.

House of Commons Commission

46. **Angela Smith:** To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what progress has been made regarding informing hon. Members about the deliberations of the House of Commons Commission on a regular basis. [146227]

Mr. Kirkwood: Further measures, including the setting up of a website on the Parliamentary Intranet have been approved by the Commission since my answer to the hon. Lady on 14 November 2000; *Official Report*, column 588W.

Parliamentary Estate

Mr. Baker: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) of 22 January, *Official Report*, column 413W, regarding the security of the Parliamentary Estate, what assessment he has made of the *(a)* savings to be derived from and *(b)* the operational possibility of replacing police officers with civilian staff. [148015]

Mr. Kirkwood: A recent survey on this aspect of the security operation within the Parliamentary Estate has taken place leading to a decision not to replace police officers with civilian staff.

Parliamentary Questions

Tony Wright: To ask the President of the Council how many and what percentage of written parliamentary questions asked in Session 1998–99 received a holding answer, broken down by Department. [142190]

Mrs. Beckett: The information requested, provided by the House of Commons Library (POLIS database[1]), is provided in the table.

Department	*Questions tabled*	*Holding reply*	*Percentage*
Accommodation and Works Committee	13	4	30.77
Attorney-General	111	1	0.9
Cabinet Office	479	28	5.85
Catering Select Committee	6	1	16.67
DCMS	1,048	316	30.15
DFEE	2,061	251	12.18
DFID	770	18	2.34
DH	2,428	253	10.42
DSS	1,647	70	4.25
DETR	3,978	447	11.24
DTI	2,353	591	25.12
Deputy Prime Minister	131	20	15.27
FCO	2,191	236	10.77
HO	3,310	84	2.54
HoC Commission	26	6	23.08
LCD	630	17	2.70
MAFF	1,697	440	25.93
MOD	2,358	440	18.66
NIO	1,081	184	17.02
PCO	158	2	1.27
Prime Minister	712	154	21.63
SO	1,200	307	25.46
HMT	2,083	544	26.12
WO	1,073	29	2.70

[1] A note provided by the House of Commons POLIS Section on how these figures should be interpreted has been placed in the Library.

Foreign Languages

Mr. Dismore: To ask the President of the Council what support the House offers to hon. Members to learn foreign languages; and if he will make a statement. [146729]

Mrs. Beckett: Members may fund appropriate language teaching for their staff through the office costs allowance; however, at present the House can offer no such support to Members who wish to learn foreign languages themselves.

PRIME MINISTER

Hinduja Brothers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Prime Minister what representations he received from the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) in the period 1997–98 in relation to the applications for citizenship by Mr. G. P. and Mr. S. P. Hinduja; if he will place in the Library copies of relevant documentation; and if he will make a statement. [147995]

The Prime Minister: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer she received from my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary today.

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Prime Minister (1) what representations he has had from Lord Levy regarding applications for citizenship by *(a)* Mr. G. P. Hinduja and *(b)* Mr. S. P. Hinduja; and if Lord Levy informed him of involvement on his part in such applications; [147986]

(2) what representations Lord Levy has had from *(a)* Mr. G. P. Hinduja and *(b)* Mr. S. P. Hinduja regarding applications for citizenship; and what involvement Lord Levy had in such applications. [147987]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him today by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if the inquiry he has established into naturalisation applications by S. P. Hinduja will be published before the next General Election. [148016]

The Prime Minister: Sir Anthony Hammond QC started his review on 25 January. His aim is to complete his review as quickly as possible, consistently with the need to conduct a thorough investigation. I understand that Sir Anthony has informed the Cabinet Secretary that on the information currently available to him he would hope to complete the review by the end of February. It is my intention to publish Sir Anthony's report.

Lord Levy

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Prime Minister how many invitations Lord Levy has accepted, and from whom, in 2000, for Diwali celebrations. [147989]

The Prime Minister: This is a matter for Lord Levy.

Former Ministers (Severance Payments)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make it his policy that no severance payments are made available to former Ministers where loss of office has been mainly or wholly caused by personal misconduct. [148021]

The Prime Minister: I have no plans to change entitlement to severance pay, which is set out in the Ministerial and Other Pensions and Salaries Act 1991.

Ministerial Telephone Calls

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister in which Ministers' offices telephone conversations between Ministers are tape recorded. [148100]

The Prime Minister: As far as I am aware no Ministers' offices make a practice of tape recording conversations between Ministers.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 31 January 2001

DEFENCE

Barrack Accommodation (Scotland)

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to *(a)* alter and *(b)* expand barrack accommodation in Scotland; and at which locations. [146175]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* The major barracks in Scotland are:

Fort George, near Inverness;

Redford Barracks, Edinburgh;

Dreghorn Barracks, Edinburgh;

Army Training Regiment and Recruitment Selection Centre at Glencorse, near Edinburgh;

Royal Marines Base Condor, Arbroath;

HMS Neptune, Faslane;

RNAS Prestwick;

RAF Kinloss, Moray;

RAF Lossiemouth, Moray.

Apart from routine property maintenance, the only plans for significant alterations to, or expansion of, accommodation at these sites involve:

The expansion of both administrative and Junior Ranks Single Living Accommodation at Faslane, with the relocation of the Fleet Royal Marine Protection Group from Royal Marine Base Condor.

The building of barrack accommodation to replace an existing facility at RAF Lossiemouth in Moray.

The Royal Navy will be converting RNAS Prestwick to a Forward Operating Base with effect from April 2002 and in so doing has plans to dispose of one of the two sites at Prestwick, which is known as the Greensite and is surplus accommodation.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if a cost-benefit analysis under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 was conducted for the recent chemically evoked seizure experiments conducted on guinea pigs; and if he will make a statement; [147181]

(2) if he will make it his policy to apply the same cost-benefit analysis requirements in respect of animal experiments as apply to industry under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. [147180]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* Under the terms of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 all proposals for licences to undertake work involving animals have a requirement to have determined the cost-benefit analysis of the research.

This type of analysis is undertaken as part of the formal ethical review procedure required by the Home Office. It assesses all proposals in detail, prior to submission to the Home Office, to determine whether the benefits likely to result from the project outweigh the cost in suffering to the animals to be used. This assessment includes the appropriateness of the animal use and the measures to be taken to minimise suffering. It thus demonstrates that as much as possible has been done to replace the procedures with alternatives not using living animals, to reduce numbers of animals used in particular studies; and, to refine the procedures to minimise pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm, a process known in animal welfare circles as the 3Rs.

The chemically evoked seizure research involving guinea-pigs was conducted under a project licence that had been through this rigorous review process. The research was required to provide UK Service Personnel with the best possible medical countermeasures against nerve agent poisoning. To do this it is essential to understand the actions of nerve agents and test possible therapeutic drugs. This research has provided a better understanding of nerve agent-induced seizures, and suggested approaches to their prevention or reversal by the use of anticonvulsant drugs. In addition, the methods developed during this research led to a significant advance, in that many parameters were able to be assessed within the same animal, reducing the number of animals required.

Type 45 Destroyers

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1), pursuant to his answer of 21 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 249W, on Type 45 destroyers, if the DFM contract resolves conflicts between *(a)* the prime contractor's incentives to deliver the first batch at a price below the maximum price, *(b)* the additional cost of employing two yards to design and assemble the first three ships and *(c)* an unsolicited proposal from BAE Systems Marine for sole sourcing of the assembly of the Type 45 ships; and if he will make a statement; [147531]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 21 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 248W, on the Type 45 destroyer, what incentives there are in the DFM contract for BAE Systems Electronics to deliver below the maximum price; and if he will make a statement. [147528]

Mr. Hoon: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 31 January 2001:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence about the Type 45 Destroyer Demonstration and First of Class Manufacture (DFM) contract. This matter falls to me to answer within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The DFM contract has a successive target arrangement which incentivises the Prime Contractor to deliver below the maximum price by increasing the profit he can earn as his costs decrease. This contract does not envisage an alternative procurement strategy or the unsolicited bid. The pricing of this contract matches the existing procurement strategy, in which there is an integrated project design team composed of personnel from Vosper Thornycroft and BAE Systems Marine, with work on the first three ships distributed among the two companies. Although it could be argued that there is some additional cost for the first three ships inherent in this strategy,

we believe this to be easily outweighed by the benefits of subsequent competition for which it provides. Any alternative procurement strategy would have to be judged against these broader criteria, not just the price of the DFM contract. Any change to the procurement strategy would need to be approved by the Ministry of Defence and would require the contract to be re-negotiated.

Haslar Hospital

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many consultants have resigned from service at Haslar Hospital in each of the last three years. [146708]

Dr. Moonie: The numbers of consultants who left the armed forces on premature voluntary retirement in each of the last three years while serving at the Royal Hospital Haslar are as shown. The period between the acceptance of an application to leave and the date of leaving may be up to 18 months.

Year	*Consultants*
1998	2
1999	6
2000	8

Army Personnel (Scotland)

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about trends in the number of regular soldiers stationed in Scotland since 1995. [145899]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 16 January 2001]:* The Ministry of Defence produces figures showing the numbers of Regular Army personnel based in Scotland as at 1 July each year. The latest available official figures are shown in the table.

Number of UK Regular[1] Army personnel in Scotland: 1 July 1995 to 2000

Date	*Officers*	*Soldiers*	*All ranks*
1 July 1995	243	2,344	2,587
1 July 1996	292	3,161	3,453
1 July 1997	351	2,602	2,953
1 July 1998	388	3,367	3,755
1 July 1999	373	3,441	3,814
1 July 2000[2]	[2]422	[2]3,739	[2]4,161

[1] Figures exclude Gurkhas, Full-time Reserve Service Personnel, Home Service Battalions of the Royal Irish Regiment and mobilised reservists

[2] 1 July 2000 figures for Scotland are provisional

JSF Aircraft

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what protections he has negotiated with the US Department of Defense for the eventuality that the new US Administration cancel the JSF project. [147567]

Mr. Hoon: Any decision by either JSF partner to withdraw from the programme is covered by the standard conditions in the JSF MOU. A copy of this document is available in the House of Commons Library.

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much will be paid, and over what period, to the US Department of Defence as the British contribution to the EMD phase of the Joint Strike Fighter project. [147565]

Mr. Hoon: The UK contribution to the US for the EMD phase of the JSF programme amounts to some £1.3 billion. This will be paid over the 12 year period October 2001 to March 2013. A further £600 million will be spent, some in the US, on UK specific requirements outside of the EMD activity.

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what implications the privatisation of New DERA will have for the UK participation in the JSF project; and if he will make a statement. [147569]

Mr. Hoon: None. The arrangements for UK participation in the JSF programme take into account the creation of New DERA.

Malaria

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many armed forces personnel deployed to Sierra Leone have been diagnosed with malaria or admitted to hospital for investigation since May 2000; what percentage of deployed forces this represents; what his Department's estimate was, previous to deployment, of the percentage effectiveness of protection against malaria the preferred anti-malaria treatment afforded; what percentage of forces deployed to Sierra Leone were administered with anti-malarial treatment before deployment; and if he will make a statement. [147595]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* As of 25 January, there have been 112 confirmed cases of malaria and three suspected cases among Service personnel who have served in Sierra Leone. These figures include personnel who have been referred to hospital for investigation. They represent 1.5 per cent. of deployed forces; 97 per cent. of personnel deployed to Sierra Leone were issued with anti-malarial tablets prior to deployment. It is not normal practice in the field of travel medicine to quote the percentage efficacy of different anti-malarial prophylactic drugs, since the degree of protection can be subject to a wide range of factors; for example, the geographical location, the season, the activities undertaken by the individuals concerned and other types of protection or environmental controls used. Mefloquine is the preferred drug for Sierra Leone as it is more effective than chloroquine and proguanil, and Sierra Leone is a chloroquine-resistant area.

Hinduja Brothers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which Ministers and officials in his Department have *(a)* been contacted by and *(b)* contacted (i) Mr. G. P. Hinduja and (ii) Mr. S. P. Hinduja since 2 May 1997; if he will list the occasions on which there was such contact; and if he will make a statement. [148080]

Dr. Moonie: It is not the normal practice of the Government to release details of meetings or discussions with private individuals or companies.

All relevant papers will be made available to the Inquiry being conducted by Sir Anthony Hammond QC.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

First Group and Arriva

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the Office of Fair Trading's investigation into the First Group and Arriva. [147472]

Dr. Howells: On 10 October 2000, officers of the Director General of Fair Trading visited offices of First Group and Arriva under the powers in section 28 of the Competition Act 1998. The exercise of the Director General's powers of investigation under the Act are a matter for him.

European Trades Union Confederation

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he last met representatives from the European Trades Union Confederation; and if he will make a statement on the issues discussed. [147519]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Mr. right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has not met representatives from the European Trades Union Confederation. I had an introductory meeting with the Secretary General of the Confederation, Emilio Gabaglio, on 11 November 1999 at which we exchanged views on current employment relations issues.

Departmental Projects

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the projects undertaken for his Department by *(a)* outside consultants, *(b)* academic researchers and *(c)* university departments since 1 May 1997, giving the total expenditure incurred in each category. [144078]

Dr. Howells: The information requested is not held centrally by the Departments' Directorates and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

However, the majority of the Office of Science and Technology's (OST SEB) programme expenditure is channelled through the Research Councils as annual grant-in-aid. The Councils then pay a large number of grants to universities. Providing full details would involve disproportionate cost. In summary, main grants-in-aid are as follows.

Grant-in-aid paid to Research Councils in 1997–98 to 2000–01

£000 (net)

Research Council	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*[1]
BBSRC	183,042	182,762	194,182	202,420
ESRC	65,227	67,506	70,872	71,300
EPSRC	386,276	379,444	404,796	412,026
MRC	289,078	284,098	304,538	319,151
NERC	166,150	173,967	176,715	181,450
PPARC	197,869	207,418	186,680	205,774
CCLRC	1,206	1,462	2,000	2,000

[1] Estimate for year

OST SEB does commission a small number of consultancies directly. Details are as shown.

Consultancy paid by OST SEB

	£
1 May 1997 to 31 March 1998	
Consultants	
Preparation of SET statistics and Web production	4,829
Academic researchers	—
University departments	—
Total	4,829
1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999	
Consultants	
Poster project—Women's Unit	11,000
Public Consultation on Development in the Biosciences	130,000
Preparation of SET statistics and Web production	15,176
Consultancy assistance with personnel framework	12,843
Consultancy assistance with senior Council appointments	35,218
Academic researchers	—
University departments	—
Total	204,237
1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000	
Consultants	
Poster project—Women's Unit	7,000
Public Consultation on Developments in the Biosciences	208,000
Review of Science Communication and Public Attitudes to Science in Britain	75,000
Preparation of SET statistics and Web production	35,000
Consultancy assistance with senior Council appointments	20,423
Academic researchers	—
University departments	—
Total	345,423
31 March 2000 to 31 December 2000	
Consultants	
Research into Women returners to science	30,000
Consultancy assistance with senior Council appointments	101,906
Academic researchers	—
University departments	—
Total	131,906

Note:

Year defined by when payment made

Electricity Trading

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the timetable for the implementation of the New Electricity Trading Arrangements. [148481]

Mr. Hain: The Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem) today announced that 27 March remains the target implementation date for the New Electricity Trading Arrangements (NETA). This follows a review of progress by the NETA programme and reflects the fact that the programme is on schedule to meet the timetable announced last October.

Public Interest Immunity Certificates

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many public interest immunity certificates *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers of State, *(c)* junior Ministers and *(d)* civil servants in his Department have signed in each calendar year from 30 May 1997. [147729]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* My Department's records show that, since 30 May 1997, two public interest immunity certificates have been signed by Ministers of this Department, both in 1998. One was signed by a Minister of State and one by a Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State. No certificates were signed by civil servants.

Treaty of Nice

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list his responsibilities in international bodies represented by the European Commission which, under the Treaty of Nice, will be determined by *(a)* unanimity and *(b)* qualified majority voting. [146001]

Mr. Caborn: My hon. Friend appears to be referring to the amendments to Article 133 concerning the common commercial policy. This article extends qualified majority voting in principle to the negotiation and conclusion of agreements relating to trade in services and the commercial aspects of intellectual property. However, unanimity will be retained for certain specified matters (i.e. where unanimity is required for the adoption of equivalent internal EU rules, or where the Community has not exercised related internal rule-making powers).

On certain other matters where competence will continue to be shared between the Community and member states (i.e. trade in cultural, audio-visual, educational, social and human health services) decisions will continue to be reached by consensus. There will be no change to the current arrangements for transport.

The article also makes clear that member states will still be able to negotiate agreements in international organisations, in so far as such agreements respect Community law and other relevant international agreements.

Ofcom

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which of the proposals of Ofcom detailed in the Communications White Paper require legislation to incorporate agencies overseen by his Department; if Ofcom will operate in shadow form; and if he will make a statement. [147615]

Ms Hewitt: Legislation is required to transfer the functions of the Radiocommunications Agency and of Oftel to Ofcom, as proposed in Chapter 8 of the White Paper. The Government will consider whether to set up a shadow Ofcom before Royal Assent. In the meantime, we are working closely with all the regulators concerned to plan a smooth transition to the new regulatory regime.

ECGD

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the operational committees which are responsible to the Management Board of the Export Credits Guarantee Department for overseeing the business functions and operations of the Export Credits Guarantee Department; and on what dates each of these committees was set up. [146646]

Mr. Caborn: The following is the information:

Operational committees	*Date*
Underwriting Committee	1992
Underwriting Technical and Policy Committee	1992
Claims and Recoveries Management Committee	1992
Tactical Recoveries Committee	1992
Cardiff Claims Committee	1994
Debt Conversion Committee	1992
Market Committee	1998
IT Scrutiny Committee	1997
Treasury Management Committee	1999
Audit Committee	1994

Euro

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the recent report of the Centre for Economics and Business Research into the impact of the euro on employment and unemployment; and if he will make a statement. [146947]

Mr. Byers: The Government have said that they will make an assessment of the five economic tests early in the next Parliament.

Manufacturing and Business Skills

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he plans to publish a White Paper on manufacturing and business skills. [148070]

Mr. Byers: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and I intend to publish a White Paper on business (including manufacturing) and skills in the near future.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Hardship Fund

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, how much money is allocated to the Hardship Fund for the current financial year; which dioceses have been given help from the Hardship Fund; what criteria are applied when distributing the Hardship Fund money; and what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the Hardship Fund for the next financial year. [148031]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The hon. Member refers to the funds the Church Commissioners provide to the Archbishops Council for selective allocation to dioceses to support the cost of parish ministry. The Commissioners must determine annually the total sum available for this purpose, taking into account the other statutory duties laid upon them by this House and by the General Synod of the Church of England.

In 2001 the Council will allocate £14.9 million provided by the Commissioners for stipend support to thirty dioceses, nearly two-thirds of which will be targeted on dioceses whose financial need is greatest. In addition the Commissioners provide more that £5 million in direct payments to clergy in all dioceses.

The dioceses receiving allocations in 2001 are:

Birmingham
Blackburn
Bradford
Canterbury
Carlisle
Chelmsford
Chester
Coventry
Derby
Durham
Exeter
Hereford
Leicester
Lichfield
Liverpool
London
Manchester
Newcastle
Norwich
Portsmouth
Ripon and Leeds
St. Albans
St. Edmundsbury and Ipswich
Sheffield
Southwark
Southwell
Truro
Wakefield
Worcester
York.

The current allocation formula takes into account diocesan socio-economic factors such as potential income, unemployment and OxLIP (a low income predictor) together with diocesan resources from historic endowments. It is under review and after revision will place greater emphasis on expected levels of giving by parishioners. It is expected that the new proposals will be introduced in 2002.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Waste Disposal

Mr. Temple-Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has issued concerning the temperature at which combustion of polychlorinated biphenyl should occur in incinerators in order to minimise the emission of dioxins and dibenzofurans. [147512]

Mr. Meacher: The Environment Agency has issued a Technical Guidance Note (S2 5.01) for waste incinerators regulated under Part A of the Environmental Protection (Prescribed Processes and Substances) Regulations 1991/SI No. 472, and a guidance note to its inspectors on the requirements of the EC Directive on the incineration of hazardous waste. These notes summarise both the statutory requirements of the Directive and the techniques available for incineration. As a minimum, a combustion temperature of 850 deg C in the presence of 6 per cent. oxygen for a period of two seconds after the last injection of combustion air is required, unless it can be shown that the Directive emission limit values are complied with and the levels of dioxins and furans emitted are lower or equivalent to those obtained by applying the temperature and residence time requirements laid down in the Directive. However, if the waste stream contains more than 1 per cent. of halogenated organics (which may include polychlorinated biphenyls) a temperature of 1,100 deg C is required in order to minimise emissions of dioxins and dibenzofurans.

Road Schemes

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the road schemes *(a)* approved and *(b)* provisionally approved in (i) the targeted programme of improvements, (ii) multi-model studies and (iii) the local transport settlement, where the primary objective is economic regeneration. [147316]

Mr. Hill: "Regeneration and integration" was stated in "A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England" as the primary objective of the following schemes in the targeted programme of improvements:

Road	*Scheme*
A5	Weeford-Fazeley Improvement
A11	Roudham Heath-Attleborough Dualling
A27	Polegate Bypass
A46	Newark-Lincoln Improvement
A120	Stansted Braintree
A249	Iwade-Queenborough Improvement
A500	Basford, Hough, Shavington Bypass
A500	City Road/Stoke Road Junctions

Regeneration featured strongly in the cases made by authorities for the following schemes accepted as part of the local transport settlement announced on 14 December 2000.

City	*Scheme*
Accepted schemes	
Leeds	East Leeds Link Road
Provisionally accepted schemes	
Birmingham	A38 Northfield Regeneration Scheme
Darlington	Darlington Eastern Transport Corridor
Dorset	Weymouth Relief Road
Durham	A688 Wheatley Hill to Bowburn
Norfolk	Nar Ouse Regeneration Route
Sandwell	Cradley Heath Town Centre
Staffordshire	Biddulph Bypass
Staffordshire	Rugeley Bypass
Thurrock	West Thurrock Riverside Regeneration Scheme
Wakefield	Hemsworth—A1 Link
Wakefield	Glasshoughton Link Road

Multi-modal studies are not a mechanism for approving road schemes. They are designed to examine options for dealing with transport problems and informing subsequent decisions on investment in transport projects. To date only one report on a multi-modal study, 'Access to Hastings', has been received and is under consideration.

Fuel Poor Households

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson), on 18 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 294W, on fuel poor households, if he will estimate on the same basis the number of fuel poor households in each nation and region of the United Kingdom in 1996. [147247]

Mr. Meacher: The common definition of a fuel poor household is one that needs to spend in excess of 10 per cent. of household income in order to maintain a satisfactory heating regime. Using data from the latest English House Condition Survey, the following table shows the effect of different options for calculating household income on the number of households defined as fuel poor by Government Office region in 1996[1].

Government Office region	*(a) Income including Housing Benefit and Income Support for Mortgage Interest (£000)*	*(b) Income excluding Housing Benefit and Income Support for Mortgage interest (£000)*	*(c) Income excluding housing expenditure (£000)*
North East	330	370	470
Yorkshire and Humberside	560	650	770
West Midlands	550	640	820
North West	700	890	1,080
South West	440	520	710
East Midlands	360	440	560
Greater London	480	670	930
Eastern	360	450	630
South East	450	580	830
England (£ million)	[2]4.3	[2]5.3	[2]6.8

[1] Assumes fuel costs include those for non-heating purposes.
[2] Due to the manner in which these data are processed and rounded, the total reported nationally differs very slightly from the sum of the individual regions.

Fuel poverty is a devolved matter and it is the responsibility of the respective Parliament and Assemblies to comment on the situation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Motorway Service Areas

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what criteria his Department uses for determining need for motorway service areas. [147419]

Mr. Hill: Proposals for new motorway service areas (MSAs) are subject to the normal operation of the land use planning system. It is therefore for local planning authorities—or the inquiry Inspector in the event of an appeal—rather than my Department to weigh the need for a proposed MSA. Guidance to planners on how to assess that need is contained in Circular Roads 1–94 and a policy statement which the then Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), made to the House on 31 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 611W. Copies of both documents are available from the Library.

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if it remains the policy of his Department that a motorway service area is required on the south-western quadrant of the M25 motorway; [147418]

(2) if he will make it his policy that in future considerations of planning applications and appeals in respect of motorway service areas on the M25 south western quadrant, each application and appeal is considered without a presumption that at least one of the proposed sites must be successful. [147624]

Mr. Hill: The statement to the House by the then Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), on 31 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 611W, described the Government's policy on the spacing of motorway service areas (MSAs). It explained that this policy was likely to mean that there would be either one or two MSAs on the western side of the M25. The policy did not, and does not, necessarily require an MSA on the south-western sector. Proposals will therefore be considered on their individual planning merits and there is no presumption that either a site within this sector, or any other currently proposed M25 MSA, must be successful.

Homes Bill

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when, where and for how long *(a)* the Housing Minister and *(b)* his officials have met the Council of Mortgage Lenders to discuss the Homes Bill, and if he will indicate the names and titles of those attending the meetings. [147799]

Mr. Raynsford: Since publication of the Homes Bill on 13 December 2000, I have not met the Council of Mortgage Lenders (CML). My last meeting with the CML took place on 4 December, when I addressed their Annual Conference.

The CML have been involved from the outset in the Home Buying and Selling Advisory Group, which assists the Government in developing its proposals. The Group comprises the major representative bodies with an interest in home buying and selling (including consumers), and officials from DETR and other Departments. It is chaired by Michael Gahagan, Director of Housing at DETR. The Group has met once since publication of the Bill, on 12 January.

The CML and the Department have attended two sub-committees of the Advisory Group since publication of the Bill: the Home Condition Report Working Group, at RICS, Great George street, London, on 8 January 2001; and the Home Inspectors Certification Board Steering Group Meeting on Thursday 11 January 2001. Both these meetings were also attended by other stakeholders in the home buying and selling process.

My officials have had two meetings recently with the CML about our home buying and selling proposals. The first was on 22 November; the second was on 15 December 2000. Both meetings lasted about one and a half hours. Full details of attendees are as follows.

Meeting at DETR with CML—22 November 2000

DETR

Michael Gahagan—Director, Housing Directorate

David Woodward—Housing Policy, Renewal and Ownership Division

Steve Nuttall—Principal Research Officer

Andrew Hannan—Superintending Estates Officer

Jacqui Marriott—Assistant Policy Adviser

CML

Michael Coogan—Director General, CML

Fiona Hoyle—Senior Legal Adviser

Shaun Stevens—Housing Policy Adviser

Meeting to discuss the Homes Bill, at CML, 3 Savile Row, London on 15 December 2000

DETR

Michael Gahagan—Director, Housing Directorate, DETR

Martin Jones—Divisional Manager, Housing Policy, Renewal and Ownership, DETR

Steve Nuttall—Principal Research Officer, DETR

Andrew Hannan—Superintending Estates Officer, DETR

CML

Michael Coogan—Director General, CML

Peter Williams—Deputy Director General, CML

Fiona Hoyle—Senior Legal Adviser, CML

Shaun Stevens—Housing Policy Adviser, CML.

Rough Sleepers Unit

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the names and salaries of the three most senior staff at the Rough Sleepers Unit. [147800]

Ms Armstrong: Louise Casey, the Director of the Rough Sleepers Unit, is a member of the Senior Civil Service on fixed-term contract whose salary is within the band £70,000 to £75,000. Gordon Campbell the Deputy Director of the Unit is on secondment from London Borough Grants and DETR reimburses LBG for his employment costs which currently are £54,000. The third most senior member of staff Carol Sweetenham is a band 7 civil servant whose salary is within the pay range for this grade, which is currently £45,526 to £60,095.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the annual budget is of the Rough Sleepers Unit. [147797]

Ms Armstrong: The Rough Sleepers Unit was established in April 1999 and has a three-year programme expenditure budget up to 31 March 2002 of just over £198 million. This includes a number of funding streams previously administered by other Government Departments, most notably the Department of Health and the Department of Social Security. Almost £73 million of the available funding is capital expenditure administered on the Unit's behalf by the Housing Corporation to provide a range of temporary and permanent accommodation for rough sleepers. The remainder meets the on-going costs of a range of accommodation and support services throughout England to help rough sleepers move away from the streets and to rebuild their lives. The Unit has the ability to use its three-year budget in a flexible manner. Therefore it would not be appropriate to give an annual budget figure.

Over the same three-year period, the Rough Sleepers Unit has an administration budget of £3.641 million.

Home Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance has been issued to managing agents of the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme *(a)* on the need to publish analysis of works carried out under the scheme *(b)* the frequency and format of publication and *(c)* to whom this information should be made available. [147811]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* As part of their contracts for managing the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme, Eaga Partnership Ltd. and Eastern HEES Ltd. are required to collect energy efficiency data in regard to homes improved through the programme. This information will be provided annually free of charge to all local authorities in England[1]. Summary monthly reports will be posted on the scheme managers' internet websites to reach all those who have an interest. We are currently in discussion with the scheme managers about the exact format of the data collected.

[1] HEES is a devolved scheme run in England since 1 June 2000. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own separately funded grant programmes.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many households have benefited from grants paid under the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme for *(a)* insulation improvements only, *(b)* heating improvements only and *(c)* heating and insulation improvements; and how many households have benefited under New HEES plus from grant assistance for, (i) insulation improvements only, (ii) central heating installation only and (iii) central heating installation and insulation improvements. [147812]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* The new Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES) was launched on 1 June 2000 and is run by two scheme managers in England: Eaga Partnership Ltd. and Eastern HEES Ltd. with the actual work carried out by independent installers. The table as shown identifies the number of households, which have received either *(a)* insulation, *(b)* heating or *(c)* insulation and heating measures through either HEES or HEES Plus and where the invoice for the work has been received and paid.

Measure	*HEES*	*HEES plus*	*Total*
Insulation only	31,000	19,800	50,800
Heating only	400	1,700	2,100
Insulation and Heating	400	1,250	1,600
Total	31,800	22,750	54,500

A further 82,000 works orders have been placed with installers. At present it is taking installers up to six weeks to send in their invoices from the date of actual installation. It is therefore, likely that a significant proportion of these orders have been completed but not as yet invoiced.

Sport

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the cost is of exempting sporting rights in 1998–99 from the valuation role in *(a)* England, *(b)* Scotland, *(c)* Wales and *(d)* Northern Ireland. [147889]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Sporting rights have not been rateable in England and Wales since 1 April 1997. This was estimated to cost £4 million to £5 million in 1997.

Sporting rights have been exempt from valuation rolls in Scotland since 1 April 1995. This was estimated to cost £2 million to £3 million in 1997.

Sporting rights have not been rateable in Northern Ireland since 1 April 2000. Before then, certain recreational sporting rights would have been eligible for 65 per cent. rate relief, while commercial sporting rights would not have had such relief. Costs for 1998–99 are not readily available.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions have taken place with the Better Regulation Task Force about the proposals for rate relief for voluntary sports clubs in the Green Paper for Local Government Finance. [147891]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Better Regulation Task Force responded to the Green Paper and raised a number of issues, although it did not comment on the proposed rate relief for small businesses and non-profit making bodies including sports clubs. These proposals would provide additional rate relief for qualifying sports clubs. We do not expect them to increase the administrative requirements that clubs meet at present in applying for discretionary rate relief under the current system.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions have taken place between his Department and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport regarding the Green Paper on Local Government Finance and the Government's Sports Strategy. [147892]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Green Paper "Modernising Local Government Finance" is a Government publication and as such reflects the collective views of Ministers. There were detailed discussions and agreement of its content before publication and there will be further discussions at both official and ministerial level to discuss the responses we have received to the Green Paper and the way forward. We will publish our conclusions in a White Paper later this year.

Strategic Rail Authority

Mr. Best: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Strategic Rail Authority will be established; and if he will make a statement. [148392]

Mr. Hill: The Strategic Rail Authority was formally established as an executive non-departmental public body of my Department on 15 January 2001. Members of its Board were appointed on this day. The Authority will commence operation on 1 February when the main provisions of Part IV of the Transport Act 2000 come into force.

My Department has prepared a financial framework, in accordance with paragraph 16 of schedule 14 to the Transport Act, and a management statement for the Authority. I have arranged for copies to be placed in the House Library. These are working documents, which are likely to be amended as my Department's relationship with the Authority develops. If either document is revised significantly, a new version will be placed in the House Library. Copies of the latest version of both documents are available from my Department's Railways Sponsorship Division.

Air Quality

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to announce his conclusions from the review of the Air Quality Strategy objective for particles. [148393]

Mr. Meacher: The Air Quality Strategy for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland was published on 19 January 2000 following an extensive review of the original Strategy. This sets air quality objectives for eight air pollutants that have the potential for significant health effects. These objectives are to be achieved between 2003 and 2008.

The new Strategy replaces the original objective for particles with new objectives derived from the EU Stage 1 limit values for 2005. This was considered to be the only realistic option in view of the latest information that showed that the original objective would not be achievable in the short term, even with the most ambitious emission reduction measures. The Strategy explains that the new objectives for particles are seen as a staging post and not a final outcome. It goes on to say that the Government are concerned to set their sights beyond the immediate need to comply with the EU limit values, and that work has been set in hand which will enable the prospects for strengthening these objectives to be assessed before the next general review of the Strategy.

This work is nearing completion. The most significant area of work is likely to be advice from the Department of Health's Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollution (COMEAP) on the chronic effects of air pollution. To date, the health implications of particle air pollution have tended to focus on the acute, short-term effects. COMEAP's 1998 report suggested that the deaths of over 8,000 vulnerable people may be brought forward and over 10,000 hospital admissions and re-admissions may be associated with short-term air pollution each year. Evidence is now beginning to emerge which suggests that the long-term chronic effects of particle air pollution may

be considerably more significant. COMEAP has been asked by the Department of Health to consider the evidence and the Committee is expected to report shortly.

Advice from COMEAP may, if relevant, be used to support a quantification of the benefits to health from reducing concentrations of particles. These health benefits, along with the information that we already have on the acute health effects of particle pollution, can be considered alongside the latest information on the measures to reduce particle concentrations. A comprehensive study of the costs of emission reduction measures is in hand, as is further modelling work, that will show the impact that recently announced policy measures are likely to have on concentrations of particles over the next few years.

I now intend the review of the objectives for particles to commence in March, to allow time for these various pieces of work to be completed. I expect to be in a position to consult on proposals for a new objective for particles by the end of June.

It is not intended to propose a change to the existing objective for particles. It is important that local authorities have a period of stability as they take forward the local air quality management process. Any new objective will be for the longer term.

In the meantime, the trend in urban air quality is continuing to improve. I announced earlier this month that in 2000 in urban areas there were 17 days of moderate or higher air pollution on average per site, the lowest figure recorded since the series began in 1993. Days of moderate or higher air pollution caused by particles have fallen steeply since 1993.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to respond to the Audit Commission's report into the cost of supporting asylum seekers in London boroughs; and if he will make a statement. [147131]

Mrs. Roche: I am not aware that the Audit Commission has published any recent report on the cost of supporting asylum seekers in London boroughs.

I will, of course, give any such report by the Audit Commission careful consideration once it is received.

Child Curfew Orders

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his original estimate was of the number of local child curfew orders that would be enforced annually. [148066]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We did not make estimates of the number of local child curfews that would be applied for under the powers introduced in 1998. They are a discretionary matter for local authorities, to be considered in the light of wider strategies to deal with disorder in their areas. The need will depend on local circumstances.

Criminal Justice Act

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he plans to introduce legislation further to extend the exemptions in section 34A(2) of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 to include additional categories of offender; and if he will make a statement. [148062]

Mr. Boateng: Section 62 of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 added offenders subject to the notification requirements of Part I of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 to the list of those excluded from Home Detention Curfew. I have no plans at present to add any further categories of offender to the 10 categories already excluded.

Hinduja Brothers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when, and by whom, he was first informed of the citizenship applications submitted by *(a)* Mr. G. P. Hinduja on 5 March 1997 and *(b)* Mr. S. P. Hinduja on 20 October 1998; and if he will make a statement; [148093]

(2) what discussions the hon. Member for Warwickshire, North (Mr. O'Brien) had with ministerial colleagues concerning the application for citizenship by Mr. S. P. Hinduja following the conversation the hon. Member had with the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson); and if he will make a statement; [148034]

(3) when he was first informed of the contact between the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) and the hon. Member for Warwickshire, North (Mr. O'Brien) regarding the application for citizenship from Mr. S. P. Hinduja; and if he will make a statement; [148035]

(4) if he received any representations from ministerial colleagues or other hon. Members regarding the application for citizenship by Mr. G. P. Hinduja; and if he will make a statement; [148036]

(5) if *(a)* Mr. G. P. Hinduja and *(b)* Mr. S. P. Hinduja satisfied all the requirements for naturalisation when the decision was taken to grant them citizenship; if exceptions to the requirements were made in either case; and if he will make a statement. [148094]

Mr. Straw: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave her, the hon. Members for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) and for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 166W.

Young Offenders

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his target date is for achieving the Government's pledge of halving the national average time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders; what progress has been made; and when he expects the target to be achieved. [148064]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In 1996 the average time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders was 142 days. Working with the local youth justice services,

the Government's target is to halve this by March 2002. Substantial progress has already been made—the national average fell to an estimated 94 days by October 2000.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many offenders under the age of 18 years were sentenced in *(a)* the magistrates court, *(b)* the youth court and *(c)* the Crown court, broken down by type of sentence, indicating in particular how many were given a (i) absolute discharge, (ii) conditional discharge, (iii) fine, (iv) community sentence and (v) custodial sentence in each of the last five years for which figures are available; [147604]

(2) what *(a)* custodial and *(b)* non-custodial disposals are available to the youth court; and on how many occasions each type of disposal has been used by the youth court in respect of young offenders in each of the past five years. [147605]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* Available information, taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database, showing the number of offenders aged under 18 years sentenced and the sentences imposed in (i) the magistrates court, (ii) the youth court and (iii) the Crown court are given in the tables for the period 1995 to 1999 (the most recent year for which data are available).

The custodial and non-custodial disposals available to the youth court, and the number of occasions each type of disposal has been used over the past five years by the youth court are also listed in the tables. A number of new orders became available for juveniles in 2000. A new custodial order, the Detention and Training Order was introduced on 1 April 2000 and replaces the secure training order (for 12 to 14-year-olds) and detention in a Young Offender Institution (for 15 to 17-year-olds). New non-custodial disposals, the reparation order and the action plan order, were introduced in June 2000.

Table A: Number of offenders aged 10–17 sentenced at the magistrates court, broken down by type of sentence, England and Wales, 1995–99

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*[1]	*1999*[1]
Total Sentenced	5,365	5,348	5,301	5,613	5,516
Absolute Discharge	87	91	85	87	70
Conditional Discharge	1,799	1,834	1,805	1,938	1,967
Fine	2,101	2,234	2,056	2,137	2,062
Probation Order	141	100	129	140	122
Supervision Order	383	323	362	409	379
Community Service Order	182	151	195	177	176
Attendance Centre Order	214	191	214	267	269
Combination Order	68	49	68	59	69
Curfew Order	[2]—	2	1	5	11
Total Community Sentence[3]	988	816	969	1,057	1,026
Secure Training Order	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	4	5
Young Offender Institution	202	202	209	219	191
Total Immediate Custody[4]	202	202	209	223	196
Otherwise Dealt With[5]	188	171	177	171	195

Table B: Number of offenders aged 10–17 sentenced at the youth court, broken down by type of sentence, England and Wales, 1995–99

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*[1]	*1999*[1]
Total Sentenced	59,470	65,345	38,869	75,907	79,883
Absolute Discharge	558	716	772	716	662
Conditional Discharge	20,479	21,508	22,308	23,986	24,649
Fine	12,258	14,707	16,376	18,887	18,609
Probation Order	1,820	2,235	2,405	2,700	2,813
Supervision Order	9,300	10,013	10,068	11,158	11,442
Community Service Order	2,974	3,269	3,435	3,604	4,114
Attendance Centre Order	6,376	6,366	6,569	6,965	7,542
Combination Order	798	1,127	1,354	1,523	1,625
Curfew Order	[2]—	11	36	149	300
Total Community Sentence[3]	21,268	23,021	23,867	26,099	27,836
Secure Training Order	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	94	173
Young Offender Institution	3,592	3,900	3,920	4,198	4,560
Total Immediate Custody[4]	3,592	3,900	3,920	4,292	4,733
Otherwise Dealt With[5]	1,315	1,493	1,626	1,927	3,394

Table C: Number of offenders aged 10–17 sentenced at the Crown court, broken down by type of sentence, England and Wales, 1995–99

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*[1]	*1999*[1]
Total Sentenced	2,965	3,904	4,922	4,774	4,761
Absolute Discharge	4	7	4	6	6
Conditional Discharge	116	113	144	136	110
Hospital Order Mental Health Act 1983 S37(1)	2	4	7	12	11
Restriction Order Mental Health Act 1983 S41	1	—	—	1	—

Table C: Number of offenders aged 10–17 sentenced at the Crown court, broken down by type of sentence, England and Wales, 1995–99

	1995	1996	1997	1998[1]	1999[1]
Fine	21	21	28	26	24
Probation Order	194	197	192	244	245
Supervision Order	460	580	819	867	858
Community Service Order	272	299	389	368	380
Attendance Centre Order	69	74	79	72	62
Combination Order	87	136	215	233	207
Curfew Order	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	1	9
Total Community Sentence[3]	1,082	1,286	1,694	1,785	1,761
Detained Under S.53 Children and Young Person Act 1933	401	635	748	603	631
Secure Training Order	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	4	17
Young Offender Institution	1,269	1,760	2,206	2,095	2,076
Total Immediate Custody[4]	1,670	2,395	2,954	2,702	2,724
Otherwise Dealt With[5]	69	78	91	106	125

[1] Orders under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 (examples include Reparation Order, Action Plan Order, Parenting Order and Drug Treatment and Testing Order), were piloted in selected areas in late 1998 and 1999, and are recorded as 'otherwise dealt with'.
[2] Not applicable.
[3] Community Sentence comprises: Probation Order, Supervision Order, Community Service Order, Attendance Centre Order, Combination Order and Curfew Order.
[4] Immediate Custody comprises: Secure Training Order and Young Offender Institution.
[5] Otherwise Dealt With includes: Compensation, Hospital or Guardianship Order under the Mental Health Act 1983, Police Cells, Recognizance, Parents to pay fine or compensation or costs, Parents bound over etc.

Disposals available to the youth court for offenders aged 10–17, England and Wales, 1995–99

Non-custodial

Absolute Discharge

Conditional Discharge

Fine

Probation order

Supervision Order

Community Service Order

Attendance Centre Order

Combination Order

Curfew Order

Custodial

Secure Training Order

Young Offender Institution

Otherwise Dealt With[1]

[1] Includes Compensation, Hospital or Guardianship Order under the Mental Health Act 1983, Police Cells, Recognizance, Parents to pay fine or compensation or costs, Parents bound over etc.

Professional Witnesses

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his policy is on the use of professional witnesses to gather information; what his estimate is of the increased use of such witnesses since 1997; and if he will make a statement. [148065]

Mr. Straw: The report "Speaking up for Justice", published in June 1998, recommended that good practice guidelines for the use of professional witnesses in criminal cases should be developed by the Local Government Association in conjunction with the Association of Chief Police Officers. We hope to be in a position to issue such guidelines shortly.

I understand that records are not kept of the number of occasions on which professional witnesses are used.

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many anti-social behaviour orders have been issued to date in respect of *(a)* juveniles and *(b)* adults; how many are in force; and if he will make a statement. [148073]

Mr. Charles Clarke: At least 150 anti-social behaviour orders have been made since the provision came into force on 1 April 1999. Since the minimum duration of an order is two years, and we are not aware of any orders being discharged, we understand that all of these remain in force.

It is not possible from the figures available to give an exact breakdown between adults and juveniles. We are, however, aware of at least 50 orders which have been made against persons under 18.

Emergency Services

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will require the same communications technology to be used across the three emergency services; [147626]

(2) if he will assess the project work undertaken by the Greater Manchester Fire and Civil Defence Authority when determining future radio strategies for emergency services. [147629]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Joint working is one of the Government's core principles for delivering efficient and modern public services. The communications systems of each of the emergency services need to be able to meet the particular operational requirements of that service. But the systems also need to support effective interworking between the services. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has therefore asked representatives of the police, fire and emergency ambulance services to put proposals by Easter 2001 to him and to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health on how collaboration between those services in communications and in other areas can be encouraged and improved.

I would encourage and indeed expect these proposals to take account of project work already in hand by emergency services in different parts of the country.

Immigration

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for indefinite leave to remain under the concession to those who have suffered domestic violence have been received since its introduction; and how many of those applicants were granted settlement in the UK. [147560]

Mrs. Roche: To date, we have recorded 77 applications made under the terms of the concession, of which 47 have been granted settlement. In the other cases, there was insufficient evidence fully to meet the terms of the concession.

Lieutenant Governor of Jersey

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people applied for the advertised job of Lieutenant Governor of Jersey; how many applicants were women; how many were shortlisted and how many of these were women. [147847]

Mr. Straw: 58 applications were received for the post of Lieutenant Governor of Jersey, of which two were from women. 14 applicants, all male, were shortlisted.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will extend to Guernsey the responsibilities of the new Lieutenant Governor of Jersey. [147846]

Mr. Straw: No. The Bailiwicks of Jersey and Guernsey are separate jurisdictions, with their own legislatures, legal systems and judiciaries. Each has its own Lieutenant Governor, who is the personal representative of Her Majesty The Queen. It would not be appropriate to have a single Lieutenant Governor for the two Bailiwicks.

Female Prisoners

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what analysis he has made of the ethnic origin of girls sentenced to detention and training since April 2000. [147455]

Mr. Boateng: Eighty-nine girls were received into custody under detention and training orders in their first three months, April to June 2000. One was Asian, four were black, five were of mixed race, 76 were white and three were of other ethnic origin.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many incidents of self-harm have taken place among *(a)* females, *(b)* females under 21 and *(c)* females under 18 serving custodial sentences in each year since 1995, broken down by establishment in which the incidents occurred. [147469]

Mr. Boateng: Figures for self-harm incidents for all female prisoners held in establishments designated as prisons for women since 1994–95 are given in the table. They are given by financial year so as to include the most up to date figures available. Those for the period since March 2000 are being collated and should be available in May. I regret that these self-harm figures are not available for female prisoners by age.

Total incidents of self harm in Her Majesty's prison establishments for women

Prison	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*[1]
Askham	0	5	4	4	0	0
Brockhill	0	1	11	69	67	0
Bullwood Hall	126	312	0	97	234	46
Cookham	32	49	46	23	15	0
Drake Hall	7	5	14	9	9	46
East Sutton	0	3	1	0	0	0
Eastwood	0	61	176	95	154	24
Holloway	386	192	139	252	250	240
New Hall	325	260	116	190	180	412
Styal	156	108	92	96	144	12
Total	103	996	599	835	1,053	780

[1] Until 31 March 2000

The table lists figures of self-harm incidents for all female establishments since 1994–95, but does not, for example, include figures for women's units currently in use in other establishments.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into deaths and incidents of self-harm in women's prisons. [147470]

Mr. Boateng: There is a wide range of research studies covering many aspects of self-harm and suicidal behaviour in women's prisons. The Prison Service is planning a new research and evaluation strategy for self-inflicted deaths and self-harm in custody and will take into account the learning from these and other studies.

Previous projects include research into the institutional factors of self-harm at Bullwood Hall prison; the management and recording of suicidal behaviour at Styal prison; and the management of self-harm, characteristics of those who self-harm, and evaluation of intervention effectiveness at Holloway prison. Current projects include a study of women life sentence prisoners and suicidal behaviour at Highpoint prison. All generic studies of self-inflicted deaths include women prisoners.

All research is evaluated so that it informs and contributes to the development of suicide and self-harm prevention policies and practices.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the

factors underlying the recent increase in the number of women sentenced to imprisonment. [147457]

Mr. Boateng: The number of women prisoners increased by 100 per cent. from 1993 to 1998, compared with a 45 per cent. increase in the number of men. The increase is due to more women going through the courts, and more women getting custodial sentences and for longer periods. In 1999, 70,800 women were proceeded against for indictable offences compared with 68,500 in 1998. Since 1997 the custody rate for women has increased by just over a quarter compared with a 9 per cent. increase for men. In the last five years, 50 per cent. of the rise is due to more women being convicted of drugs offences.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he plans to remove 15 and 16-year-old girls from the prison system. [147456]

Mr. Boateng: In March 2000, 40 of the 130 girls sentenced and remanded to custody were held outside the Prison Service. Following the Government's changes to the sentencing, remand and placement arrangements last year this total has increased to 60. We aim to increase it further but as the total of girls in custody is rising we cannot set a date for removing 15 and 16-year-olds completely from Prison Service accommodation.

Graffiti

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representations he has received regarding the restriction on the sale of spray paints to minors. [147593]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* I have received several representations of late from Members of Parliament and from members of the public calling for restrictions on the sale of spray paints to minors. There are, however, no plans to introduce such restrictions at present. I refer the hon. Member to the closing statement I gave to the Adjournment debate 'Graffiti and Vandalism' on 27 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 195.

Police Recruitment

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will list the planned police recruitment intakes in England and Wales for the remainder of 2000–01, broken down by force, differentiating recruits under the Crime Fighting Fund initiative and those who would otherwise be recruited; [146290]

(2) if he will list the *(a)* planned and *(b)* actual police recruitment intakes in England and Wales in 2000–01 to date, broken down by force, differentiating recruits under the Crime Fighting Fund initiative and those who would otherwise have been recruited. [146289]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* The only information collected centrally about force recruitment by intake is that required for the purposes of monitoring the Crime Fighting Fund (CFF) and calculating CFF grant. Forces are not asked for details of all planned and actual recruits, only for the number of appointments on probation. For CFF purposes any officer appointed on transfer from the Royal Ulster Constabulary is also counted in this category. The figures provided by forces are the source of the information given in this answer.

Individual force plans for particular recruitment intakes have changed frequently according to the success of the force in attracting and processing applications. The table sets out the actual recruitment, month by month, reported by each force for the period 1 April to 15 December 2000. This was the cut-off date for the most recent payment of CFF grant. The table shows separately the number of officers deemed to be CFF recruits and other appointments on probation. The number of recruits deemed to be CFF officers is calculated as a proportion of the force's projected total appointments on probation. If the total of these appointments for the year varies from a force's projections, the number of recruits deemed to be CFF officers may also change.

In view of the frequent changes to force plans for the number of recruits on each intake, it is difficult to offer a meaningful force by force projection for each intake for the remainder of 2000–01. However, returns from forces suggest that by 31 March 2000 a total of 7,250 appointments on probation will have been made in the financial year 2000–01. Of these 2,750 will be deemed to be CFF recruits.

Appointments on probation—1 April to 15 December 2000[1,2]

	April		*May*		*June*		*July*		*August*	
Forces	*Deemed CFF*	*Others*	*Deemed CFF*	*Others*	*Deemed CFF*	*Others*	*Deemed CFF*	*Others*	*Deemed CFF*	*Others*
Avon and Somerset	3	3	0	0	7	6	8	8	9	9
Bedfordshire	0	0	2	9	0	0	2	7	0	0
Cambridgeshire	3	13	3	8	2	9	3	13	3	8
Cheshire	2	4	0	0	2	4	2	6	1	4
City of London	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	10
Cleveland	3	9	3	7	0	0	0	0	3	9
Cumbria	0	0	0	0	7	1	0	0	0	0
Derbyshire	0	0	6	4	5	4	0	0	10	8
Devon and Cornwall	7	8	7	7	8	9	8	10	9	10
Dorset	4	6	0	0	0	0	4	6	4	7
Durham	0	0	5	8	0	1	5	7	4	6
Dyfed Powys	4	6	0	0	4	8	0	0	4	5
Essex	0	12	0	8	0	10	0	16	0	12
Gloucestershire	5	9	0	0	4	8	5	9	0	0
Greater Manchester	11	16	16	30	3	6	5	10	9	14
Gwent	12	0	0	0	10	0	9	0	0	0

Appointments on probation—1 April to 15 December 2000[1,2]

Forces	April		May		June		July		August	
	Deemed CFF	*Others*	*Deemed CFF*	*Others*	*Deemed CFF*	*Others*	*Deemed CFF*	*Others*	*Deemed CFF*	*Others*
Hampshire	2	16	1	15	2	19	1	16	2	15
Hertfordshire	0	12	0	16	0	13	0	9	0	11
Humberside	8	0	0	0	11	0	5	0	7	0
Kent	7	13	7	11	10	18	10	17	9	15
Lancashire	8	8	7	7	8	8	7	7	8	9
Leicestershire	7	10	0	0	6	10	0	0	7	10
Lincolnshire	0	0	4	8	4	8	8	16	5	9
Merseyside	14	6	14	6	0	0	8	3	11	4
Metropolitan	42	57	42	57	41	55	36	49	0	0
Norfolk	6	4	6	3	4	2	0	0	8	4
North Wales	4	8	2	4	4	8	0	0	8	13
North Yorkshire	0	0	0	0	3	11	3	9	0	0
Northamptonshire	1	1	9	8	8	6	3	3	6	5
Northumbria	4	10	6	12	6	12	8	17	9	19
Nottinghamshire	4	6	5	8	4	7	5	7	5	7
South Wales	4	11	4	14	4	14	5	18	8	25
South Yorkshire	5	7	5	7	11	13	5	7	11	13
Staffordshire	0	0	8	2	8	2	0	0	0	0
Suffolk	0	0	7	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Surrey	7	22	5	15	4	14	6	20	4	13
Sussex	2	8	2	8	4	11	5	16	6	18
Thames Valley	4	14	5	18	4	18	6	26	5	22
Warwickshire	0	0	0	0	5	10	0	0	4	8
West Mercia	0	0	11	7	6	3	0	0	0	0
West Midlands	14	27	13	25	24	45	24	46	24	45
West Yorkshire	8	7	7	6	8	7	9	9	11	11
Wiltshire	0	0	4	4	0	0	4	5	0	0

Forces	September		October		November		December	
	Deemed CFF	*Others*	*Deemed CFF*	*Others*	*Deemed CFF*	*Others*	*Deemed CFF*	*Others*
Avon and Somerset	10	10	10	10	0	0	10	10
Bedfordshire	0	0	1	6	2	7	2	10
Cambridgeshire	0	0	2	9	2	9	3	13
Cheshire	0	0	2	5	4	9	0	0
City of London	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	10
Cleveland	0	0	3	9	3	9	0	0
Cumbria	0	0	0	0	7	1	7	1
Derbyshire	0	0	9	7	8	6	0	0
Devon and Cornwall	0	0	9	9	8	10	0	0
Dorset	0	0	8	12	0	0	6	8
Durham	0	0	3	4	4	4	4	6
Dyfed Powys	0	0	3	4	4	3	0	0
Essex	0	0	0	22	0	22	0	0
Gloucestershire	0	0	4	9	0	0	0	0
Greater Manchester	0	0	12	23	12	23	21	39
Gwent	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hampshire	0	0	2	22	1	17	0	0
Hertfordshire	0	0	0	0	0	13	0	0
Humberside	0	0	0	0	12	0	4	12
Kent	0	0	10	19	11	19	12	20
Lancashire	0	0	8	9	8	8	8	8
Leicestershire	5	9	0	0	5	7	2	4
Lincolnshire	0	0	5	9	0	10	0	0
Merseyside	0	0	14	5	14	6	0	0
Metropolitan	41	55	52	70	57	77	0	0
Norfolk	0	0	6	3	1	8	0	0
North Wales	0	0	8	13	0	0	0	0
North Yorkshire	0	0	3	7	0	0	0	0
Northamptonshire	0	0	5	5	0	13	0	6
Northumbria	0	0	7	16	7	14	8	18
Nottinghamshire	0	0	4	7	3	6	10	18
South Wales	0	0	7	23	7	21	0	0
South Yorkshire	0	0	4	5	11	13	0	0
Staffordshire	0	0	7	1	7	2	0	0
Suffolk	0	0	9	5	0	0	11	6
Surrey	7	20	8	25	0	0	4	15

Forces	September		October		November		December	
	Deemed CFF	Others	Deemed CFF	Others	Deemed CFF	Others	Deemed CFF	Others
Sussex	0	0	5	15	7	21	7	21
Thames Valley	0	0	5	19	3	12	4	14
Warwickshire	0	0	4	8	4	8	4	9
West Mercia	0	0	9	5	6	3	9	6
West Midlands	0	0	24	45	24	46	0	0
West Yorkshire	0	0	8	8	10	10	0	0
Wiltshire	0	0	7	7	0	0	0	0

[1] Based on force returns for CFF purposes
[2] Force returns cover appointments on probation, except that any officer transferring to a force in England and Wales from the RUC would also be counted among 'others'

TREASURY

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement about progress on implementing the recommendations made by KPMG in December 1999 on the adequacy of the risk management systems and processes of the Export Credits Guarantee Department. [148480]

Mr. Timms: The Government, in their response to the Trade and Industry Committee's report on the future of ECGD, noted that it intended to commission a follow-up, independent report to assess progress in addressing the recommendations made by KPMG in 1999 [Cm 4792]. I announced the Terms of Reference for this follow-up review to the House on 30 November 2000. KPMG have been re-engaged for this review which is to be undertaken in two stages. The first stage is now complete and I have placed a copy of KPMG's report in the Library of the House. KPMG's conclusions were as follows:

"A significant volume of work has been undertaken in addressing the recommendations set out in the original KPMG report. Most of the recommendations have been addressed, although there are still some areas outstanding. However, in most cases, the implementation of the proposals made to address the recommendations is still in course.

As a result, the majority of steps taken to address the recommendations could only be reviewed through studying the so called Product Papers relating to each area of the Action Plan, and the practical effectiveness could not be reviewed. Many of the findings of this report have, therefore, stated a requirement for further review in Phase 2 of the review. In many cases, it will be necessary for ECGD to revise the processes proposed by the Action Plan Products to fit the PMS3 framework and this is likely to involve a considerable volume of work.

Therefore, as regards Section 5 of the original KPMG report, we believe that there is a need for ECGD to formally monitor the implementation of the Product Papers and their associated recommendations, in order to maintain the momentum required to ensure full implementation in advance of Phase 2 of the review.

As regards Section 4 of the original report and progress towards capitalisation, there was found to be a high degree of commitment within ECGD to the development of the PMS3 framework. There has been considerable progress in the high level design of the constituent elements of a capitalisation framework comparable to best practice in the commercial sector. However, in most cases, the detailed design of the various elements is still in course and was not therefore ready for review.

The high level review of the elements in place revealed that significant progress has been made towards the development of the PMS3 framework, but that there is also a great deal more work to be completed for ECGD to successfully meet the April 2001 implementation date. This is particularly the case regarding the development of the operational framework within which PMS3 will work. It is recommended that fulfilment of the criteria set out in Annex B of this report should be reviewed in Phase 2 to more fully assess the potential effectiveness of the PMS3 framework.

Overall, therefore, whilst we believe that significant progress has been made in addressing the recommendations, it is clear that there is still a considerable amount of implementation work to be completed before the operating environment will be appropriate for the delegation of full operational autonomy to ECGD and the adoption of the purely strategic relationship proposed in Product E4 of the Action Plan".

Special Shares

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the special shares he holds in former nationalised companies; what value is placed on those shares based on resource accounting procedures; and what market value is attached to those shares. [147251]

Mr. Andrew Smith: HM Treasury does not hold special shares in any former nationalised companies.

For figures on the numbers of special shares held by the Government, I refer to the answer my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary gave to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 764W. Since 21 February, the Government have redeemed their special share in both PowerGen plc and National Power plc and have obtained a special share in Lattice plc following the restructuring of British Gas plc.

Special shares are not marketable and are not assigned a value within departmental resource based accounts.

Children's Tax Credit

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families in the constituency of Glasgow, Pollok he estimates will be eligible to claim the children's tax credit. [148119]

Dawn Primarolo: An estimate of the number of families in the constituency of Glasgow, Pollok who will be eligible to claim the children's tax credit (CTC) is unavailable, but an estimate of the number of families in Scotland who will be eligible to claim CTC is 400,000.

Unemployment Costs

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the average annual cost to public funds is in terms of benefits payments and lost revenue of each unemployed person; and how this varies between employment sectors. [147721]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The extent to which unemployment affects Government revenues and spending depends on a number of assumptions, in particular the extent to which unemployment reflects permanent changes in output growth. Treasury research on this is included in "Fiscal policy: public finances and the cycle" (March 1999). As a result of falling levels of unemployment, social security expenditure to the unemployed is forecast to be £4 billion lower, in real terms, in 2000–01 than in 1996–97. DSS ready reckoners estimate that an increase of 100,000 in claimant unemployed would lead to an increase in expenditure of around £500-£550 million a year. Public revenue and spending effects of unemployment in different employment sectors are not available.

Drug Smuggling

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many employees of HM Customs and Excise *(a)* are predominantly involved in tackling importation of illegal drugs and *(b)* have some responsibility for tackling importation of illegal drugs and how many employees there are in total; [146301]

(2) what proportion of the resources deployed by HM Customs and Excise are involved in dealing with the importation of illegal drugs. [146302]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 24 January 2001]:* This information for resources deployed to the Protection of Society is contained within HM Customs & Excise's Annual Report 2000, a copy of which is available in the House of Commons Library. The majority of these staff will be deployed on anti-drugs work.

Insurance Regulation

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to investigate the regulatory performance of his Department and its predecessors in respect of insurance providers and appointed actuaries on the issue of *(a)* guaranteed annuity policies, *(b)* with profits funds and *(c)* policyholders' reasonable expectations in the period leading up to 1 January 1999. [145695]

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will conduct an inquiry into his Department's regulation of Equitable Life during 1997 and 1998. [146685]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 16 and 22 January 2001]:* The Financial Services Authority is preparing a report on the events leading to the closure of Equitable Life to new business. As the FSA said on 22 December the report will set out the background and events leading up to the FSA assuming responsibility for prudential insurance regulation. The report is likely to take some months and it will be published.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 8 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 462W, if he will make it his policy to provide compensation to Equitable Life policy holders who acted on the guidance issued by his Department. [145570]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* As I announced in the Westminster Hall Adjournment debate on 19 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 56WH, compensation for the customers of financial services firms is available if a firm becomes insolvent. As I also reported in that debate, the FSA said when the firm closed to new business that the Equitable Life was not insolvent. In the case of insolvent insurance firms, the relevant compensation scheme is that provided for under the Policyholders Protection Act 1975. The Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, when implemented, will bring these arrangements into the single Financial Services Compensation Scheme.

Tax Law Rewrite Project

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if there have been further developments on the Tax Law Rewrite project. [148479]

Dawn Primarolo: I am pleased to be able to tell the House that the Tax Law Rewrite project is continuing to make good progress. The rewritten Capital Allowances Bill was introduced in this House earlier this month and the Inland Revenue today publish the project's eleventh Exposure Draft, containing draft clauses rewriting a second group of the employment income provisions. Copies of the Exposure Draft are being placed in the Libraries of the House.

HEALTH

National Institute for Clinical Excellence

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if all NICE appraisal determinations on health technologies are submitted to him for final approval prior to their dissemination to the NHS. [146388]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) issues its appraisal guidance directly to the National Health Service and is solely responsible for the content of the appraisal determination on which it is based. In accordance with its directions, the dissemination of the final guidance is subject to the approval of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. The Department, in common with other consultees, has the opportunity to comment on the content of the draft guidance before the final guidance is drawn up by NICE.

Prescription Drug Prices

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the level of change in the price of drugs prescribed generically by the NHS was during 2000; if he will list the 10 drugs which have shown the highest rate of increase and what that rate has been in each case. [146453]

Mr. Denham: The prices paid by the National Health Service for the main medicines prescribed and available generically fell by around 30 per cent. overall in 2000, with most of the falls occurring in anticipation of and in response to the introduction of our maximum price scheme for generics in July 2000. This represents an estimated saving to the National Health Service in 2000 of some £170-£180 million compared to prices in January 2000.

The table lists the 10 presentations of the main medicines prescribed and available generically which recorded the highest price increases in 2000. The cost of the increases is taken into account in the estimated savings figure for 2000 and had a marginal effect on it.

Name of presentation	Percentage Increase in price
Digoxin—Tab 62.5mcg (28-pack)	73
Loperamide HCl—Cap 2mg (30-pack)	46
Aspirin—Tab E/300mg (100-pack)	40
Co-Codamol Eff—Tab 8mg/500mg (100-pack)	39
Digoxin—Tab 125mcg (28-pack)	29
Digoxin—Tab 250mcg (28-pack)	29
Paracetamol—Tab 500mg (100-pack)	22
Lorazepam—Tab 2.5mg (100-pack)	19
Clomipramine HCl—Cap 10mg (28-pack)	15
Dothiepin HCl Cap 25 mg (28-pack)	13

Notes:

The main medicines prescribed and available generically, on which the price index is based and from which the data on increases is taken, are defined as the generic preparations subject to the Government price control measures introduced in July 2000 and any other preparations in the top 200 generic medicines in terms of net ingredient cost in the first six months of 2000, the latest period for which comprehensive information is available. Together they represent around 90 per cent. of total net ingredient cost of medicines prescribed and available generically. The price index is based on the average unit Drug Tariff price of each preparation weighted according to quantities (includes estimates for months for which actual data are not yet available) dispensed in 2000–01.

Internet Adoption

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the statutory provisions which apply to *(a)* the adoption of children through the internet and *(b)* adoption agencies' use of the internet. [146602]

Mr. Hutton: Only councils and approved voluntary adoption agencies may advertise (on the internet and elsewhere) children for the purposes of adoption. Anyone else who does this is committing an offence under section 58(1) of the Adoption Act 1976.

Section 58(1) of the Adoption Act 1976 provides that it is unlawful for any advertisement to be published indicating:

(a) that the parent or guardian of a child desires to cause a child to be adopted;

(b) that a person desires to adopt a child; or

(c) that any person (not being a local authority or voluntary adoption society approved by the Secretary of State) is willing to make arrangements for the adoption of a child.

Making arrangements for the adoption of a child is defined in section 72(3) of the Adoption Act 1976 as amended by section 13 of Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999.

Section 58(2) provides that any person who causes to be published or knowingly publishes an advertisement in contravention of section 58(1) is guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale. The law applies equally to the internet as it does to any other medium.

I wrote to the United Kingdom Internet Service Providers Association on 19 January, informing them that if they become aware of any material on one of their Internet Service Providers advertising children for adoption that is not run by a local authority or approved adoption agency, they must remove it. If they failed to do so then they will be committing an offence and may face prosecution.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action the Government are taking in response to the views of the beta interferon appeal panel on selecting patients for treatment with beta interferon. [147036]

Mr. Denham: The panel was set up to examine specific procedural points relating to the determination of the Appraisal Committee on beta interferon. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) asked the Appraisal Committee to reconsider the matters in the light of the appeal panel's decision.

NICE has now extended the timescale for its appraisal of both beta interferon and glatiramer acetate to enable further research to be undertaken on their cost effectiveness. NICE will review the outcome of the new modelling in the summer and unless there are further appeals would expect to issue its guidance by this November.

Haemophilia

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to provide genetically engineered recombinant treatment products in place of blood products for people with haemophilia in the United Kingdom. [147042]

Mr. Denham: We have already instructed National Health Service trusts to provide recombinant clotting factors to new haemophilia patients and those under age 16. We have recently met representatives from the Haemophilia Society, the United Kingdom Haemophilia Doctors Association and the Royal College of Nursing Haemophilia Nurses Association to discuss the case for extending this provision to all haemophilia patients in England, and are giving careful consideration to the points they made.

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will hold a public inquiry into the infection of people with haemophilia, HIV and hepatitis through contaminated blood products; and if he will make a statement. [147041]

Mr. Denham: The technology to make blood products free from HIV and hepatitis C in sufficient quantities to treat all haemophilia patients in the United Kingdom was not available until the mid 1980s. Once it was, the National Health Service introduced it. All this information is in the public domain and we do not believe that anyone's interest would be best served by a public inquiry.

Mr. Pollard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to enable adults with haemophilia to be offered treatment with genetically engineered recombinant and to establish a no-fault compensation scheme for people with haemophilia who have been infected with hepatitis. [147265]

Mr. Denham: We have already instructed National Health Service trusts to provide recombinant clotting factors to new haemophilia patients and those under age 16. We have recently met representatives from the Haemophilia Society, the United Kingdom Haemophilia Doctors Association and the Haemophilia Nurses

Association to discuss the case for extending this provision to all haemophilia patients in England, and are giving careful consideration to the points they made.

We have reviewed the previous Government's decision not to offer financial assistance to haemophilia patients infected with hepatitis C through blood products. We concluded that an exception could not be made to the general rule that compensation or financial help is only given when the NHS, or individuals working in it, have been at fault.

Fluoride

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the relative benefits to dental health of *(a)* calcium fluoride and *(b)* sodium fluoride. [147258]

Mr. Denham: The use of sodium salts to deliver fluoride to benefit dental health is more appropriate than the use of calcium salts.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the report into the safety and efficacy of fluoride in drinking water carried out by the National Health Service Centre for Reviews and Dissemination at the University of York; and what plans he has to establish a public inquiry into the issue. [147259]

Mr. Denham: We accept the findings of the York report that more high-quality research is required and have asked the Medical Research Council to consider how the research base may be strengthened. We do not consider that a public inquiry would be appropriate.

Hospital Cleanliness

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those hospitals in Cornwall and Devon which failed to meet basic cleanliness standards according to the recent survey by NHS Estates. [147249]

Mr. Denham: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave on 23 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 508W.

Nurses

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many agency nurses were employed in the NHS in December 2000; and what the total cost of that employment was. [147242]

Mr. Denham: Information about the number of agency nurses is not collected centrally. Information on the annual costs of employing agency nurses is collected centrally after the end of each financial year. Information on the cost of employing agency nurses during individual months of the year is not collected centrally.

Computer Systems

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to carry out a value for money and operational effectiveness audit of the NHS computer systems purchased through the South West regional procurement following full implementation, before employing this procurement methodology elsewhere. [147139]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* The South West procurement exercise is a pilot from which lessons will be learned and applied elsewhere in the country to help implement acute EPR. Once the systems and services have been implemented, a post-implementation review will be carried out by each local community taking part and will be published, as required by the conditions of the business case approval.

Food Safety

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what foods which have gone past their sell by date are routinely reprocessed by the food industry and sold to the public in another form; and if he will make a statement. [147382]

Ms Stuart: The information requested is not available centrally.

Whether or not the date mark on a food has expired, and whether or not a food has been reprocessed, it is an offence under the Food Safety Act 1990 to sell, or possess for sale, food that does not comply with food safety requirements. These are that food, not only for retail sale but throughout the food chain, must not have been rendered injurious to health, be unfit, or be so contaminated that it would be unreasonable to expect it to be eaten. The Act also makes it an offence to render food injurious to health, to sell to the purchaser's prejudice food which is not of the nature or substance or quality demanded, or to describe or present food falsely or misleadingly.

Orthopaedic Surgeons

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average cost of the education and training of a qualified orthopaedic surgeon is. [147268]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not collected centrally in the form requested.

In order to qualify as an orthopaedic surgeon, a doctor would have to complete a medical degree, one year of general clinical training, a minimum of two years as a senior house officer and six years as a specialist registrar.

The costs to the National Health Service and Higher Education Funding Council in England of a five year undergraduate medical course plus a year of general clinical training are in the region of £160,000 to £200,000. The health service makes a significant investment in postgraduate medical education. Doctors in postgraduate training follow an apprenticeship model where their training is inextricably bound up with the service they provide. Even within specialties the length and type of training will vary according to the particular career path an individual chooses and their rate of progress. For these reasons it is not possible to put a meaningful figure to the cost of training individuals to completion of specialist training.

Food Standards Agency

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 18 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 41–42W, if he will list the amendments to directives and proposed future directives the Food Standards Agency is seeking to allow food products to

carry consumer information about disease risk exposure reduction; and if he will make a statement on the progress so far made in achieving these objectives. [147745]

Ms Stuart: The Food Standards Agency has made specific representations to the European Commission arguing for establishment of an effective and practical system for the verification and approval of health claims at European Union level. It has made the case for allowing valid disease risk reduction claims as an integral part of these arrangements. These initiatives form part of the Food Standards Agency's wide-reaching food labelling action plan to improve the quality and clarity of information available to consumers.

I understand the Commission is now reviewing this area of legislation with a view to making proposals later this year.

A summary of the changes being pursued has been published by the FSA in its action plan on food labelling, copies of which are available in the Library.

Children (Medicines)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans his Department has to establish a centrally-held record of suspected adverse reactions among children to medicines. [147772]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* The Medicines Control Agency and its independent scientific expert advisory committee, the Committee on Safety of Medicines, have responsibility for monitoring the safety of medicines in the United Kingdom.

One of the key data sources used in monitoring is the yellow card scheme. This scheme receives spontaneous reports of suspected adverse drug reactions, including those in children, from doctors, dentists, coroners and pharmacists. All reports are entered on the adverse drug reactions on line information tracking database maintained by the MCA.

MRSA

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to reduce infection by Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus in NHS hospitals. [147873]

Mr. Denham: The recently published NHS Plan implementation programme makes it very clear that, as a core requirement, National Health Service organisations must have effective systems in place to prevent and control hospital acquired infection (HAI), including methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA).

New evidence-based multi-professional guidelines commissioned by the Department for the prevention of HAI, including multi-drug resistant organisms, were published in January 2001 as a supplement to the Journal of Hospital Infection.

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures are taken to test-screen possible carriers of Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus in NHS hospitals. [147836]

Mr. Denham: There are different patterns of MRSA incidence throughout the country. Expert opinion is that it is not desirable or practical to screen all patients for MRSA but this is a matter for local determination. Mandatory surveillance of blood stream infections, including those caused by MRSA, is to be introduced from April 2001. This will enable National Health Service trusts more effectively to target interventions at patients most at risk.

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the incidence of Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus infection in NHS hospitals. [147842]

Mr. Denham: Aggregate data on numbers of incidents of methicillin resistant "Staphylococcus aureus" (MRSA) voluntarily submitted by trusts for specialist microbiological tests since 1996 are given in the tables. These data are routinely available on a regional basis only. Data on "Staphylococcus aureus" bacteraemias (blood infections) showing the proportion resistant to methicillin in England and Wales are published quarterly by the Public Health Laboratory Service in the Communicable Disease Report, copies of which are available in the Library. More comprehensive information about bacteraemias, including MRSA, will be collected from all acute trusts from 1 April 2001 and data will be published from 1 April 2002.

Incidents of MRSA 1996–2000

	Incidents of MRSA		
	1996	*1997*	*1998*
Anglia and Oxford	237	297	223
North Thames	539	544	289
North West	176	259	215
Northern and Yorkshire	150	224	202
South and West	206	254	101
South Thames	421	385	220
Trent	99	123	109
West Midlands	121	102	69
Wales	158	176	169
Total	2,107	2,364	1,597

	Incidents of MRSA	
	1999	*2000*
Eastern	80	60
London	290	170
Northern and Yorkshire	170	70
North West	180	90
South East	170	100
South West	40	10
Trent	100	30
West Midlands	30	50
Wales	130	40
Total	1,190	620

Notes:

1. For 1996 and the first half of 1997 data have been amalgamated to the approximate boundaries of the new Regional Office areas. This allows for comparison with subsequent years.
2. An incident is three or more patients infected or colonised by the same strain of MRSA in the same month from the same hospital.
3. The criteria for submission of isolates of MRSA (and other isolates of staphylococcus aureus) to the PHLS for specialist tests have been revised twice since 1996 (in January 1998 and in January 2000).
4. These revised criteria have led to a fall in the number of incidents of MRSA that were reported to the PHLS and cannot be used as a reliable estimate of the total number of cases of MRSA.

London Hospitals

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what funding his Department has given to *(a)* Camden and Islington NHS Trust, *(b)* The Royal Free Hospital and *(c)* The Whittington Hospital since May 1997. [147878]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* The figures given in the table are for total revenue income of the trusts. It should be noted that this includes income other than that received from the Department (via health authorities and primary care groups) by means of contracts.

Total revenue income

£000

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Camden and Islington Community Health Services NHS Trust	100,547	106,089	114,939
The Royal Free Hampstead NHS Trust	178,839	216,825	246,209
Whittington Hospital NHS Trust	71,247	75,007	81,485

Source:
Camden and Islington Community Health Services NHS Trust, The Royal Free Hampstead NHS Trust and Whittington Hospital NHS Trust Summarisation Schedules 1997–98, 1998–99, and 1999–2000.

Lymington Community Hospital

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the conclusions he has drawn regarding the future of Lymington Community Hospital. [146156]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* An announcement will be made in due course.

Body Parts (Regulation)

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidelines his Department has published to control and regulate the sale of *(a)* human organs and *(b)* other body parts to third parties, (i) inside and (ii) outside the NHS. [148097]

Mr. Denham: A letter from the Department to directors of paediatric cardiothoracic units in 1996 stated that the supply of surgical tissues for research or commercial purposes should meet the criteria of consent, safety and cost recovery.

Directions by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health under section 25 of the National Health Service Act 1977 (paragraph 9.9) restrict charges made by blood transfusion centres for blood and blood derivatives to reasonable handling charges, with no charge to be made for the blood or derivatives.

The Human Organ Transplants Act (1989) prohibits commercial dealing in human organs. "Organ" is defined in the Act as "any part of a human body consisting of a structured arrangement of tissues which, if wholly removed, cannot be replicated by the body".

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (1990) says that "no money or other benefit may be given or received in respect of any supply of gametes or embryos unless authorised by directions."

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS hospitals have sold *(a)* thymus glands and *(b)* other body tissues to third parties, (i) inside and (ii) outside the NHS in each of the last three years; and how much money is involved. [148096]

Mr. Denham: As long as consent is properly obtained and ethical standards adhered to, it is appropriate for the National Health Service to supply human tissues to pharmaceutical companies for the development of new vaccines and medicines. As this involves a cost to the NHS, which would otherwise have to be met by funds provided for patient care, it is legitimate for these costs to be recovered from the companies concerned.

Information is not held about the supply of thymus glands and other body tissues for such purposes.

Animal Experiments

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what press releases were issued, speeches and other public statements supporting animal testing for medical research purposes were made by him and his Ministers in the year to 18 January. [147409]

Yvette Cooper: In the year from 19 January 2000 to 18 January 2001, written answers were given by Department of Health Ministers to six parliamentary questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) on this and related subjects. These answers were given on 8 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 760W; on 5 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 509W; on 3 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 169W; on 15 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 19W; on 13 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 683W; and on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 254W.

In the first of these answers I made clear that we are concerned to ensure that research in animals is undertaken only when necessary to fulfil statutory obligations. In the last of these answers I said that my noble Friend Lord Hunt of Kings Heath had explained to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow at a meeting on 25 July 2000 that we fully support the need to raise public awareness of the benefits of animal testing.

PRIME MINISTER

Standards in Public Life

Mr. Plaskitt: To ask the Prime Minister when he expects to announce the conclusion of the Quinquennial Review of the Committee on Standards in Public Life; and if he will make a statement. [148394]

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to announce that the Report of the Quinquennial Review of the Committee on Standards in Public Life is published today. Copies are being placed in the Libraries.

The Report recommends that the Committee should continue in its present form for the time being. It notes that there may not always be a need for the Committee to be continuously involved in a full-time inquiry but that in the future less active periods of monitoring may be called for. It recommends that the Committee should react flexibly to requirements and developments in the field of standards in public life. I am grateful to Lord Neill and his Committee for the work they have done in this area. I agree with the Report, which concludes that the Committee has itself become a part of the fabric of public life.

Peter Mandelson

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister if he will publish the exchanges between him and the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), concerning the latter's resignation as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. [148126]

The Prime Minister: There were none.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister on what date *(a)* discussions first took place between a Minister and the Hinduja brothers, *(b)* correspondence was sent by a minister and *(c)* correspondence was received by a minister concerning the possible sponsoring of the Faith Zone in the Millennium Dome by the Hinduja Brothers; and if he will make a statement. [147176]

The Prime Minister *[pursuant to his reply, 29 January 2001, c. 70W]:* Owing to an administrative error the answer printed in *Hansard* gives the same answer to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) (UIN 147176) and the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) (UIN 147718). The answer given only related to the question from the hon. Member for Aylesbury. My office informed the hon. Member for Lewes of the error and a substantive reply to his question is given below.

It was the responsibility of the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC), as the operator of the Dome, to negotiate and secure sponsorship for the Dome.

I understand from NMEC, that the Hinduja Foundation first approached NMEC in February 1997 about the possibility of incorporating the "Concordia Project" into the Dome. This was to be an interactive visitor education centre focusing on the world's different cultures.

On 24 February 1998, together with several other Ministers, I launched the public appeal for sponsorship at a televised public event at which the Hinduja Foundation, among many other companies and organisations, were present. At the launch they reiterated their desire to be involved in the Millennium project.

They then wrote to me on 25 February 1998 and the Minister without Portfolio on 26 February 1998. Further negotiations were conducted by NMEC.

On 3 June 1999 NMEC announced that the Faith Zone would receive £4 million in sponsorship—£2 million from the Laing Family Trusts (Christian charitable foundations); £1 million from the Hinduja Foundation and £1 million from other Christian trusts including the Jerusalem trust.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Prime Minister when, and by whom, he was first informed of the possibility that the Hindujas might provide sponsorship for the Millennium Dome; and if he will make a statement. [148095]

The Prime Minister: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I have given today to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker).

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Prime Minister if he will invite the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis to investigate the activities of the Hinduja brothers under the Prevention of Corruption Act 1906 in relation to their passport applications; and if he will make a statement. [148098]

The Prime Minister: No. I have set up an inquiry.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Prime Minister what gifts have been received since 2 May 1997 from the Hindujas by *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* other persons representing the Government. [148067]

The Prime Minister: The rules on the acceptance of gifts by Ministers and civil servants are set out in the "Ministerial Code" and "Departmental Handbooks". Details of gifts received by Ministers and civil servants are not held centrally.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Prime Minister which officials in his office have *(a)* been contacted by and *(b)* contacted (i) Mr. G. P. Hinduja and (ii) Mr. S. P. Hinduja since 2 May 1997; if he will list the occasions on which there was such contact; and if he will make a statement. [148075]

The Prime Minister: It is not the normal practice of the Government to release details of meetings or discussions with private individuals or companies.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Prime Minister on what occasions since 2 May 1997 he has met *(a)* Mr. G. P. Hinduja and *(b)* Mr. S. P. Hinduja; and if he will make a statement. [148069]

The Prime Minister: It is public knowledge that I have met members of the Hinduja family. Subject to that it is not the normal practice of Government to release details of meetings with private individuals or companies.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Prime Minister on how many occasions since 2 May 1997 he has discussed matters relating to the Hinduja brothers with *(a)* the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), *(b)* the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), *(c)* the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), *(d)* the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), *(e)* other Ministers. [148068]

The Prime Minister: A central record is not maintained of each and every conversation that I have with Ministerial colleagues.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Prime Minister when, and by whom, he was first informed of the citizenship applications submitted by *(a)* Mr. G. P. Hinduja on 5 March 1997 and *(b)* Mr. S. P. Hinduja on 20 October 1998; and if he will make a statement. [148092]

The Prime Minister: Applications for citizenship are a matter for the Home Office.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Auld Report

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he plans to announce the results of Lord Justice Auld's review of the criminal justice system. [147691]

Jane Kennedy: Lord Justice Auld is currently drafting his final report. It will be published once it is available.

Magistrates Courts Service (Northamptonshire)

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what funding has been provided for the Northamptonshire magistrates courts service for each year from 1990. [147704]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department provides separate grants for revenue and capital (buildings and IT) to local authorities for magistrates courts costs. Grant is paid at 80 per cent. of expenditure/costs of scheme or item, with the remaining 20 per cent. met by local authorities.

The total funding provided to Northamptonshire magistrates courts committee was:

Year	*£ million*
1992–93	3.74
1993–94	3.41
1994–95	3.72
1995–96	3.61
1996–97	3.66
1997–98	3.55
1998–99	3.75
1999–2000	4.03
2000–01	[1]3.55

[1] The 2000–01 figure is an estimate, as revenue grant costs will not be certain until the end of this financial year

The Lord Chancellor's Department became responsible for magistrates courts from 1 April 1992. Funding figures prior to this are unavailable.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

TV Licensing

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many representations *(a)* his Department and *(b)* TV Licensing have received from (i) hon. Members and (ii) members of the public on the conduct of TV Licensing. [147609]

Janet Anderson: The Department does not record the subject matter of correspondence received in such a way as to enable the information requested to be provided in full. However, during the calendar year 2000 the Department received over 80 representations from hon. Members about correspondence received from TV Licensing or the activities of that organisation. A number of representations were also received from members of the public on these subjects.

TV Licensing carries out the administration of the television licensing system as an agent for the BBC. According to information provided by the BBC, during the calendar year 2000 TV Licensing received 45,095 representations. Separate figures for Members of Parliament are not readily available.

National Waterways Museum

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what support his Department has given to the National Waterways Museum in the years *(a)* 1998, *(b)* 1999 and *(c)* 2000. [147620]

Mr. Alan Howarth: My Department does not provide core funding for the National Waterways Museum which is governed by the Waterways Trust, an independent charitable trust. However, the Museum has received financial support from organisations directly and indirectly sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

From the Designated Museums Challenge Fund, the Museum received £53,080 in 1999–2000, and £116,608 in 2000–01. From the South West Museums Council, which is funded by Re:Source: The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, the Museum received grants totalling £2,424 in 1998–99, and £2,571 in 1999–2000. The Museum was also awarded a grant of £502 in 1999–2000, and has been offered a grant of £5,000 in 2000–01, from the PRISM (Preservation of Scientific and Industrial Material) Fund administered by the Science Museum on behalf of Re:Source.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Farm Incomes

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on farm incomes. [148535]

Mr. Nick Brown: Revised estimates of farm income during 2000 were published this morning. These confirm the significant reduction forecast last November, and indicate a fall of 25 per cent.

This fall is largely due to pressure on prices for agricultural outputs caused by a further rise in sterling against the euro, as compared to 1999.

The Government remain committed to providing a framework within which the industry may react to the challenges presented by the current situation.

Detailed estimates of the income, output and productivity of agriculture in the United Kingdom in 2000 have been placed in the Library of the House.

Hazard Analysis

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received concerning the impact of hazard analysis critical control points on official control of meat inspection. [146981]

Ms Stuart: I have been asked to reply.

Representations on Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) and the future control of meat inspection have been received from UNISON and hon. Members on behalf of constituents. I am advised that UNISON and the Association of Meat Inspectors (AMI) have also been holding discussions on this issue with the

Food Standards Agency (FSA). The concerns expressed relate to an unfounded view that the FSA would countenance a change to the present system of meat inspection which did not fully protect the public.

A European Commission working document, made available by the FSA earlier this month to a wide range of interests, including UNISON and the AMI, sets out some initial ideas on what might form the main elements of a future risk-based meat inspection system. Among other things, the document discusses the possibility that operators who demonstrate a high degree of commitment to good hygiene practice including consistently good microbiological test results, who train their own staff to the same level as official inspectors and who wish to take on the responsibility, might be permitted to carry out on-line meat inspection subject to official scrutiny and enforcement, as long as those high standards are maintained. Other, non-European Union, countries have already adopted or are piloting such an approach because of perceived consumer benefits.

Any legislative proposals that flow from the Commission's working document would be subject to formal public consultation in the UK, negotiations with other member states, and both EU and UK Parliamentary scrutiny, before any changes could be implemented.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate his Department has made of the cost of introducing hazard analysis critical control point. [146982]

Ms Stuart: I have been asked to reply.

I am advised that the Food Standards Agency is in the process of gathering information on the cost implications of implementing the changes to European Union food safety legislation proposed by the European Commission last July. This includes information on the likely costs of introducing in full the hazard analysis and critical control point food safety management system. The agency invited comments on the likely costs of meeting the new legal requirements in the initial regulatory impact assessment (RIA) which formed part of its public consultation on the Commission's proposals. An updated RIA will be made available when the European Scrutiny Committee debates the proposals.

Smallholdings

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many agricultural holdings were registered as at 1 January; and of that number how many were classified as smallholdings. [146641]

Ms Quin *[pursuant to her reply, 23 January 2001, c. 515W]:* I regret an error has been discovered in the numbers previously provided.

The correct number of agricultural holdings in England registered at 1 January 2001 is:

Main holdings—151,121

Minor holdings—31,012.

It should also be noted that there has been an increase of 4,800 holdings on the register since June 2000 largely as a result of the register improvement exercise currently taking place, and the total figures are subject to change.

Notes:

A holding is classified as minor if all the following criteria are true:

a. the total area is less than six hectares

b. there is no regular whole-time farmer or worker

c. the estimated annual labour requirement is less than 100 days (of eight hours' productive work by an adult worker under average conditions)

d. the glasshouse area is less than 100 square metres

e. the occupier does not farm another holding.

If any of these conditions is not satisfied, the holding is categorised as "main".

Fishmeal

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the impact of the proposed EU-wide ban on fishmeal in animal feed on Britain's livestock farmers. [146407]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* I have asked my officials to consult the UK agriculture industry on the impact of the introduction of the new EU-wide feed controls, including the ban on fishmeal. A consultation paper including a draft Regulatory Impact Assessment has been sent to representative organisations for comments by 2 February. It is also available on the MAFF website http://www.maff.gov.uk and in the Libraries of the House.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Departmental Projects

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the projects undertaken for his Department by *(a)* outside consultants, *(b)* academic researchers and *(c)* university departments since 1 May 1997, giving the total expenditure incurred in each category. [144076]

Mr. Wills: This information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Early Years Education (Somerset)

Paddy Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what his estimate is of the proportion of three-year-olds in Somerset who will have a free early years place by *(a)* spring 2001, *(b)* spring 2002 and *(c)* spring 2003; and if he will make a statement. [144606]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 18 January 2001]:* By September 2004, there will be a free early education place in Somerset for every three-year-old whose parents want one.

To move towards this achievement, the Government have allocated to Somerset funding for 1,704, 2,262 and 2,786 places for the three financial years to 2004 (allocations for the last two years are indicative). The LEA is already funding further places in the maintained sector.

Our experience tells us that some parents do not take up places as soon as their children are three and do not always want a full-time place. Building that knowledge into our assumptions, over the three financial years

in question there will be free places for 47 per cent., 60 per cent. and 70 per cent. of three-year-olds in Somerset. These figures are averages based on the number of places available for the year as a whole. Local education authorities have been asked to increase places on a term by term basis to build up to universal provision, therefore the figures in the spring term are likely to be higher than the annual average.

In 1997, about 8.5 per cent. of Somerset's three-year-olds had places in local education authority maintained nurseries.

Since September 1998, all four-year-olds have been able to access a free, part time, early education place.

Departmental Policies (Slough)

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Slough constituency, the effects on Slough of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [146929]

Mr. Wills: Outlined are details of the effect on the Slough constituency and Slough LEA of a range of the Department's policies.

Sure Start

There is a Sure Start programme centred in the Britwell and Northborough area of Slough. There is a strong emphasis on parental involvement with equal representation on the partnership board. The programme addresses the need to reshape existing services as well as offering a wide range of new activities including support to teenage parents and a new Community Parents project to promote and enable positive health and parenting skills through local community involvement.

The programme has been granted funding of £1,643,508 until March 2003.

Education Action Zones

There is a large EAZ in Slough: 'Heart of Slough' Education Action Zone. EAZ grant payments to Slough EAZ comprise:

	£
1999–2000	169,000
2000–01	[1]627,000
2001–02	750,000

[1] i.e. the zone forecast to need this amount this FY.
[2] This figure assumes the EAZ raises £250,000 of private business contributions.

Beacon Schools

The LEA has one Beacon school—Priory School (awarded Beacon status in September 1998).

Specialist Schools

There is one Specialist School in Slough—Herschel Technology College. The additional funding made available to Herschel (because of its Specialist School status) since 1997 comprises:

	£
1997–98	73,370
1998–99	74,910
1999–2000	78,500
2000–01	87,680
2001–02	[1]88,560

[1] Estimate—calculated from pupil numbers each year. This figure assumes same pupil numbers as 2000–01.

Class sizes

Class sizes—Slough LEA

£

	Revenue	*Capital*
1998–99	88,000	0
1999–2000	301,000	113,000
2000–01	322,721	676,000

The September 2000 figure shows that there are now only 95 (2.7 per cent.) pupils remaining in infant class sizes of 31 or more. The figure in January 1997 was 713 (19.8 per cent.).

Key Stage 2 results

Percentage of pupils achieving level 4 or above in Key Stage 2 tests in Slough LEA:

	English	*Maths*	*Science*
2000	74	70	84
1999	68	63	72
1998	65	53	63

GCSE/GNVQ results

	Percentage 5 or more A-C*			*Percentage no passes*		
	1998	*1999*	*2000*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
Slough	42.9	48.1	51.3	3.5	3.3	4.2
England	46.3	47.9	49.2	6.6	6.0	5.6

Funding

Capital (excluding NDS)

£000

	2001–02	*2000–01*	*1999–2000*	*1998–99*
ACG	375	246	180	74
SCA	0	70	50	45
VA Grant	407	118	80	60
Seed	—	109	0	0
Capital Formula	0	796	0	0
NGfL	0	362	284	176
Science Labs	105	105	0	0
SSLUs	25	29	0	0
Access	116	0	0	0
Security	0	39	38	27
Outside toilets	0	0	0	0
Energy	0	0	0	20
AMP assistance	0	0	17	0

New Deal for Schools

(As Berkshire)	£
NDS 1 (1997–98)	761,000
NDS 2 (1998–99)	385,000
NDS 3 (1999–2000)	644,000
NDS 4 (2000–01)	1,622,000

School projects are described in the following table.

£

Name of school	Project	Allocation
NDS 1		
James Elliman Middle, Arbor Vale Special, Our Lady of Peace RC First, Slough and Eton CE Secondary, Montem Infants, Wexham Secondary, Baylis Court Nursery, Godolphin Infants, Littledown School	Large package for urgent Health and Safety works	[1]761,000
NDS 2		
Godolphin Infants	Heating improvements	37,254
Lea Infants	Heating improvements	18,576
Lea Middle	Heating improvements	104,975
Montem Middle	Heating improvements	18,576
Our Lady of Peace RC First	Heating improvements	13,473
Our Lady of Peace RC Middle	Heating improvements	30,875
Baylis Court	Heating improvements	24,700
Beechwood	Heating improvements	49,400
St. Bernard's Convent	Heating improvements	23,465
NDS 3		
Wexham Secondary, Slough and Eton CE Secondary	Two school package for replacement of defective window frames	210,381
Marish Infant, William Penn Primary	Two school package for replacement of defective and rotten windows	219,048
Arbor Vale Special	Early years provision	17,028
NDS 4		
Godolphin Junior	Replacement of temporary classrooms	121,560

[1] Total Berkshire LEA NDS 1 allocation

Student numbers at all FEFC funded institutions where home postcode is in the local authority district of Slough, 1996–97 to 1999–2000

	FEFC funded				Non-FEFC funded			
	16–18		Adult		16–18		Adult	
Year	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT
1996–97	1,175	371	242	4,725	19	34	35	121
1997–98	1,138	340	243	4,533	11	86	32	163
1998–99	1,082	380	449	4,325	38	113	67	909
1999–2000	974	453	552	4,385	16	123	46	732

Modern apprenticeships

Since 2 May 1997, we know of 801 starts on Modern Apprenticeships in the Slough constituency (as at 31 October 2000). Broken down by financial year these are:

Financial year	Foundation modern apprenticeships[1]	Advanced modern apprenticeships[2]	Total
1997–98	1	127	128
1998–99	27	134	161
1999–2000	115	150	265
2000–01 (to date)	157	90	247
Total	300	501	801

[1] Foundation Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as National Traineeships, were introduced nationally in September 1997.

[2] Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as Modern Apprenticeships, were introduced nationally in September 1995.

Note:

1. The Trainee Database System (TDS), from which these data are taken, is less complete than Management Information supplied to the Department by Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) (around 95 per cent.)

2. In addition, the postcode information on the TDS, from which parliamentary constituency data are compiled, are 95 per cent. complete.

3. TEC Management Information does not provide information at parliamentary constituency level.

Source:

WBTYP trainee database

Labour market

The working age employment rate in Slough UA in autumn 2000 was 77.8 per cent., above the UK rate of 74.7 per cent. The rate in autumn 1997 was 78.9 per cent., in autumn 1998 was 71.4 per cent., and in autumn 1999 was 77.7 per cent. As can be seen, these data are volatile and our best interpretation of the trend in the employment rate for Slough since 1997 is that it has been broadly flat.

The claimant unemployment rate has fallen from 3.2 per cent. in December 1997 to 2.1 per cent. in December 2000 in the constituency of Slough.

To the end of October 2000, 824 young people have joined the New Deal, with a total of 371 entering employment. 280 of these entered into sustained employment.

Pupil Funding

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list, for each English local education authority, *(a)* the amount spent per primary pupil, *(b)* the amount spent per secondary pupil and *(c)* the amount spent per primary pupil as a percentage of the amount per secondary pupil for each of the past three years. [145029]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 18 January 2001]:* The information on funding per pupil is contained in tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

These figures are based on education Standard Spending Assessments combined with central Government grant. They demonstrate a trend showing gradual convergence between overall primary and secondary funding. It is, of course, for each local education authority ultimately to decide the balance between primary and secondary funding for its schools.

Under this Government, funding per pupil has already increased by over £300 in real terms, and it will increase by a further £150 per pupil for 2001–02. Under the last Government, funding per pupil fell by £60 in real terms between 1994–95 and 1997–98. There will be further increases in funding following the year 2000 spending review: a further £370 per pupil over the three year period, taking the total increase to nearly £700 between 1997–98 and 2003–04.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the cost of ministerial travel was *(a)* within the UK and *(b)* outside the UK for his Department for each of the last three years. [147232]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* The cost of overseas travel by Ministers in this Department for the last three financial years is as follows:

2 May 1997 to 31 March 1998: £79,171

1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999: £116,886

1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000: £88,168.

These costs were included in the figures on Ministers visits overseas published by the Prime Minister on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 969W. Travel within the United Kingdom is undertaken by a variety of means—car, rail and air. Information on the cost of such travel is not held centrally. All travel complied with the requirements of the "Ministerial Code" and "Travel by Ministers".

Child Minders

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will broaden the criteria for the registration of child minders to enable nightworkers and lone parents working unsocial hours to benefit from the Working Families Tax Credit. [147422]

Ms Hodge: All working parents, subject to their income, are eligible to receive Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC). The Childcare Tax Credit (CTC) element of WFTC can meet up to 70 per cent. of eligible child care costs.

WFTC helps with the cost of overnight care where it is done by a child care provider who is registered under the Children Act. But we recognise that some parents, with certain working hours or particular needs, have little option except to employ child care providers who fall outside the eligible arrangements. We are looking at the scope to extend access to the CTC for these groups and what quality assurance arrangements would be appropriate.

Correspondence

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the Minister with responsibility for School Standards will reply to the hon. Member for Hertsmere's letter of November 2000, concerning teacher recruitment. [147471]

Ms Estelle Morris: The reply to the hon. Member's letter has been issued today.

Acquired Brain Injury

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what support his Department offers to people with acquired brain injury; [147957]

(2) what plans he has to help individuals with acquired brain injury back into work. [147958]

Ms Hodge: The Employment Service provides a range of services which support people with acquired brain injury. It provides a network of Disability Employment Advisers, who, in addition to providing advice about job opportunities, act as the gateway to specialist programmes aimed at securing a return to work. One of these is Work Preparation, for which the Employment Service contracts with local providers who deliver flexible programmes tailored to the needs of each individual. Other measures which can be used to help people with acquired brain injury are the Access to Work Programme and the Job Introduction Scheme.

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he gives to local authorities in Greater Manchester on support for vocational rehabilitation for individuals with acquired brain injury. [147959]

Ms Hodge: My Department does not give any guidance to local authorities. Support for vocational rehabilitation, including support for those with acquired brain injury, is provided by the Employment Service, which contracts with various providers to deliver services to meet local needs.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Romania

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will publish the exit strategy report produced by her Department concerning the Romania Information Centre. [147211]

Clare Short: The report entitled "Romanian Information Centre—Appraisal Report" produced by an independent consultant and funded by my Department will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which non-governmental organisations and charities her Department supports in Romania. [147210]

Clare Short: At present, my Department is providing support to the following non-governmental organisations and charities in Romania:

1. Groundwork Blackburn
2. Romanian Association for Community Development
3. Emergency Services Despatch Centre
4. Casa Ioana—ACASA Project
5. Support To Enlaka Rural Community
6. Assistance To CIER Constanta
7. Nursing School—Dr. Sofaer
8. ASHR Centre For Handicapped Women
9. CDM—Strategic Planning For Local Admin
10. Perspective Magazine
11. Rehabilitation Centre For Handicapped People
12. CODECS—Open University
13. Light Into Europe—Air Ambulance
14. Clean Coal Technologies
15. CIR—Centrul De Informare Roman
16. Fire Aid International
17. Hawkesley Trust
18. Info-Crafts Project
19. Lamont Centre—Cluj
20. Romani Criss
21. Memory Centre
22. Craft Foundation
23. SENSE International
24. Unicul Sens—Kindergarden
25. ICAR Foundation
26. Children Of The Future
27. Transrural Trust
28. Romani Coneci
29. ANHR Arad
30. Project Ruth
31. The Ellenor Foundation
32. Ungureni Orphanage Trust
33. Ian 2001.

India

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had with the Indian Government concerning the treatment of religious minorities in India. [147215]

Clare Short: I recently visited Madhya Pradesh and discussed this issue with the Chief Minister. On my previous visits to India I discussed the issue with Federal Ministers in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. UK development assistance to India is targeted on poor people. Ethnic and religious minorities tend to be disproportionately poor. Our efforts are focused on improving their livelihoods and respect for their rights.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the meetings she attended with Indian Government officials during her recent visit to India. [147214]

Clare Short: In Delhi, I met the Union Ministers for Finance, Mr. Yashwant Sinha; for Health and Family Welfare, Dr. C. P. Thakur; and for Power, Mr. Suresh Prabhu. In Madhya Pradesh, I met the Chief Minister, Mr. Digvijay Singh and the Minister of Finance, Col. Ajay Mushran, as well as the Chief Secretary, Mr. K. S. Sharma, and other senior officials.

Departmental Surveys

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list for *(a)* 1992–93, *(b)* 1993–94, *(c)* 1994–95, *(d)* 1995–96, *(e)* 1996–97, *(f)* 1997–98, *(g)* 1998–99, *(h)* 1999–2000 and *(i)* 2000–01, (I) her Department's total spending on quantitative and qualitative surveys of policy issues by focus groups, opinion polling, task forces or other means and (II) the cost of each individual project. [146592]

Clare Short: We carry out regular monitoring of public attitudes to development in order to inform and monitor the impact of the public education work of the Department.

The details requested are as follows: a study of public attitudes was undertaken in 1997–98 at a cost of £43,000; there was no expenditure on surveys in 1998–99; and further studies costing a total of around £45,000 were undertaken in 1999–2000.

These consisted of: a general public attitudes survey costing £28,200; a schoolchildren's attitudes survey costing £14,700; and a readership survey of "Developments" magazine costing £1,804.

In financial year 2000–01 we have undertaken a general public opinion study costing £33,000. A schoolchildren's survey is currently under way at an estimated cost of £9,800. The results of all these surveys are available on the DFID website.

We do not hold information on any surveys carried out between 1992–93 and 1996–97.

Cancer Rates (Southern Iraq)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she has received the conclusions of the World Health Organisation study on the possible increase of cancer rates in southern Iraq; and if she will make a statement. [146383]

Clare Short: The World Health Organisation (WHO) have not yet undertaken this study. WHO's Head of Non-Communicable Diseases is in Baghdad this week, leading a team of experts in reviewing the Iraqi Ministry of Health's capacity in epidemiological surveillance, including their ability to monitor and register cancer, including leukaemia, across Iraq.

We have offered WHO support for improving health information systems in Iraq and are discussing funding their proposed programme to build Iraqi capacity to monitor cancer epidemiology.

Nigeria

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what requests her Department has received for assistance for Nigeria's Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission. [146830]

Clare Short: We have received no requests for assistance for Nigeria's Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission.

Reproductive Health Policy

Ms McCafferty: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has made to her American counterpart concerning the USA's international reproductive health policy. [147596]

Clare Short: I have as yet had no contact with the new US Administration. The implications of the decision announced by President Bush on 22 January will become clearer as new guidance is issued. This decision by the US Administration will make no difference to the commitment of our Government to helping poor people access good quality family planning and sexual and reproductive health services.

Hinduja Brothers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which Ministers and officials in her Department have *(a)* been contacted by and *(b)* contacted (i) Mr. G. P. Hinduja and (ii) Mr. S. P. Hinduja since 2 May 1997; if she will list the occasions on which there was such contact; and if she will make a statement. [148078]

Clare Short: I met one of the Hinduja brothers at a dinner in honour of President Carter on 7 October 1999. Mr. S. P. Hinduja had two days before contacted the Head of DFID India about possible co-operation with the Hinduja Foundation. Mr. S. P. Hinduja wrote to me on 19 October 1999 suggesting a meeting with me about possible co-operation which I declined and suggested a meeting at official level. Following a meeting with a representative of the Hinduja Foundation at official level on 23 November 1999, I and one of my officials accepted an invitation by Mr. S. P. Hinduja and Mr. G. P. Hinduja to a lunch on 11 January 2000 at which co-operation between DFID and the Hinduja Foundation on HIV/AIDS work in India and a possible publication with the Hindi community on the 2015 International Development targets was discussed.

I have had no further contact with the Hinduja brothers. No concrete proposals for co-operation between DFID and the Hinduja Foundation were identified.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Far East Prisoners of War

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement about the funding of ex-gratia payments to former Far Eastern prisoners of war or their surviving spouses. [148536]

Mr. Bayley: The authority to make these payments will rest entirely on the Appropriation Act. Parliamentary approval for this new scheme will be sought in a Supplementary Estimate for the Central Government Administered Social Security Benefits and Other Payments Vote (Class XII Vote 1).

Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £190 million will be met by repayable advances from the Contingencies Fund.

Winter Fuel Payment/Free Television Licence

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will place in the Library an estimate for each parliamentary constituency of *(a)* the number of beneficiaries from the Winter Fuel Payment and *(b)* the number of recipients of free television licences. [147806]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. The latest figures for Winter Fuel Payments and estimates of the over-75 population who may benefit from a free television licence for each constituency in Great Britain have been placed in the Library.

TV Licensing administers the free television licence scheme for the BBC. I understand that geographical breakdowns of the number of free licences are not available.

WALES

Policing

4. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent meetings he has had with the First Secretary to discuss policing in Wales. [146524]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Minister regularly to discuss a number of issues, including policing in Wales. In addition, I meet, from time to time, the four Welsh Chief Constables.

Census

5. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary with regard to the census in Wales. [146525]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular meetings with the First Minister to discuss a range of subjects, including this one.

NHS Waiting Lists

6. **Sir George Young:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary with regard to the progress of the Government's commitment to reduce health service waiting lists. [146526]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I meet regularly with the National Assembly's First Minister and the Assembly Health and Social Services Minister to discuss the NHS in Wales. The subject of waiting lists is, of course, often on the agenda.

Benefit Recovery

7. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last met the Secretary of State for Social Security to discuss the impact of the Social Security (Recovery of Benefits) Regulations 1997 upon the people of Wales; and if he will make a statement. [146527]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have met my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security regarding this issue. He is now examining, with the claimants' solicitors, ways of speeding up and simplifying the system, and is proposing to issue "nil" certificates when interim

payments are made, to extend the time for which recovery certificates are valid, and to accept sworn statements from former miners when they become ill.

Optical Electronics

8. **Mr. Ruane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he plans to meet representatives of businesses involved in optical electronics in North Wales. [146528]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend visited Avimo Optical Imaging, Prestatyn in September and is due to visit Thales Optronics, Llandudno Junction (formerly Pilkington Optronics) next week.

Dairy Farming

10. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary on dairy farming in Wales. [146530]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend discusses a range of issues in his weekly meetings with the First Minister. I also regularly meet the Assembly Agriculture Minister to discuss a variety of issues.

Manufacturing Industry

11. **Mr. Barry Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary concerning prospects for manufacturing industry in Wales, with particular reference to the future of the steel industry. [146531]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly meet the First Minister and discuss a wide range of issues including manufacturing and the steel industry.

The UK steel industry is among the most productive in the world. Each steelworker today is four times more productive than he or she was 20 years ago. Seventy per cent. of steel qualities available today have been developed in the last 10 years to meet increasing demands for stronger, lighter materials. Those are the reasons why, despite its current difficulties, I firmly believe that the UK steel industry has a future in today's knowledge driven economy.

21. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what meetings he has had with the First Secretary to discuss manufacturing industry in Wales. [146542]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly meet the First Minister and discuss a wide range of issues including manufacturing.

Manufacturing is a key part of the economy. The Government appreciate the difficulties facing manufacturers in some sectors and are supporting them by providing macro-economic stability. Low inflation, low interest rates and sound public finances will help UK manufacturers in the long term.

Dee Estuary

12. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Assembly Environment Secretary on cross-border concerns relating to the environment of the Dee Estuary. [146532]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend has regular discussions on environmental issues with the First Minister, and I have regular meetings with the Assembly Minister for Transport, Planning and the Environment to discuss a range of environmental matters.

In the vast majority of cases such decisions as they affect Wales are a matter for the National Assembly for Wales, in discussion with the lead Whitehall Department and the Environment Agency where appropriate.

Unemployment

13. **Mr. Caton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about current unemployment levels in Wales. [146533]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend regularly meets the First Minister and I hold regular meetings with the Assembly Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, when we discuss a wide range of issues including unemployment levels in Wales. I also addressed the Wales New Deal Task Force in November on the Government's future plans for the New Deal.

Since the Government's New Deal was launched throughout Wales, there has been a 73 per cent. fall in the number of 18–24 year olds unemployed and claiming the Jobseeker's Allowance for six months or more from 6,555 in April 1998 to 1,774 in October 2000.

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about unemployment levels in Wales. [146521]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State regularly meets the First Minister and I hold regular meetings with the Assembly Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, when we discuss a wide range of issues including employment levels in Wales.

This Government's continued firm handling of their sound economic policy has seen a significant reduction in the number of people claiming benefits in Wales, with a fall in the claimant count from 4.7 per cent. in December 1999 to 4.3 per cent. in December 2000.

Sports Council

14. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Sports Council for Wales about encouraging artistic and sporting talent in Wales. [146534]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have met the Chairman of the Sports Council for Wales to discuss general issues affecting sport in Wales.

Wales has an excellent record of achievements in many activities, and I am keen to encourage opportunities for all people to take part in sport within the community.

Environmental Issues

15. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the process for deciding cross-border issues relating to the environment. [146535]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The bilateral concordat between the Assembly and the DETR sets out the principles for dealing with cross-border environmental issues and the arrangements for joint sponsorship of the Environment Agency.

Garment Manufacturing

16. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last had discussions with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on the future of garment manufacturing in Wales. [146536]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly meet my ministerial colleagues and discuss a wide range of issues.

Welsh companies can benefit from the Government's 12 point plan to help the industry improve its competitive position in the global market.

Steel Industry

17. **Mr. Denzil Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the future of the steel industry in Wales. [146537]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Over the past weeks, I have discussed the future of the steel industry with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I have also held numerous meetings with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the First Minister of the National Assembly for Wales.

In addition, I have met Sir Brian Moffat, the Chairman of Corus, twice.

I have to tell the House that the Government have not been given any detail about the forthcoming re-structuring of the British steel industry, much of which is based in Wales. The company has not engaged with the Government. I regret this, and I urge Corus to recognise the record of our steel works and steelworkers, and not to take any short term decisions.

22. **Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent representations he has made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the steel industry in Wales. [146543]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly meet ministerial colleagues and discuss a wide range of issues including, of course, the steel industry in Wales.

Prisoner Release Scheme

18. **Mr. Greenway:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for the Home Department with regard to the early prisoner release scheme in Wales. [146538]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the Home Secretary regularly to discuss a range of issues.

Social Exclusion

19. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the level of social exclusion in Wales. [146540]

Mr. Hanson: The National Assembly for Wales published a reported entitled "Mapping social exclusion in Wales", 1999 Edition. The report contains 50 indicators related to aspects of social exclusion and maps their concentration across Wales. Copies of the report are available in the Library of the House.

In December, the National Assembly published a consultation paper entitled "Regenerating Our Most Disadvantaged Communities, Communities First". Copies of the consultation paper will be placed in the Library of the House as soon as possible.

In addition, the Welsh Affairs Committee published a report on social exclusion in Wales on 15 January. The report acknowledged that social exclusion affects people of many different kinds and that it is not unique to Wales; it is a fact of life across the United Kingdom.

This Government are committed to tackling social exclusion and I welcome the high priority that the National Assembly places on bridging the gap between the most deprived communities in Wales and the more affluent ones.

Crime and Resources

20. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he next intends to meet the chief constables of Wales to discuss crime and police resources in Wales. [146541]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I met all four Welsh chief constables on 15 January to discuss a number of issues affecting policing in Wales, including crime and police resources.

25. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he plans to meet the First Secretary and chief constables to discuss police funding and crime levels in Wales. [146546]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I met all four Welsh chief constables on 15 January to discuss a number of issues affecting policing in Wales, including police funding and crime levels. I meet the First Secretary regularly to discuss a range of issues, including this one.

Miners' Compensation

23. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Department of Trade and Industry on the number of miners' compensation claims which have been *(a)* made and *(b)* settled in Wales. [146544]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have discussed this issue on several occasions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and with ministerial colleagues.

The number of claims made for respiratory disease in Wales is 27,446 while the total number of claims in Wales settled in full and final terms is 861.

The number of claims made for vibration white finger in Wales is 15,533 while the total number of claims in Wales settled in full and final terms is 3,674.

The Government are determined to see all claims settled as quickly as possible and my ministerial colleagues and I are giving this very full attention. For

example, on 4 January I chaired a very constructive first meeting of a Welsh sub-group of the Coal Health Claims Monitoring Group which I established specifically to address coal health issues in Wales. The group will meet on a regular basis and will discuss progress made and ways of further speeding up the processing of coal health claims.

New Deal

24. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the operation of the New Deal in Wales. [146545]

Mr. David Hanson: The Government are committed to creating employment opportunity for all to fulfil our long-term employment ambition that, by the end of the decade, there will be a greater proportion of people in work than ever before.

The New Working Age Agency, to be set up in 2001, will bring together parts of the Employment Service and Benefits Agency to give greater support to people of working age.

The Government announced on the 30 November that we had reached our New Deal target for getting 250,000 people off welfare and into work. Over 17,000 18 to 24-year-olds in Wales have obtained employment since the New Deal was introduced and, there has been a 73 per cent. fall in the number of 18 to 24-year-olds unemployed and claiming the Job Seeker's Allowance for six months in Wales over the same period.

Police Funding

26. **Mrs. Lawrence:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary and the Home Secretary on the funding of the police in Wales. [146547]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet both the First Secretary and the Home Secretary regularly to discuss a range of issues, including the funding of police in Wales.

Mrs. Betty Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he plans to meet chief constables in Wales to discuss police funding and crime levels. [146539]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I met all four Welsh chief constables on 15 January to discuss a number of issues affecting policing in Wales, including police funding and crime levels.

Digital Broadcasting

28. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on the funding of S4C2, the Digital BBC channel for Wales. [146549]

Mr. Hanson: I meet my right hon. Friend regularly and we discuss a range of issues.

Birth Certificates

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will introduce legislation to allow children of Welsh parents born in England to be entitled to a Welsh birth certificate. [146548]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The rules on birth certificates are a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

European Security and Defence Policy

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library a copy of the Dutch Presidency's proposal for a parliamentary dimension for the oversight of the ESDP. [146456]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* A copy was placed in the House Libraries on 26 January.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library a copy of the Government's response to the proposals of the Dutch Presidency for the parliamentary oversight of the ESDP. [146457]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* The Dutch proposal was circulated as a basis for discussion and as such does not require a formal response.

Hinduja Brothers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which Ministers and officials in his Department have *(a)* been contacted by and *(b)* contacted (i) Mr. G. P. Hinduja and (ii) Mr. S. P. Hinduja since 2 May 1997; if he will list the occasions on which there was such contact; and if he will make a statement. [148076]

Mr. Wilson: It is not the normal practice of the Government to release details of meetings or discussions with private individuals or companies.

All relevant papers will be made available to the inquiry being conducted by Sir Anthony Hammond QC.

European Disability Forum

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what funding from *(a)* EU and *(b)* UK Government sources is available to the European Disability Forum; and when he last received representations from them. [147458]

Ms Hodge: I have been asked to reply.

The European Disability Forum received 750,000 euro from the European Commission for the period 1 April 2000 to 31 March 2001 plus 100,000 euro for co-ordination of the European Day of Disabled People. The provisional budget for 1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002 is 900,000 euro (inclusive of funding for the European Day of Disabled People 2001).

I am not aware of any UK Government funding for this organisation.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many export licences for military dual-use equipment have been refused to

(a) Angola, *(b)* Namibia, *(c)* Zimbabwe, *(d)* Rwanda, *(e)* Uganda and *(f)* Burundi on the grounds that there was a possibility it would be used in the Democratic Republic of Congo. [146831]

Mr. Wilson: Details of export licensing decisions between 2 May 1997 and 31 December 1999 have been set out in the Government's Annual Reports on Strategic Export Controls. These reports list by country of destination the numbers of export licences issued and refused in each equipment category and give details of the military equipment for which licences have been granted.

Between August 1998, when the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) started, and 9 February 2000 one application for a Standard Individual Export Licence (SIEL) was refused to Zimbabwe. This application was set out in the 1999 Annual Report and was refused against Criterion 4 (preservation of regional peace, security and stability) of the EU Code of Conduct. We judged it highly probable that the equipment would be used by Zimbabwean forces deployed in the DRC.

Between when the Prime Minister set out the basis of our new tighter policy on arms sales to countries intervening in the DRC, 9 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 184–85W, and 17 January 2001, two applications for a SIEL were refused to Uganda. These applications were refused on the grounds that there was a clear risk that the equipment would be used in the DRC. These will be set out in the 2000 Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls in due course.

UN Compensation Fund

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the relationship is between *(a)* Iraq's unutilised oil for food moneys and *(b)* reparations via the UN Compensation Fund; and if he will make a statement. [147216]

Mr. Wilson: Of the nearly $12 billion in the UN Iraq account as of 19 January 2001, $4.5 billion of "oil for food" revenue remains unallocated by Iraq, depriving its people of much needed humanitarian relief. This money remains available to be spent by Iraq under future phases of the "oil for food" programme. There is no relationship between this money and reparations under the UN Compensation Fund. However, it is worth noting that as a measure to give further support to the Iraqi people, the UN Compensation Commission agreed to reduce from 30 per cent. to 25 per cent. the proportion of revenue dedicated to the UN Compensation Fund under Phase IX of the "oil for food" programme, so releasing more money for food, medicines and other humanitarian relief.

Brussels Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the outcome was of the General Affairs Council held in Brussels on 22 and 23 January; and if he will make a statement. [147160]

Mr. Vaz: The General Affairs Council (GAC) on 22 January adopted the "A" points listed in document No. 5419/01. It also noted the resolutions, decisions and opinions adopted by the European Parliament in its session of 29–30 November in Brussels listed in document No. 12940/00. Copies of these documents will be deposited in the House Libraries as soon as they are available. The European Parliament did not transmit a record of its resolutions, decisions and opinions at its 11–15 December session in Strasbourg in time for adoption by the GAC on 22 January; they will go forward for adoption at the GAC on 26 February 2001.

Open debate on conflict prevention

In open debate, the Council agreed that the EU possessed appropriate resources and instruments to play a major role in conflict prevention, but needed to manage them more coherently and systematically.

Orientation debate on strengthening the EU's external action

The Council held its first ever debate on the priorities and quality of the EU's external actions, including external assistance.

The Council expressed broad support for Commission reforms covering both the process and the implementation of external assistance, and hoped that they would continue. The Council also agreed on the need for greater coherence, focus, flexibility and consistency in the use of external relations instruments. The Presidency concluded that Council views were converging on priorities for external action, namely: neighbouring countries (including the accession countries), poverty reduction, conflict prevention, and co-operation with major international actors. In addition, external actions needed to be responsive to both new expenditure pressures and to long-term priorities. These conclusions, together with the discussion itself and the Presidency paper on external action reforms would provide general guidance for the Commission in preparing the 2002 budget. (The Council remitted to COREPER further work on common strategies and other suggestions which arose during the debate, including the Foreign Secretary's proposal that the GAC hold a follow-up debate later in the year in connection with the draft budget).

Western Balkans

The GAC welcomed the free and fair elections in Serbia in December. It underlined the need for the FRY to co-operate fully with the ICTY and comply with its obligations under UNSCR 1244 and the Dayton and Paris agreements. The Council agreed to send an EU ministerial troika to Belgrade in early February. The GAC urged the authorities in Serbia and Montenegro to agree on a new constitutional arrangement, within a federal framework. The GAC also called for the speedy release of Kosovo Albanian and other prisoners held without charge or on political grounds. It strongly condemned terrorist acts by ethnic Albanians in southern Serbia, while welcoming the FRY authorities' commitment to UNSCR 1244. The Council thanked Mr. Kouchner for his work as UNMIK Special Representative in Kosovo and pledged its support for his successor, Mr. Haekkerup.

The Council approved the terms of reference for the high level EU/Albania Steering Group, which is to help Albania meet the requirements of the Stabilisation and Association agreement.

The GAC also discussed the use of depleted uranium in the Balkans. It agreed that this issue must be dealt with transparently, and that NATO would remain in the lead.

Middle east peace process

The GAC welcomed President Clinton's efforts to seek a breakthrough in the peace process, and stated the EU's wish to work closely with the Bush Administration on the issue. It also expressed its support for the current negotiations in Taba, Egypt. The Council called on Israel to end its withholding of revenue payments due to the Palestinian Authority.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Council condemned the assassination of President Kabila, and called for all parties to the Lusaka Agreement to respect their commitments under this agreement.

El Salvador

The Council expressed its deepest sympathy to the victims and families of those lost in the El Salvador earthquake, and called for efficient donor co-ordination, both immediately and in the longer-term. It recalled the support being provided by the Community and member states.

Nice follow up: IGC/Nice Treaty

The Presidency announced that the Nice Treaty will be signed by Ministers in Nice on 26 February 2001. The Foreign Secretary welcomed the Presidency's plans for broad consultation involving all relevant actors, including national Parliaments.

Nice follow up: EU enlargement

The Presidency presented their work programme and emphasised their intentions to keep to and, where possible, proceed more rapidly than the Commission's timetable for negotiations agreed at Nice.

Any other business: Bananas

A discussion on the EU's banana import regime is now remitted to a future Council.

"Your Britain, Your Europe"

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the *(a)* past and *(b)* future venues of the "Your Britain, Your Europe" roadshow; and what have been its costs to date. [147460]

Mr. Vaz: Since the launch of the "Your Britain, Your Europe" information initiative, I have visited the following cities, towns and boroughs: Newcastle; Sunderland; Hull; Rotherham; Manchester; London; Bristol; Bath; Nuneaton; Birmingham; Leicester; Leeds; Liverpool; Norwich; Southampton; Edinburgh; Glasgow; Rosyth; Cardiff; Newport; Reading; Newbury; Swindon; Oxford; Slough; Henley on Thames; Wolverhampton; Loughborough; Northampton; Brent; and Tower Hamlets.

In the next two months, I plan to visit Newcastle, Sunderland, Middlesbrough, Sheffield, Cambridge, Huntingdon, Peterborough, Brighton, Hove and Hastings.

So far, the total cost of my programme of visits has been about £100,000.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many responses were received to the questionnaire attached to the "Your Britain, Your Europe" leaflet; how many leaflets have been distributed; at what cost; and if he will make a statement. [147466]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 10 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 77W.

We have now distributed all 17,000 copies of the "Your Britain, Your Europe" leaflet. The total design and printing costs came to £3,862.51.

European Women's Lobby

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last *(a)* met and *(b)* received representations from the European Women's Lobby; and if he will make a statement. [147314]

Mr. Vaz: The Secretary of State has not met the European Women's Lobby. Relevant officials come into contact with the Lobby during regular European-level meetings and the Lobby circulates publications on women's issues to interested parties in all member states.

Euro

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on planned information campaigns for UK embassy and consulate staff on the euro. [147463]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the Treasury's "Fourth Report on Euro Preparations", copies of which have been deposited in the Library of the House.

Iraq

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the outcomes of the oil-for-food programme for Iraq. [147374]

Mr. Wilson: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer the then Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) on this subject on 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 405W.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much of the money from the Iraqi "oil-for-food" programme, held in a UN administered account, was spent on *(a)* food and medicine, *(b)* war reparations and *(c)* payments to the UN in the last 12 months. [147370]

Mr. Wilson: During the last 12 months the UN has continued to direct 66 per cent. of "oil for food" revenue to the UN's humanitarian programme in Iraq, 30 per cent. to the UN Compensation Fund and 4 per cent. to UN administration of the programme. However, for the current phase of "oil for food" (December 2000-June 2001) the UN has agreed to reduce the UN Compensation Fund share to 25 per cent. and increase the humanitarian programme share to 71 per cent. as a gesture to the Iraqi people.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received concerning the ending of sanctions against Iraq; and if he will make a statement. [147381]

Mr. Wilson: In response to recent representations by the Government of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, we have given assurances that the process leading to the suspension and eventual lifting of sanctions on Iraq can begin when Iraq chooses to co-operate. SCR1284—a UK

initiative—continues to offer Iraq the opportunity to make quick progress in this process. We continue to urge Iraq to accept this resolution.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps are being taken to combat the smuggling of embargoed goods to and from Iraq; and what role Turkey plays in this process. [147025]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* The UN sanctions regime continues to be largely effective in controlling the flow of embargoed goods into and out of Iraq and denying the Iraqi regime of funds outside UN control. However we remain concerned about breaches of sanctions, in particular the smuggling of Iraqi oil through the Gulf and across Iraq's land borders, which has the effect of depriving the Iraqi people of humanitarian aid under the UN "oil for food" programme.

Where we have firm evidence that embargoed goods are being smuggled, we press Governments, including that of Turkey, both bilaterally and through the UN Sanctions Committee to take action against the smugglers. We also continue to play an active role in the Multinational Interception Force, which through its regular patrolling, helps to deter smuggling through the Gulf.

Iran

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on relations with Iran. [147255]

Mr. Wilson: The Foreign Secretary last met his Iranian counterpart Dr. Kharrazi at UNGA on 15 September last year and reaffirmed our commitment to constructive engagement with Iran.

Our policy, in line with that of our EU partners, remains to encourage the reforms already under way in Iran while pressing for improvements in those Iranian policies that are of concern.

Ecuador

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what aid the British Government have provided to help Ecuador deal with the oil spill off the Galapagos Islands. [147373]

Mr. Battle: We are providing £50,000 to help Ecuador protect the integrity of this flagship World Heritage Site; and we have informed the Government of Ecuador that we are ready to share the UK's experience in contingency planning to avoid or repair damage to sensitive marine environments. At an international co-ordination meeting in Quito on 24 January the Ecuadorean Environment Minister expressed publicly his warm appreciation of support from the UK.

Drugs Control

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the management of United Nations Drugs Control Programme funds. [148058]

Mr. Battle: We have, with a number of other donors, raised concerns about UNDCP programme management. In light of recent press reporting on this issue, I wrote to Mr. Arlacchi on 23 January seeking his assurance that UK contributions have been managed properly and used effectively, and encouraging early progress towards a more transparent system of project management and evaluation. In his reply of 24 January, Mr. Arlacchi assured me that he had invited a management audit of the UNDCP by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services in New York, and that UK funds had been properly managed. In response to requests from donor countries, Mr. Arlacchi has also produced a paper on management reform which we and other donors are studying.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 1 February 2001

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Departmental Surveys

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list for *(a)* 1992–93, *(b)* 1993–94, *(c)* 1994–95, *(d)* 1995–96, *(e)* 1996–97, *(f)* 1997–98, *(g)* 1998–99, *(h)* 1999–2000 and *(i)* 2000–01, (I) his Department's total spending on quantitative and qualitative surveys of policy issues by focus groups, opinion polling, task forces or other means and (II) the cost of each individual project. [146582]

Dr. Howells: The information is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Information on task forces, including reports produced, is updated and published every six months.

Employment Agency Regulations

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will publish a revised draft of the Employment Agency Regulations. [148636]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have today released a final draft of the Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Business Regulations and will be consulting representative bodies. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses, and also on my Department's website www.dti.gov.uk. I have invited comments to be made by 16 March.

Car Industry (Government Assistance)

Sir David Madel: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what Government assistance has been provided to *(a)* General Motors and *(b)* Vauxhall Motors in the UK in the past five years. [148142]

Mr. Alan Johnson: *(a)* No Government assistance has been provided to General Motors in the last five years.

(b) Vauxhall Motors have received a total of £10 million Regional Selective Assistance. This was a single offer in support of a project to modernise the Ellesmere Port plant and introduce the new Astra model in 1997. All the grant has been fully drawn down by the company.

Miners (Compensation)

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many ex-miners from *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* the UK claiming compensation for chronic bronchitis and emphysema have died before their claims were fully processed; and how many claims have been fully processed to date. [148211]

Mr. Hain: The Department's claim handling agents, IRISC, have registered a total of 6,802 claims by former miners who have died and where the date of death is after the date of claim. Of these 656 were Scottish claimants. In all these cases the claims will be continued by the claimant's widow or dependants. In addition, where the claimant's death certificate shows that one of the respiratory diseases for which British Coal were found liable either caused or materially contributed to the death, the Department will also make bereavement or loss of society awards. The Department has made 4,650 bereavement or loss of society awards, totalling £38.7 million. Of these 258, totalling £2 million, were Scottish claimants.

The Department has settled some 7,080 claims in full, with payments totalling £25 million. Of these some 585 settlements, totalling £1.6 million, were to Scottish claimants. In addition the Department has made some 25,000 interim settlements, totalling £83.5 million, with some 2,000 payments, totalling £5.5 million, made to Scottish claimants.

In total the Department paid out £21.6 million in coal mining compensation to Scottish respiratory and vibration white finger claimants.

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many former miners in Amber Valley have *(a)* claimed and *(b)* received payments in compensation for chronic bronchitis and emphysema. [147389]

Mr. Hain: The Department's claim handling agents, IRISC, have registered 1,945 claims in respect of chronic bronchitis and emphysema from claimants in Amber Valley. As at 24 January the Department had settled 106 claims in full, and made a further 219 interim settlements. In total the Department has paid out nearly £1 million in respect of chronic bronchitis and emphysema related compensation in Amber Valley.

Arms Exports

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the process of indirect offset with regard to arms export licences. [147594]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* I have been asked to reply.

Offset (both direct and indirect) is a matter between the customer and the supplier. For the criteria for export licensing, I refer the hon. Member to the answer which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs gave on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 199–203W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt).

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Homes and Leasehold Reform Bills

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on which dates the Minister for the Environment attended departmental meetings to discuss *(a)* the Homes Bill and *(b)* the Leasehold Reform Bill. [147444]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Information about internal meetings and advice is not disclosed under Exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Waste Disposal

Mr. Temple-Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how many occasions municipal solid waste incinerators have been found to be operating in breach of conditions on their operation imposed by *(a)* planning consents and *(b)* pollution control consents in each of the last five years; and what assessment was made of the potential damage to the health of local residents in each case. [147506]

Mr. Meacher: Planning Consents: The Department does not keep a central record of breaches of planning consent conditions. It is the responsibility of the local planning authority that imposed the planning conditions to assess the effect of any that are breached and to take any necessary action.

Pollution Control Consents: Within the UK, municipal solid waste incinerators (MSWIs) are regulated under part 1 of the Environment Protection Act 1990 by the Environment Agency, the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, the Environment and Heritage Service in Northern Ireland and local authorities. In England and Wales, the Environment Agency is responsible for regulating MSWIs with a capacity of one tonne per hour or more under the Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) regime.

The table summarises the numbers of breaches of emission limits to air from MSWIs currently operating in England and Wales under the IPC regime. The table does not include breaches of limits in the period 1 January to 1 December 1996 for MSWIs that closed following the implementation of the Council Directive on the reduction of air pollution from existing municipal waste incineration plants.

All operators of MSWIs are required by their authorisations to inform the Agency of any breaches of emission limit values or failures of equipment that could result in a breach. On receipt of these notifications the Agency assesses the cause and the potential effect on the environment and health. Where enforcement action is necessary the Agency follows its Enforcement and Prosecution Policy. I understand that to date there have been no breaches of limits that have warranted a detailed study of the impact on health, as the Agency has determined that the potential impact would be negligible. However, should an emission limit be exceeded in the future to the extent that the impact is not likely to be negligible, the Agency has assured me that it would take appropriate enforcement action and study the potential effects.

Numbers of breaches of emission limit values for MSWIs between January and December for the period 1996–2000

Air	*1996–98 (annual average)*	*1999*	*2000*
HCl	302 (101)	142	60
SO2	11 (4)	42	13
NOx	34 (12)	29	27
CO	65 (22)	107	41

Numbers of breaches of emission limit values for MSWIs between January and December for the period 1996–2000

Air	*1996–98 (annual average)*	*1999*	*2000*
Particulate matter	16 (6)	3	5
Metals	0	1	0
HF	1 (0.3)	0	0
Dioxins	0	0	0

Countryside and Rights of Way Act

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what length of time he will allow for the completion of the mapping exercises required by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. [147702]

Mr. Meacher: My Department has a Public Service Agreement target to open up public access to mountain, moor, heath, down and registered common land by the end of 2005. The Countryside Agency has a duty under the Act to prepare and consult on statutory maps of open country and registered common land in England. This is a major task. The Agency plans to map region by region and aims to complete the mapping process by September 2004.

We are considering with the Agency the possibility of early commencement of the right, either on a region-by-region basis, or for mountains over 600 m and registered common land.

GM Products

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the European Parliament's decision to allow the European Commission to start issuing new licences for GM products to go on to the market in Europe from February. [147579]

Mr. Meacher: The European Parliament has taken no such decision. The placing on the market of products consisting of or containing GMOs within the European Community is governed by Directive 90/220/EEC. The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union are currently considering a revision to this Directive under Community co-decision procedures. In accordance with these procedures, the Parliament and the Council are required to take a decision by 14 February 2001 on whether to adopt the text of a revised Directive approved jointly by a Conciliation Committee of the two institutions on 20 December 2000. On the assumption the revised Directive is adopted as currently drafted, member states and the Commission will continue to have joint responsibility, as they have under the existing directive, for taking decisions on the authorisation of the placing on the market of products controlled by the Directive. Such decisions are taken on a case-by-case basis, including detailed assessment of the measures necessary to avoid any adverse effects on human health and the environment that might arise from the authorisation of a particular product.

Abandoned Vehicles

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the estimated number of motor vehicles abandoned in the Greater London area during the month of November 2000; and if he will make a statement. [147839]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Department holds no central records of the number of vehicles identified as abandoned. Abandoned vehicles in the Greater London area are the responsibility of the London borough councils and the Corporation of London under the Refuse Disposal (Amenity) Act 1978.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what talks have taken place with provisional bidders for NATS in regard to extra capacity and aircraft movements in British airports. [148190]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Bidders for the NATS PPP are required to submit a long-term strategic plan covering all aspects of NATS business, including proposals for meeting the challenge of increasing demand for airspace capacity.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the consultants advising the Government on the sale of NATS. [148167]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The following consultants are employed by the Government in connection with the NATS PPP:

Credit Suisse First Boston

Slaughter and May

Deloitte and Touche

Ove Arup and Logica

Real Time Engineering

Enviros Aspinwall

Insignia Richard Ellis

PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has had from the IPMS concerning the possibility of industrial action involving air traffic controllers. [148145]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: None.

Private Property Owners (Local Authority Licensing Scheme)

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to consult on proposals for legislation to give powers to local authorities to set up schemes for selective licensing of private property owners. [148052]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 129W.

Rate Relief (Sports Clubs)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what the annual cost is of giving mandatory rate relief at 50 per cent. to voluntary sports clubs in England; [147887]

(2) how many voluntary sports clubs in England during 1998–99 received discretionary rate relief, and at what level; [147888]

(3) how many voluntary sports clubs in *(a)* England, *(b)* Scotland, *(c)* Wales and *(d)* Northern Ireland are listed with the relevant agency responsible for the collection of rateable values; [147890]

(4) how many sports clubs in England will benefit from the mandatory rate relief and discretionary relief proposals published in the Green Paper on the Local Government Finance Bill; [147894]

(5) how many voluntary clubs in England have a rateable value of under *(a)* £3,000 and *(b)* £8,000. [147895]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 31 January 2001]:* The rating lists do not record the use of property as a voluntary sports club as distinct from other sports clubs, so the information is not available in the form requested. The rating lists for England include around 16,000 sports properties, including those used by voluntary clubs as well as professional and commercial sports bodies. The equivalent information requested regarding Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland relates to a devolved matter and as such is for the relevant devolved administration to provide.

Of the 16,000 sports properties in England, around 7,500 have rateable values of under £3,000 and a further 4,000 have rateable values above £3,000 and below £8,000.

Under the proposals in our Green Paper "Modernising Local Government Finance", mandatory rate relief would be available to all small businesses and non-profit making bodies in England. All 11,500 sports properties with rateable values below £8,000 would be eligible for the relief, the amount depending on their size. 7,500 sports properties with rateable values below £3,000 would be eligible for 50 per cent. mandatory relief. 3,000 properties with rateable values between £3,000 and £6,000 would be eligible for mandatory relief between 50 per cent. and 20 per cent. 1,000 properties with rateable values between £6,000 and £8,000 would be eligible for mandatory relief of less than 20 per cent., tapering to no mandatory relief above £8,000. Mandatory relief would be available to all non-profit making sports clubs, as well as commercial or professional clubs that met other tests of being a small business, as proposed in the Green Paper. We are currently considering responses to the Green Paper and will announce the final details of the proposed scheme in a White Paper later this year.

All non-profit making sports clubs are currently eligible for 100 per cent. discretionary relief and would continue to be so under the Green Paper proposals, both to top up any mandatory relief and for those clubs over the size threshold for mandatory relief. Information on the number of voluntary sports clubs eligible for discretionary relief is not held centrally.

To give 50 per cent. mandatory relief to all 16,000 sports properties in England would cost around £35 million in 2000–01. This includes commercial and professional bodies as well as voluntary clubs, as information on voluntary clubs is not available separately. This figure does not take account of any discretionary relief which is already given to non-profit making sports clubs, nor of any transitional or other reliefs which may apply to any of these properties.

English local authorities estimate the total cost of discretionary rate relief to all non-profit making bodies at £24.5 million in 2000–01. This includes relief for non-profit making sports clubs as well as other philanthropic, educational, social, scientific, literary or fine arts bodies, excluding those which are charities. Information on how much of this was for voluntary sports clubs and the level of relief given to each club is not recorded centrally. Information is not readily available for 1998–99.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the results of the Regulatory Impact Assessment on the administrative burden on voluntary sports clubs through the Green Paper on Local Government Finance. [147893]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 31 January 2001]:* We will publish the Regulatory Impact Assessment of the proposals for rate relief for small businesses and other non-profit making bodies including sports clubs in due course. If the relief were to apply to all non-profit making bodies within certain rateable value thresholds, as we currently propose, we would expect the additional burden on clubs in making an application to be minimal, and no more than is currently involved in apply for discretionary rate relief.

Council Housing (Voluntary Stock Transfers)

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the council housing stock voluntary transfers which *(a)* have taken place since 1997 and *(b)* are proposed by local authority, indicating the number of housing units involved in each case; [148261]

(2) how many voluntary transfers of council housing stock have taken place since 1997; and how many more are proposed; [148259]

(3) how many housing units on average were involved in each voluntary transfer of council stock since 1997. [148260]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: There have been 75 large scale voluntary transfers of council housing stock since 1997 involving 259,659 dwellings; an average of 3,462 dwellings per transfer. A further 14 are pending involving 124,633 dwellings. The tables show transfers which *(a)* have taken place since 1997 and *(b)* are proposed indicating the number of dwellings involved in each case.

All housing stock voluntary transfers which have taken place since 1997

Local authority	*Number of dwellings*
Cotswold DC	4,282
South Staffs C	5,273
Lichfield DC	4,921
South Oxfordshire DC	5,018
Eden C	1,510
LB Lambeth—Moorlands	515
LB Bexley	4,118
LB Bexley	4,097
Congleton BC	4,061
Oldham BC—Limehurst	642
Liverpool CC—Windermere	493
LB Merton—Pollards Hill	1,018
LB Tower Hamlets—Poplar I	1,852
Kerrier DC	3,732
LB Hackney—Kingsmead	951
LB Brent—Fortunegate/Church End	1,481
Basildon DC—Vange	708
West Somerset DC	1,869
Stoke-on-Trent CC—Bentilee	917
Tewkesbury BC	3,066
Rother DC	3,058
LB Lambeth—Lansdowne Green	681
LB Tower Hamlets—Poplar II	2,431
Wirral—Leasowe	1,082
Tameside—West Ashton	901
West Devon BC	1,446
South Somerset DC	8,883
East Lindsey DC	5,102
Liverpool CC—Pinehurst	646
Manchester CC	1,030
LB Hackney—Morningside	1,084
South Hams DC	3,096
LB Hammersmith and Fulham—Old Oak	668
LB Hackney—Upper Clapton	1,000
Telford and Wrekin C	13,081
LB Enfield	1,194
Worthing BC	2,525
Bath and North East Somerset C	9,887
Manchester CC—East Wythenshawe	6,667
LB Greenwich—Charlton Triangle	1,280
LB Hackney—Haggerston	661
Allerdale BC	3,704
Allerdale BC—Salterbeck	727
Preston BC—Avenham	1,121
LB Lambeth—Central Stockwell	2,358
Birmingham CC—Central areas	2,813
LB Islington—Barnsbury	647
LB Islington—10 estates	739
Liverpool CC—Speke Garston	4,382
West Lindsey DC	3,929
LB Lambeth—St. Martins	1,033
Boston BC	4,871
Tynedale DC	3,564
Newcastle Under Lyme BC	9,887
Restormel BC	3,577
Manchester CC—Colshaw Farm	600
North Devon DC	3,293
LB Hackney—Stamford Hill	1,095
LB Hackney—Pembury Estate	1,241
Burnley	5,330
Manchester CC—Sale Estate	1,655
Weymouth and Portland	3,105
Huntingdon	6,650
Elmbridge	4,894
Test Valley	5,495
Wyre Forest DC	6,056
Manchester CC—Whitefield Estate	1,033
LB Tower Hamlets—THCH	1,551
Tameside MBC	8,532
Richmond	7,934
Coventry	7,139
	20,125

All housing stock voluntary transfers which have taken place since 1997

Local authority	*Number of dwellings*
Fylde	1,905
Chester	7,096
Horsham	4,650
Number of authorities	259,659
Average	3,462

Proposed voluntary transfers of council housing stock

Local authority	*Number of dwellings*
East Northants	3,540
Blackburn and Darwen	10,218
Manchester CC—Knutsford estates	464
Manchester CC—Handforth estates	664
Chichester	5,510
West Oxfordshire	3,884
Mendip	4,544
Torbay	2,975
West Wiltshire	3,965
Staff Moorlands	3,247
East Staffordshire	5,859
Walsall	28,195
Calderdale MBC	13,066
Sunderland	38,502
Total	124,633
Average	8,902

Planning Appeals

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of planning appeals in 2000 were determined by *(a)* a written inquiry, *(b)* a full inquiry lasting less than two days and *(c)* a full inquiry lasting more than two days; and what the average cost of an inquiry was in each category. [147441]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Figures are listed for the three appeals procedures. Hearings do not normally take longer than one day.

Year 2000	*Total number*	*Percentage of number decided*
Planning appeals[1] received	14,962	—
Planning appeals decided	12,602	—
by written representations	9,197	73
by hearings	2,573	20
by inquiries (2 days or less)	626	5
by inquiries (more than 2 days)	206	2

[1] Appeals under s.78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

The following unit costs have been calculated by the Planning Inspectorate in each category for the financial year ending 31 March 2000. (Figures for the calendar year 2000 are not readily available).

Planning appeals determined by	£ *Average unit cost*
Written representations	1,047
Hearing	2,135
Inquiry	5,618

Water and Recreation Sport

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to award a research contract about access to water for sport and recreation. [148635]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: We are today letting a contract to a consortium led by the University of Brighton to establish the facts about participation. The research will also provide information about availability of water space, the effectiveness of current arrangements in meeting the demand for different types of water-based sport and recreation and the scale and nature of potential demand.

Lorries

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when 44-tonne lorries will be allowed to operate generally in Great Britain. [148632]

Mr. Hill: The necessary Regulations (Statutory Instrument SI 2000 No. 3224—The Road Vehicles (Authorised Weight) (Amendment) Regulations 2000)—will come into force on 1 February. The regulations will allow certain types of lorry to operate at up to 44-tonnes maximum weight in Great Britain. The lorries in question must have six axles, a maximum axle weight of 10.5 tonnes and Euro 2 low emission engines. These vehicles will result in a considerable saving in lorry miles where heavy goods are being carried and will be no bigger, and cause less road wear, than existing 40-tonne, 5 axle lorries.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Moluccas

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Government's response to continuing unrest in the Moluccas. [147689]

Mr. Battle: We continue to urge the Indonesian Government to exercise tolerance and restraint and remind them of their responsibility to maintain law and order and take immediate steps to bring the perpetrators of the violence to justice. I did so most recently with Foreign Minister Shihab on 12 December.

Our Ambassador to Indonesia has just returned from a visit to the province and the Indonesian Minister for Settlement is arranging a further visit to Maluku with a group of diplomats next month. We will continue to work with the Indonesian authorities and UNDP to promote reconciliation, begin wider construction work and to offer practical assistance where appropriate.

Gibraltar

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last discussed Gibraltar with the Spanish Government; and what specific issues were considered. [147840]

Mr. Vaz: The Secretary of State met the Spanish Foreign Minister, Sr Pique, in London on 24 January. They considered a wide range of EU and international

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issues, as well as a number of Gibraltar related questions, including HMS Tireless, border delays, telephone numbers, the Brussels Process, aviation and the European Parliament franchise.

Nice Treaty

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many letters and postcards addressed to Her Majesty the Queen on the subject of the Nice Treaty have been passed on to him. [148005]

Mr. Vaz: About 850, as of 30 January.

Entry Clearance System

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he plans to visit India to examine the functioning of the entry clearance system. [148634]

Mr. Vaz: I plan to visit India and Bangladesh to inaugurate our new Visa Information Posts later this year.

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit Africa to examine the functioning of the entry clearance system. [148714]

Mr. Vaz: I plan to visit Entry Clearance Posts in Africa later on this month.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to his oral answer of 23 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 790, what the response was of the Turkish Ambassador concerning the bombing of a cattle feed factory at Samarwa and the killing of Iraqi cowherds. [148151]

Mr. Vaz: I plan to speak to the Turkish Ambassador today. I will then be in touch with my hon. Friend to arrange a meeting to discuss these matters.

DEFENCE

HMS Tireless

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence where HMS Tireless is to be repaired. [148207]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) on 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 64W.

Services Training

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much was spent in the last 12 months for training by the *(a)* Royal Navy, *(b)* Royal Marines, *(c)* Army and *(d)* RAF in the United Kingdom; and what proportion of these totals are spent in Scotland. [147014]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* Our latest best estimates for the amounts spent on individual training by the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Army and RAF in the last 12 months are respectively: £233 million, £39 million, £422 million and £446 million. These figures are approximate and exclude the costs of front-line collective training which are difficult to separate from normal day-to-day operations.

Of the figures above, £869 million was spent by the Services' Training Agencies. It is estimated that just over 1 per cent. of this sum was spent in Scotland. The balance of £291 million, which represents the cost of training conducted outside the Services' Training Agencies, is not broken down on a regional basis, and figures could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Operation Palliser

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the conclusions and recommendations were of the investigation into specific medical problems arising from Operation Palliser announced by his Department on 15 June 2000; if he will publish the report; and if he will make a statement. [147585]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* I will write to the hon. Member and enclose a copy of the press release which was issued by the Ministry of Defence on 25 July 2000. This gave a comprehensive report of the conclusions and recommendations of the three Service Boards of Inquiry.

A background paper summarising the findings of the Service Boards of Inquiry, which was sent to the House of Commons Defence Committee on the same day, is being placed in the Library of the House.

Saturn Electronic Protection Measure

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the new advanced electronic countermeasures Saturn System will be in service; what the service life of the system is; if it is compatible with all the NATO nations aircraft; and if he will make a statement. [148103]

Dr. Moonie: The Saturn Electronic Protection Measure (EPM) is the latest in the EPM generation and is already in service. It was introduced to meet NATO Stanag (Standardisation Agreement) requirements and will be in service for the foreseeable future. It is compatible with other NATO Saturn capable platforms.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many depleted uranium shells have been fired by United Kingdom armed forces in conflict, broken down by campaign. [148160]

Mr. Spellar: United Kingdom armed forces have used depleted uranium (DU) rounds in conflict only during Operation Granby in the Gulf in 1991. The Ministry of Defence's assessment is that UK tanks used fewer than one hundred 120 mm rounds against Iraq's military forces during hostilities (this equates to less than one metric tonne of DU).

Sierra Leone

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his estimate is of the liability for compensation arising from personal injury by armed forces personnel

who have suffered medical problems as a result of deployment to Sierra Leone; and if he will make a statement. [148146]

Dr. Moonie: It would be inappropriate to disclose information about my Department's estimated financial liability while claims for compensation remain to be settled. I am withholding the information requested under exemption 4 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. However, I can say that 15 claims for compensation have been received from members of HM forces who contracted malaria as a result of deployment to Sierra Leone. In only one of these cases does my Department accept that the claim is valid.

HEALTH

BSE

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if post mortem tests for BSE carried out in EU countries are carried out before the carcase is dressed. [141720]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 11 December 2000]:* No. The test sample is taken after the head has been removed and the carcase will be dressed before the test is carried out. It will be detained until the test result is known.

Health Service Employees (East Somerset)

Paddy Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* nurses and *(b)* doctors were employed by (i) East Somerset NHS Trust and (ii) Taunton NHS Trust for each year since 1990–91. [144599]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 18 January 2001]:* The latest information available is shown in the table.

National Health Service Hospital and Community Health Services: All doctors and all nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff excluding learners within East Somerset NHS Trust and Taunton and Somerset NHS Trust as at 30 September for each year

Whole-time equivalents

	East Somerset NHS Trust		Taunton NHS Trust	
	Nurses	*Doctors*[1]	*Nurses*	*Doctors*[1]
1991	950	70	1,380	130
1992	640	90	1,430	140
1993	630	80	1,510	150
1994	660	80	1,560	170
1995	700	90	1,330	190
1996	580	80	1,220	190
1997	580	110	1,130	210
1998	600	110	1,080	230
1999	600	120	1,140	230

[1] Data relating to the years prior to 1995 should be handled with caution owing to potential understatements of the number of staff returned by the organisation.

Notes:

Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.

Owing to rounding totals may not equal the sum of component parts.

Figures exclude learners and agency staff.

A new classification of the non-medical workforce was introduced in 1995. Information based on this classification is not directly comparable with earlier years.

Trusts were first formed in 1991. Prior to this, data to this level were not available.

Source:

Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census.

Department of Health Medical and Dental Workforce Census

Fluoride

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the release of fluoride into a patient's mouth through the use of slow-release fluoride dressings during dental treatment requires the prior consent of the patient. [147417]

Mr. Hutton: For children and adults the consent required from the patient or from a person with parental responsibility would be the same as that for any other dental treatment.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the use by NHS dentists of products intended to be placed in the mouths of patients that release fluoride over an extended period of time. [147837]

Mr. Hutton: I understand these treatments are at an experimental stage. Full evaluation would be necessary before consideration could be given to making the products generally available to National Health Service patients.

Medical School Training Places

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many extra medical school training places will be created in each year from 2001 to 2004 expressed in the same terms as the figures in the NHS Plan; and if he will make a statement. [147555]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* Following our announcement in 1998 that the annual intake of medical students in the United Kingdom should be increased by about 1,000, medical school intake in England is planned to rise as follows as set out in the table.

Academic year	*Actual and planned increases in intakes*
1999–2000	223
2000–001	289
2001–02	273
2002–03	273
2003–04	22

Work on the planned further increase of up to 1,000 places set out in the NHS Plan is being taken forward by a Joint Implementation Group (JIG) which includes representatives of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Department and the General Medical Council. The joint implementation group will make recommendations to the HEFCE Board, which is responsible for the allocation of medical student places to higher education institutions (HEIs) in England.

The JIG invited all HEIs in England to submit proposals to provide these extra places in September 2000. The group is currently considering the proposals that have been submitted and will make recommendations to the HEFCE in due course.

Primary Care Trusts

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will require newly established primary care trusts to use the current drug tariff arrangements. [R] [147757]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* The prices set out in the Drug Tariff apply to prescriptions dispensed by community pharmacies, dispensing doctors and appliance contractors, or personally administered by general practitioners, under Part II of the National Health Service Act 1977. Primary care trusts are not responsible for administering these arrangements. They do not apply to any other arrangements which may be made locally for the supply of medicines, appliances or other items.

Hospitals (Kent)

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average length of stay was for in-patients at *(a)* the William Harvey Hospital, Ashford, *(b)* the Kent and Canterbury Hospital and *(c)* the QEQM Hospital, Margate, for each month from September to December 2000 inclusive. [148143]

Ms Stuart: The table shows the average duration of an in-patient spell by month of discharge at East Kent Hospitals National Health Service Trust for 1999–2000:

Days

Month of discharge	*Mean duration of in-patient stay*
April	3
May	4
June	4
July	4
August	4
September	3
October	4
November	4
December	4
January	4
February	4
March	4

Notes:
1. 1999–2000 is the latest year for which data are available.
2. Data are collected by provider, and are not available for individual hospitals within an NHS trust.

Source:
Hospital Episode Statistics

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many bedded patients there were in accident and emergency departments awaiting operations on Monday 29 January in *(a)* the William Harvey Hospital, Ashford, *(b)* the Kent and Canterbury Hospital and *(c)* the QEQM Hospital, Margate. [148144]

Ms Stuart: The information requested is not held centrally but should be available from the Chair of the East Kent Hospitals National Health Service Trust.

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average mileage was travelled on National Health Service business by *(a)* hospital consultants and doctors and *(b)* hospital and health service managers in the area covered by East Kent Hospitals Trust (i) in 1997 and (ii) 2000. [148111]

Ms Stuart: The Department does not hold the information requested centrally.

Mental Health Services Spending

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the expenditure on mental health services as a proportion of total NHS spending has been in each year since 1979; and if he will make a statement. [148082]

Mr. Hutton: The expenditure on mental health services as a proportion of total National Health Service spending for each year between 1988–89 to 1998–99 is given in the table. Information prior to this date is not available. While health and community health services spending on mental health as a proportion of total spend has remained fairly constant, expenditure by local councils on mental health as a proportion of their total spend on social services have risen steadily.

Year	*HCHS gross expenditure on mental health as a percentage of total expenditure*
1988–89	12.5
1989–90	12.34
1990–91	12.07
1991–92	11.58
1992–93	11.56
1993–94	11.00
1994–95	10.69
1995–96	10.65
1996–97	12.21
1997–98	12.26
1998–99	12.08

1. The NHS expenditure information is based on profiles of expenditure provided by trusts but scaled to match health authorities total expenditure. Thus, there is a possibility that the figures under-estimate the expenditure on services purchased by health authorities from the private and voluntary sectors. It may be the case that hospital expenditure is over-estimated and community expenditure is under-estimated. These figures exclude Health Authority overheads.
2. In 1996–97 the data collection methodology changed. Therefore, figures from 1996–97 onwards are not directly comparable to figures up to and including 1995–96
3. From 1994–95 costs include care management, which cannot be identified for earlier years.
4. All figures exclude administrative and clerical overheads.

Prescriptions

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many prescriptions were issued but not dispensed in each year since 1995; and if he will make a statement. [148083]

Ms Stuart: The information requested is not available centrally.

Doctors (Retention)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many physicians who qualified in each year since 1990 left the profession within five years of qualification; and if he will make a statement. [148088]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally. However, the Department does commission occasional studies by the Medical Careers Research Group (MCRG) into the career patterns of newly qualified doctors from particular cohorts. The table shows the MCRG's estimates of the numbers of doctors not practising medicine, and the numbers not practising medicine in the United Kingdom, five years after qualification.

The percentage of graduates not practising medicine after five years has remained quite low for all cohorts, with no clear trends over time. For the 1993 cohort, only 5.2 per cent. were not practising medicine by 1998. The

trend in those not practising medicine in the UK after five years also remains stable, but the latest figure is lower than in previous years at 8.8 per cent.

Patterns of retention—five years after qualification

Year of qualification	Cohort size	Not practisin medicine after 5 years		Not practising medicine in the UK after 5 years	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1974	2,344	131	5.6	339	14.5
1977	3,130	184	5.9	395	12.6
1983	3,841	204	5.3	357	9.3
1988	3,731	307	8.2	514	13.8
1993	3,639	188	5.2	322	8.8

Note:
The figures exclude non-respondents who are registered as doctors in the UK
Source:
Medical Careers Research Group

HOME DEPARTMENT

Chief Superintendents

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what considerations led him to reintroduce the rank of chief superintendent. [148170]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Criminal Justice and Police Bill currently before Parliament includes provision for the reintroduction of the rank of chief superintendent.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary gave approval for the rank of chief superintendent to be reintroduced at the earliest legislative opportunity following consultation with police service interests and on the recommendation of the Police Advisory Board (PAB). The PAB view was that the abolition of the rank from 1 April 1995 had led to operational and management difficulties.

Equal Treatment Directive (Women MPs)

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the implications for the ability of political parties to introduce measures aimed at increasing the representation of women in Parliament of the draft Equal Treatment Directive. [147698]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: This is a very complex issue which will involve analysis of relevant equality, employment and electoral law. The Home Office has recently agreed to lead this work, but it will involve cross-departmental consideration. I cannot yet estimate when conclusions will be reached.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what the benefits are of the licensing procedures of substantial severity under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986; if these are dependent upon the species of animals used; and if he will make a statement; [148106]

(2) if he will exclude procedures involving *(a)* major surgery and *(b)* xenotransplantation under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 from the substantial severity category; and if he will make a statement; [148109]

(3) if he will ensure that the guidelines attached to the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 stipulate that the Secretary of State will not license procedures likely to cause severe pain or distress that cannot be alleviated; and if he will make a statement. [148107]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The reply I gave the hon. Member on 8 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 253W, fully explained the criteria for placing scientific procedures on animals in the category of "substantial severity". That reply also made it clear that, for each licence application, the likely severity of the effects of a proposed procedure on the animals concerned are weighed against the benefits likely to accrue in medical research or other developments.

This is an area of research where, rightly, enormous care is taken in granting licences. This means that licences can allow protected animals to suffer substantially severe effects only in the relatively few cases where it appears justified by the significant medical, pharmaceutical and other research gains to be made (66 of the 3,481 project licences in force at the end of 1999 had substantial severity conditions). Even then, as I made clear in the earlier reply, licence holders are required to minimise pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm, and to approach the prescribed severity limit only when absolutely necessary.

The species of animals to be used may be a factor in determining severity limits, given the criteria for defining the categories and the known varying degrees of sentience between species. However, the judgment on severity limits is exercised with respect to the suffering to be encountered by a protected animal, rather than the species by itself.

The Guidance on the Operation of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, presented to Parliament in March 2000, states that the Secretary of State will not license any procedure likely to cause severe pain or distress which cannot be alleviated. This accords with section 10(2A) of the Act, which in turn refers to Council Directive No. 86/609/EEC, regarding use of anaesthesia and analgesics. As a further safeguard, all project licences contain a standard condition (number 6) requiring that only the minimum justifiable animal suffering is caused and personal licences all bear a standard condition (number 14) requiring the prompt and humane destruction of an animal that is in severe pain or distress that cannot be alleviated. In addition, Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectors have the power to require the prompt and humane killing of any protected animal they consider to be suffering excessively or unnecessarily.

There are no current plans to exclude major surgery and xenotransplantation from the substantial severity category. Each application for a licence to undertake such procedures will continue to be assessed on a case by case basis.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many special police constables were serving in each of the Metropolitan policing divisions in December 2000. [147841]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information is not collected centrally in the form requested. The information shown in the table has been provided by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis:

Borough	*Number of special constables*
Barking and Dagenham	20
Barnet	54
Bexley	25
Brent	22
Bromley	20
Camden	18
Croydon	34
Ealing	7
Enfield	36
Greenwich	16
Hackney	19
Hammersmith and Fulham	17
Haringey	19
Harrow	14
Havering	24
Hillingdon	26
Hounslow	22
Islington	38
Kensington and Chelsea	24
Kingston	19
Lambeth	29
Lewisham	14
Merton	15
Newham	26
Redbridge	22
Richmond	18
Southwark	18
Sutton	9
Tower Hamlets	17
Waltham Forest	16
Wandsworth	17
Westminster	52

In addition to the officers serving in boroughs, 10 officers are attached to Territorial Policing, 14 officers are serving with the Marine Support Unit based at Wapping and eight officers are based at Heathrow. A further four officers are currently unallocated.

In total there are 763 special constables serving in the Metropolitan police district.

Drugs

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent assessment he has made of the effect of smoking cannabis on the probability of taking other controlled drugs. [147949]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I would refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 430W.

Asylum Seekers (Eastbourne)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers are housed in temporary accommodation in Eastbourne. [147798]

Mrs. Roche: As at 26 January 2000, there were five asylum seekers (including dependants) supported under the national asylum support scheme housed in temporary accommodation in Eastbourne.

Extraditions (Switzerland)

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many requests by Her Majesty's Government to the Swiss authorities for the extradition of a Swiss national to the UK have been refused since 1981; and how many UK nationals have been extradited to Switzerland in the same period. [147951]

Mr. Straw: No central record is kept as to the nationality of a person whose extradition has been sought. Statistical information is only available since 1997. Since then, no United Kingdom extradition request to Switzerland has been refused; and 11 fugitives have been surrendered to Switzerland.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Learning and Skills Councils (Northumberland)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much is deducted from the budget of Northumberland county council for the funding of learning and skills councils; and what his estimate is of the amount of these funds which will be returned to Northumberland county council or otherwise disbursed within the county of Northumberland. [147161]

Mr. Wicks: There has been no deduction made from the budget of Northumberland county council: its Education SSA will rise by £4.75 million to £139.66 million, an increase of some 3.75 per cent. for 2001–02. From 2000–01 to 2001–02 total funding for education in Northumberland increased by 5.69 per cent. We estimate that Northumberland's share of direct grant in 2001–02 will be £5.09 million. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 29 January that he would be making available an extra £52 million in grant to authorities with lower than average increases in their Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) in 2001–02, and who face pressures from the change of responsibility for adult education to the Learning and Skills Council from April. Northumberland local education authority's share of the additional grant will be £1.35 million.

The £142 million being allocated via the Learning and Skills Council means that all authorities have an increase of some 6 per cent. on what they are spending on Adult and Community Learning in 2000–01. For Northumberland, with current spend of £92,000, the provisional Learning and Skills Council allocation for 2001–02 is £98,000.

Within the county of Northumberland, Wansbeck local authority has been allocated £3.1 million over the next three years from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund distributed by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

New Deal

Paddy Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will rank each parliamentary constituency in the United Kingdom by the latest estimate of the number of people on the New Deal in each, indicating in each case the number of people on each of the four New Deal options; and if he will make a statement. [147315]

Ms Jowell: The information requested has been placed in the House of Commons Library. Nationally, New Deal has helped almost 270,000 young people into work. Research has shown that the New Deal benefits the labour market because young people leave it better equipped, motivated and more skilled.

University Tuition Fees

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students make contributions towards their university education of *(a)* the full cost, *(b)* more than £500, and *(c)* less than £500; and how many make no such contribution. [147535]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* Undergraduates taking their first degree course are expected to make a contribution towards their higher education only if they can afford to do so. From 2001–02, we expect around 50 per cent. of students to make no contribution to tuition fees, as a result of the rise in the income threshold. Over 85 per cent. of mature students do not pay fees. No student pays the full amount of tuition as the maximum fee set amounts to 28 per cent. of the average cost of an undergraduate course.

In 1998–99, the latest year for which data are available, there were 241,000 English and Welsh higher education students liable for fees under the Education (Student Support) Regulations. Of these, 45 per cent. were exempt from making a contribution towards fees, 20 per cent. of students made a partial contribution, and only 35 per cent. were expected to make a full contribution towards fees. Of the 20 per cent. of students making a partial contribution, it is estimated some 58 per cent. paid £500 or less and 42 per cent. paid more than £500.

Computers for Teachers

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many Key Stage 3 maths teachers will qualify to apply for the second phase of the scheme for £500 subsidy for the purchase of a laptop or personal computer. [147552]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* There is £12 million available for the second phase of the Computers for Teachers scheme. These funds will enable a maximum of 17,000 Key Stage 3 mathematics teachers, who register and meet the eligibility criteria, to receive a subsidy of up to £500.

A further £3 million will be available for further education teachers, 4,000 of whom will benefit.

Schoolchildren (Downham Market)

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the cost to public funds is of educating and transporting the 25 eligible pupils who were not found places at Downham Market High School in the present academic year. [147866]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 31 January 2001]:* Of 26 pupils whose applications for admission to Downham Market High School were turned down in appeals between April 1999 and July 2000, seven have subsequently been admitted to the school. The alternative schools of 14 out of the remaining 19 pupils are known; there is no reason to suppose that the cost of educating them at other schools is significantly different, and no extra teaching costs are known to have been directly incurred as a result of their going to other schools.

The education authority is providing support for transport for 12 out of the 26 pupils at a cost of £10,972 per annum. It is not possible to say how this compares with the costs which might have been incurred had all the pupils attended Downham Market High School, because that depends on individual pupil addresses and such hypothetical costs have not been calculated.

Higher Education

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the situation regarding applications for admission to higher education institutions in autumn 2001. [147867]

Mr. Wicks: The total number of home and overseas students applying for university and college places this year has increased by 0.7 per cent. since the same time last year, according to the latest figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). There has been a 1.4 per cent. increase in the number of young (under 21) home applicants and an increase of 1.0 per cent. in the number of mature (21 and over) home applicants.

Standards Fund

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what the final 2001–02 Standards Fund allocations made to local education authorities are by *(a)* constituency and *(b)* region; what the total local education authority contributions were to the Standards Fund for 2001–02, broken down by constituency; and what the total value of the Standards Fund was in 2000–01; [148059]

(2) what total amount of *(a)* grants and *(b)* capital spending is incorporated in the Standards Fund for 2001–02; [148060]

(3) what the percentage increase is in *(a)* local education authority contributions and *(b)* DfEE contributions to the Standards Fund for 2001–02. [148061]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 31 January 2001]:* The table shows, by region, the amounts allocated so far through the Standards Fund to each local education authority for 2001–02, including the local education authorities' contributions. Allocations cannot be given at constituency level. Some allocations remain to be made as they depend on data not yet available. All allocations requiring a local authority contribution have been made. Of the £2,492 million so far allocated, £1,837 million is recurrent and £655 million is for capital spending.

Following the announcement in the pre-Budget statement of an extra £143 million DfEE grant for capital spending this year, the Standards Fund for 2000–01 totals £2,488 million. For 2001–02 the Standards Fund will eventually total around £2,870 million. This is an increase in local education authority contributions of around £150 million (25 per cent.), and an increase of around £230 million (14 per cent.) in DfEE contributions.

The figures include all grants paid through the Standards Fund, other than New Deal for Schools capital, which is paid through the Standards Fund mechanism but is not considered part of the programme.

Standards Fund 2001–02: Allocations to date for each local education authority by region

£

Local education authority	Allocations	Local education authority contribution
Eastern Region		
Bedfordshire	19,865,257	6,284,844
Buckinghamshire	22,653,437	7,034,749
Cambridgeshire	21,842,240	6,622,654
Essex	50,566,352	16,178,119
Hertfordshire	46,322,685	14,956,779
Luton	11,538,920	4,078,918
Milton Keynes	9,894,058	3,230,331
Norfolk	34,076,755	10,973,711
Peterborough City	9,140,823	3,044,501
Southend-on-Sea	6,579,443	2,117,434
Suffolk	27,483,022	9,019,570
Thurrock	6,605,554	2,160,417
Eastern region total	266,568,546	85,702,027
Inner London		
Camden	11,968,744	3,746,206
Greenwich	16,615,398	4,522,537
Hackney	15,705,838	5,183,890
Hammersmith and Fulham	8,681,248	2,684,530
Islington	12,481,672	3,858,322
Kensington and Chelsea	6,041,420	1,887,280
Lambeth	15,049,994	4,782,498
Lewisham	16,381,036	4,812,873
London, City of	389,537	114,653
Southwark	16,235,884	4,872,125
Tower Hamlets	24,516,407	7,963,509
Wandsworth	13,591,551	4,026,035
Westminster, City of	9,582,082	3,136,499
Inner London total	167,240,811	51,590,958
Outer London		
Barking and Dagenham	10,721,024	2,793,094
Barnet	12,772,739	4,553,502
Bexley	9,267,325	3,053,043
Brent	17,005,997	4,979,801
Bromley	10,873,278	3,427,831
Croydon	14,376,020	5,225,834
Ealing	18,312,990	5,723,659
Enfield	14,055,449	4,767,387
Haringey	16,862,995	5,217,283
Harrow	8,005,251	2,732,688
Havering	9,279,140	2,857,777
Hillingdon	10,810,174	3,606,122
Hounslow	11,845,191	4,104,795
Kingston upon Thames	5,860,486	1,723,197
Merton	7,625,813	2,500,670
Newham	20,117,146	5,632,629
Redbridge	12,081,952	4,174,317
Richmond upon Thames	5,636,277	1,678,965
Sutton	7,090,164	2,266,843
Waltham Forest	15,803,156	4,741,728
Outer London total	238,402,567	75,761,165

Standards Fund 2001–02: Allocations to date for each local education authority by region

£

Local education authority	Allocations	Local education authority contribution
Midlands East		
Derby City	12,568,987	4,171,796
Derbyshire	34,423,706	10,217,337
Leicester City	20,929,762	5,891,401
Leicestershire	24,278,965	7,413,528
Lincolnshire	29,137,603	9,464,423
Northamptonshire	29,661,718	9,400,560
Nottingham City	20,159,924	5,526,930
Nottinghamshire	33,304,946	9,978,736
Rutland	1,902,246	603,762
Midlands East total	206,367,857	62,668,473
Midlands West		
Birmingham	71,004,673	20,296,512
Coventry	17,321,818	5,996,634
Dudley	14,954,457	5,262,209
Herefordshire	7,559,763	2,378,725
Sandwell	17,240,352	5,622,825
Shropshire	11,853,031	3,604,954
Solihull	10,081,181	2,767,660
Staffordshire	35,389,029	10,742,750
Stoke on Trent	17,278,785	4,264,493
Telford and The Wrekin	9,504,410	3,171,341
Walsall	15,987,739	5,514,368
Warwickshire	22,915,856	7,177,840
Wolverhampton	15,807,504	5,667,597
Worcestershire	22,268,304	7,089,089
Midlands West total	289,103,901	89,556,998
North West		
Blackburn with Darwen	10,317,071	3,666,886
Blackpool	5,959,569	1,914,479
Bolton	14,524,060	4,783,822
Bury	8,744,378	2,613,302
Cheshire	28,723,325	8,639,244
Cumbria	24,032,252	7,815,081
Halton	10,003,179	2,249,305
Knowsley	12,642,286	3,398,524
Lancashire	56,096,728	18,497,946
Liverpool	31,129,673	8,512,961
Manchester	33,828,214	9,182,076
Oldham	14,403,492	5,031,845
Rochdale	16,370,233	4,178,281
Salford	15,632,513	3,904,388
Sefton	14,829,390	4,007,497
St. Helens	12,283,283	2,765,161
Stockport	12,009,873	3,567,250
Tameside	11,523,479	3,787,397
Trafford	9,897,914	3,230,736
Warrington	8,142,929	2,582,078
Wigan	13,386,486	4,228,312
Wirral	20,428,834	5,091,949
North West total	384,909,163	113,648,520
Northern		
Darlington	5,103,939	1,583,029
Durham	26,306,858	8,122,520
Gateshead	13,549,086	3,007,975
Hartlepool	8,354,906	1,765,255
Middlesbrough	10,418,810	2,894,454
Newcastle upon Tyne	15,748,520	4,425,445
North Tyneside	11,581,629	2,929,964
Northumberland	15,982,608	5,066,476
Redcar and Cleveland	9,692,454	2,366,599

Standards Fund 2001–02: Allocations to date for each local education authority by region

£

Local education authority	*Allocations*	*Local education authority contribution*
South Tyneside	10,857,578	2,647,610
Stockton on Tees	12,815,327	2,918,073
Sunderland	18,560,141	4,632,967
Northern total	158,971,854	42,360,367
South East		
Bracknell Forest	4,163,416	1,241,993
Brighton and Hove	9,100,742	2,606,128
East Sussex	17,940,377	5,639,959
Hampshire	45,513,601	13,717,212
Isle of Wight	6,388,240	1,973,376
Kent	55,612,193	18,449,586
Medway	11,915,896	3,893,882
Oxfordshire	24,428,625	7,918,965
Portsmouth	7,810,967	2,541,028
Reading	6,154,042	1,832,982
Slough	6,715,088	2,430,429
Southampton	9,583,707	3,264,316
Surrey	33,722,008	10,841,519
West Berkshire	6,808,821	2,058,372
West Sussex	25,503,577	8,067,082
Windsor and Maidenhead	5,865,547	1,798,962
Wokingham	6,270,249	1,847,611
South East total	283,496,895	90,123,402
South West		
Bath and North East Somerset	7,060,120	2,173,004
Bournemouth	4,918,049	1,547,003
Bristol, City of	20,761,673	5,206,075
Cornwall	21,242,882	6,654,170
Devon	28,027,277	8,657,312
Dorset	15,120,702	4,583,271
Gloucestershire	24,719,540	7,554,282
Isles of Scilly	464,173	129,627
North Somerset	7,153,866	2,165,746
Plymouth	10,685,961	3,354,221
Poole	4,793,317	1,502,079
Somerset	21,396,706	6,724,594
South Gloucestershire	11,025,123	3,196,538
Swindon	8,825,101	2,798,599
Torbay	4,871,802	1,559,138
Wiltshire	19,126,190	5,869,802
South West total	210,192,482	63,675,462
Yorkshire and Humberside		
Barnsley	10,753,091	3,446,744
Bradford	41,289,876	11,882,707
Calderdale	10,495,877	3,549,883
Doncaster	15,455,746	4,723,231
East Riding of Yorkshire	14,663,121	4,219,414
Kingston upon Hull, City of	17,189,914	4,153,997
Kirklees	22,377,123	7,583,934
Leeds	41,331,442	10,380,803
North East Lincolnshire	8,740,642	2,673,257
North Lincolnshire	8,246,663	2,299,437
North Yorkshire	26,777,441	8,279,660
Rotherham	18,127,487	4,369,488
Sheffield	28,200,024	7,435,795
Wakefield	16,356,738	4,788,380
York, City of	7,447,298	2,024,698
Yorkshire and Humberside total	287,452,815	81,811,428
England total	2,492,706,891	756,898,799

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Egypt

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her proposed budget is for *(a)* bilateral development assistance and *(b)* development assistance through the EU to Egypt in the financial years (i) 2001–02 and (ii) 2002–03. [147886]

Mr. Mullin: *(a)* Discussions on a new Aid Framework for the next three years, in the light of the spending review, have yet to be concluded. The current figure for bilateral development assistance to Egypt in 2001–02 is £4.6 million.

(b) The EC provides a significant amount of development assistance to Egypt mainly through its Mediterranean Assistance (MEDA) programme. The latest MEDA regulation for 2000–06 was agreed last year but the country allocations for 2001–02 and 2002–03 have yet to be decided. The UK's contribution to the new MEDA programme is estimated to be about 19 per cent.

El Salvador

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much aid the UK Government will send to El Salvador following the recent earthquake; and how this money will be spent. [147371]

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps will be taken to provide additional foreign aid to El Salvador following the recent earthquake in that region; and if she will make a statement. [147582]

Mr. Mullin: The Department for International Development has contributed some £1.3 million for the purchase and distribution of vital emergency shelter, water and sanitation and medical supplies to those affected by the earthquake in El Salvador. This support is being channelled through the UN, Red Cross and a number of NGOs.

The table summarises the funding allocation and the type of assistance provided.

Organisation	*Type of assistance*	*Amount (£)*
UNOCHA	Co-ordination	35,000
PAHO	Health	300,000
IFRC	Shelter, food, health, water and sanitation	100,000
Oxfam	Water and sanitation	300,000
Care	IDP support	138,900
Christian Aid	Emergency shelter	100,000
Plan International	IDP support	50,000
Save the Children UK	Public health, non-food, education	200,000
SCIAF	Emergency shelter	100,000
Total		1,323,900

HIV AIDS (South Africa)

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what *(a)* financial, *(b)* practical

and *(c)* medical assistance she has given to the South African Government in relation to AIDS, since May 1997. [147882]

Mr. Mullin: Since May 1997 the Department for International Development has committed approximately £11 million in support of initiatives to help the South African Government in their efforts to manage the HIV epidemic.

Practical support with this funding has included condom procurement and supply, assistance to the National AIDS/STD Control Programme, and National TB Control Programme and initiatives to provide improved sexual health services particularly among adolescents and mineworkers.

Direct medical assistance has been limited as South Africa has, in general, the necessary skills to tackle the epidemic. However support to the National AIDS/STD Control Programme includes technical assistance from a specialist in genito-urinary medicine.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, pursuant to her answer of 15 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 6W, if she will place in the Library a copy of the KFOR information pack on depleted uranium provided to UNMACC. [147414]

Mr. Mullin: Yes.

Romania

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the value was of grants provided by her Department to United Kingdom non-governmental organisations in Romania in each year since 1996–97. [147209]

Mr. Mullin: The value of grants provided by the Department for International Development to United Kingdom non-governmental organisations in Romania in each year since 1996–97 is:

	£
1996–97	179,130
1997–98	120,806
1998–99	185,346
1999–2000	224,792

Bonded Labour (Indian Sub-continent)

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what projects her Department is supporting in *(a)* India, *(b)* Pakistan and *(c)* Nepal to help end the practice of bonded labour in these countries. [147583]

Mr. Mullin: The Department for International Development is committed to helping to eliminate all abusive labour practices. These include bonded labour, forced labour and child labour. These abusive practices persist where poverty denies people their rights and a decent livelihood. All our programmes are intended to contribute to improving the livelihoods of poor people and helping them realise their rights. We also have projects targeted at particular abusive practices.

In India we are supporting a programme to eliminate child labour, including bonded child labour. Our support to primary education addresses the issue of bonded child labour. The Rural Livelihood Project seeks to enhance livelihoods and reduce indebtedness.

In Pakistan we are working with the Asian Development bank on rural development strategies that include tackling bonded labour. We have commissioned research on access to land for poor people. We continue to support the phasing out of child labour from the football stitching industry.

In Nepal we are supporting a multi-agency programme to ensure food security for the freed Kamaiya (bonded labourers). We also support Action Aid's Poverty Reduction Project which has been working with bonded labourers in the Kailali district, to help them achieve secure livelihoods.

We are supporting Anti-Slavery International to raise awareness of the issue and stimulate action by non-governmental organisation, trade unions, business and Government in all three countries.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Museum Displays (Radioactive Minerals)

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what guidance he has issued to museums displaying radioactive minerals. [147619]

Mr. Alan Howarth: My Department has issued no such guidance. Organisations, including museums, which work with materials which emit ionising radiation are subject to the Ionising Radiations Regulations 1999. As part of this, they may be required to appoint a Radiation Protection Adviser to provide advice and guidance in such matters.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on how many occasions since he became Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport he has met *(a)* Mr. Srichand Hinduja and *(b)* Mr. Gopichand Hinduja; and what was discussed. [147999]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 30 January 2001]*: I met Mr. Srichand Hinduja and Mr. Gopichand Hinduja on 25 February 2000 to discuss their Foundation's Pledge for the Millennium which I had signed and which sought to promote tolerance and understanding between people of different faiths as a means of increasing economic prosperity and ending conflict.

They also asked about the future of the Faith Zone after the closure of the Dome and I informed them that this was a matter for the New Millennium Experience Company.

I have also met them once, unofficially, at a social function.

National Lottery

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what funds are available to the National Lottery Commission for the purposes of meeting obligations to pay compensation to a third party; and if he will make a statement. [148184]

Mr. Chris Smith: Under the National Lottery etc. Act 1993 (as amended), such sums as are necessary to defray any expenditure of the Commission shall be paid out of money provided by Parliament. The Act (as amended) also provides for the Consolidated Fund to be reimbursed from the National Lottery Distribution Fund for the Commission's expenditure, taking into account receipts from the Lottery operator's licence fees.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received from the People's Lottery consortium regarding the costs of bidding for the National Lottery contract; and if he will make a statement. [148182]

Mr. Chris Smith: None.

Free Television Licences

Mr. John Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many families in Hornchurch will benefit from the introduction of free television licences for households with a member aged 75 years or over. [148316]

Janet Anderson: TV Licensing, which administers this concession for the BBC as Licensing Authority, is not able to provide geographical breakdowns of the number of free licences issued. However, estimates based on the 1991 Census indicate that there were approximately 4,500 people aged 75 or over in the Hornchurch constituency.

TREASURY

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Brady: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what period an employer is required to continue making payments of Working Families Tax Credit to a person *(a)* outside the UK and *(b)* taking extended unpaid leave. [147229]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* Guidance on when an employer should stop paying tax credit payments is included in the booklet "WFTC/EG—An employer's guide to tax credits" which is routinely issued by the Inland Revenue to employers. Employers are normally required to pay tax credits until the date the Inland Revenue has told them to stop, unless the employee leaves the employment before that date. This applies provided the employer's payroll arrangements remain in the UK. The employer can stop paying tax credits to an employee as soon as there is a pay period in which no other payroll payments are due to that employee. The Inland Revenue then pays the employee direct for the rest of the award period.

Road User Charge (Foreign Lorries)

Mr. Syms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the Government plan to introduce their proposal for a Britdisk vignette on foreign road hauliers; and if he will make a statement. [147145]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* The Chancellor proposed in the pre-Budget report to introduce a 'vignette' or 'road user charge' for foreign lorries. The proposal, including its practical implementation, is now being developed further.

Red Diesel

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the increase in revenue to the Exchequer were all users of red diesel to be charged at the duty rate charged on *(a)* standard diesel and *(b)* ultra low sulphur diesel. [148149]

Mr. Timms: Rebated gas oil, also known as red diesel, is liable for duty at the rate of 3.13 pence per litre and is used in excepted vehicles and as a heating and industrial fuel. Assuming the current level of use, raising the rate of duty on gas oil to that applying to *(a)* standard diesel and *(b)* ultra low sulphur diesel would raise additional revenues of £3.5 billion and £3.3 billion respectively. In practice, the additional revenue would be significantly less than this because a fifteenfold increase in the duty rate would reduce the demand for rebated gas oil.

Inland Revenue

Mr. Gray: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 18 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 304W, when he *(a)* received and *(b)* approved the Inland Revenue Commissioner's report. [147785]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue annual report was published on 26 January.

I received and approved it prior to publication.

Widow's Bereavement Allowance (Crossland Case)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what grounds the Inland Revenue settled the Crossland case regarding the exclusion of widowers from receiving widow's bereavement allowance; and what legal advice it received regarding a possible outcome if the allowance was challenged under the European Convention on Human Rights. [148208]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government made a friendly settlement with Mr. Crossland, which was published by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. It would not be appropriate to disclose any legal advice the Government received, in accordance with exemption 4 (law enforcement and legal proceedings) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Tonnage Tax

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what specific commitment he has made to review the tonnage tax arrangement within a particular time period. [148577]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government keep all taxes under review, and changes are considered as part of the Budget process.

PRIME MINISTER

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Prime Minister if he will publish the terms of reference of the inquiry by Sir Anthony Hammond QC; and if he will make a statement on the scope of the inquiry. [148148]

The Prime Minister: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave to his hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) on 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 70W, and to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and the hon. Members for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) and for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 166–68W.

Mr. Gale: To ask the Prime Minister if he will give the dates and context of discussions that he has personally had with the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), since May 1997, to discuss matters relating to the Hinduja brothers. [148112]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to his right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) on 31 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 224W.

Mr. DuncanSmith: To ask the Prime Minister which Ministers and officials of Her Majesty's Government have communicated with other Ministers and officials concerning the Hinduja brothers' application for citizenship. [148262]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and the hon. Members for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) and for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 166–68W.

Stem Cell Research

Mr. Amess: To ask the Prime Minister (1) on how many occasions he has met Sir Chris Evans since May 1997; [146861]

(2) what advice he has received from Sir Chris Evans concerning stem cell techniques, cloning and biotechnology. [146862]

The Prime Minister: I have meetings with a wide range of organisations and individuals. As with previous Administrations, it is not my practice to provide details of all such meetings.

Mr. Amess: To ask the Prime Minister for what reasons he has not met religious leaders to discuss their objections to human cloning and the use of embryonic stem cells. [146864]

The Prime Minister: I was unable to agree a meeting owing to existing diary commitments. However, I do meet religious leaders regularly and will continue to do so.

The Government have listened very carefully to representations made on the recommendations of the Donaldson Report and the regulations and respect the views on both sides of the debate of many people on these sensitive issues.

NHS

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Prime Minister what personal responsibility he has for the NHS. [146952]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the statement I made to the House on 27 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 1256–61, in which I set out plans to bring about the most fundamental and far-reaching reforms the National Health Service has seen since its establishment in 1948; and to create a service fit for the 21st century.

CABINET OFFICE

Civil Service Pension Scheme

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what is the state's total liability at 2001 prices to pay civil service pensions, assuming all existing contributors retire and that all pensioners die at the age projected by the scheme's actuaries. [148008]

Marjorie Mowlam: The latest assessment of the capitalised value of liability to pay civil service pensions was undertaken by the Government Actuary's Department in 2000. This showed total liabilities of £54.4 billion for benefits accrued in respect of employment (or further employment) prior to 1 April 1999, broken down as follows:

Value of liabilities	*£ billion*
Current pensions and associated contingent pensions	25.2
Deferred pensions, including contingent pensions for those no longer contributing	7.3
Accrued benefits for existing contributors	21.9
Total	54.4

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Serious Fraud Office

33. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Solicitor-General what recent discussions the Director of the Serious Fraud Office has had with his European Union counterparts; and if he will make a statement. [146809]

The Solicitor-General: The Director of the Serious Fraud Office, Mrs. Rosalind Wright, addressed the Cambridge Symposium on Economic Crime in September 2000. The Director ensures that the SFO makes the fullest possible contribution to the continuous discussions with her European colleagues on improving the response to fraud and mutual legal assistance within the European Union.

The Director and her staff are also in regular contact with member states' specialist financial crime and fraud investigators, magistrates and prosecutors in connection with casework.

Crown Prosecution Service

35. **Mr. Dobbin:** To ask the Solicitor-General what assessment he has made of the effect of changes in funding recently announced for the CPS on the morale of the service. [146811]

The Solicitor-General: As some Members of this House will know, the CPS has secured additional funding for next year of £30.4 million from the new criminal justice reserve. This is in addition to the extra resources allocated to the CPS from the 2000 spending review announced last July. As a result, the CPS's budget next year will be 23 per cent. higher in real terms than now.

Through the CPS's consultation machinery and my own frequent visits to the areas, I know that news of the additional funds has been welcomed by staff. This is hardly surprising. A staff survey, published last May, showed that securing adequate funding and improving resource allocation were among the key development priorities staff identified to improve morale within the service. When the next survey is undertaken I have no doubt that it will show a significant improvement in morale.

With the new funding secured, the CPS has launched a national recruitment campaign for lawyers and intends to follow this with a similar campaign for caseworkers shortly. Additional staff are being recruited across the service, targeted at those areas with the greatest need.

36. **Mr. Brake:** To ask the Solicitor-General how many times in the last 12 months he has initiated a prosecution in a case which the CPS had previously decided not to pursue. [146812]

The Solicitor-General: The relationship between the Attorney-General and the Director of Public Prosecutions is one of superintendence and it is in the context of those arrangements that the accountability of the Crown Prosecution Service for individual case decisions is secured.

If the Crown Prosecution Service tells a suspect or defendant that there will not be a prosecution, the Code for Crown Prosecutors provides that that is normally the end of the matter. There are special reasons why a case might be re-started by the CPS, especially if it is serious: for example, where initially there was insufficient evidence to proceed but further significant evidence comes to light; or in rare cases where a decision not to prosecute was clearly wrong and ought not to stand. The CPS does not keep central records of re-instituted cases.

Crime Victims

37. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the level of victim satisfaction as set out in the recent British crime survey. [146813]

The Solicitor-General: Public confidence in the criminal justice system is vital if the system is to operate effectively. The 2000 British Crime Survey sought to measure the existing level of public confidence so as to provide a base line against which to set targets for improvement. The survey produced disappointing results: although the majority of people are confident that the criminal justice system respects the rights of defendants, only a quarter are confident the system meets the needs of victims of crime.

The Government are committed to improving the level of service provided to victims and are confident that new legislation and new initiatives will do much to increase levels of victim satisfaction. These measures include provisions in the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 to assist vulnerable or intimidated witnesses, the introduction of the Witness Service at all criminal courts, the introduction of victim personal statements and the CPS initiative to inform victims of decisions relating to their case.

Child Abuse

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Solicitor-General how many cases of child abuse were referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions; how many of these proceeded to prosecution; and how many convictions were secured, in each of the last three years. [148150]

The Solicitor-General: The Crown Prosecution Service holds no central records in relation to particular offences. The information is held on individual case files, and could be obtained only by examining every relevant file in each CPS office. The costs of such an exercise would be prohibitive.

However, records kept by the Home Office show that the number of defendants prosecuted and convicted for child abuse offences (which has a wide definition) was as follows:

	Prosecutions	*Convictions*
1997	4,255	3,458
1998	4,938	3,412
1999	5,184	3,519

SOCIAL SECURITY

Fraud

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what savings have been made in his Department over the last 20 years, based on current prices, in *(a)* cash and *(b)* percentage of spending terms from (i) detecting fraud and (ii) providing a more accurate and efficient service administration. [147314]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested on savings from detecting fraud and administration changes over the last 20 years is not available. We have however set in track a number of improvements to administration and tackling fraud that will produce savings in the years to come.

We are reforming the welfare state, to make it fit for the 21st century. After years of under-investment, we are putting in the investment needed to deliver more streamlined services focused on the individual needs of our customers, making better use of technology, and reducing the amount of fraud and error in the system.

We are modernising the way DSS services are delivered. From 2001, we will create a dedicated new service for pensioners and a new working age agency, bringing together the Employment Service and parts of the Benefits Agency dealing with people of working age. Over the next three years we will build new IT systems to deliver a modern, streamlined service to all our clients. From 2003 the normal method of benefit payment will be by Automated Credit Transfer directly into bank accounts, saving an estimated £500 million a year in reduced administration costs. We have also introduced new streamlined arrangements for handling disputes and appeals across the Department.

After years of neglect we are getting to grips with Social Security fraud. We are implementing a strategy to tighten up the system and make sure that from the very first claim, the right benefits are going to the right people at the right time. We have set firm targets for reducing the amount of fraud and error in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance by 25 per cent. by March 2004, rising to 50 per cent. by March 2006. The latest results show that we have already made a reduction in fraud and error from 9 per cent. of the benefit paid to 8.4 per cent.

State Pensions Liability

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the total liability at 2001 prices of the state to pay basic state pensions, assuming that all existing contributors retire and that all pensioners die at the national average age of death. [148009]

Mr. Rooker: Long-term estimates of future basic state pension liabilities are published in table 15.1 of the Government Actuary's Department quinquennial review, "National Insurance Fund: Long Term Financial Estimates". A copy is available in the Library.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the additional cost of paying the Minimum Income Guarantee to *(a)* all eligible Scottish pensioners and *(b)* to all Scottish pensioners, at April 2001 rates. [147559]

Mr. Rooker: There are no additional costs associated with administering the Minimum Income Guarantee to Scottish pensioners.

Means-tested Benefits

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the total cost *(a)* of people receiving a means-tested benefit in Scotland, *(b)* of providing a means-tested benefit for people aged 15 to 25 in Scotland, *(c)* of providing a means-tested benefit for people aged 26 to 40 in Scotland and *(d)* of providing a means-tested benefit for people aged 41 to 65 in Scotland for each year since 1992 in cash terms and at 1999–2000 prices. [145649]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is in the tables.

Amount of means-tested benefits paid to people in Scotland by age

£ million

Year	Total all ages	Aged 15 to 25	Aged 26 to 40	Aged 41 to 65
1992–93	2,434	388	817	664
1993–94	2,576	401	855	737
1994–95	2,713	393	933	765
1995–96	2,806	397	975	816
1996–97	2,758	382	967	808
1997–98	2,983	346	1,056	916
1998–99	2,944	337	1,027	917
1999–2000	2,941	325	999	943

Amount of means-tested benefits paid to people in Scotland by age, at 1999–2000 prices

£ million

Year	Total all ages	Aged 15 to 25	Aged 26 to 40	Aged 41 to 65
1992–93	2,913	464	977	795
1993–94	3,003	467	997	859
1994–95	3,119	451	1,073	879
1995–96	3,136	443	1,089	911
1996–97	2,986	414	1,046	875
1997–98	3,141	364	1,112	964
1998–99	3,013	345	1,051	939
1999–2000	2,941	325	999	943

Notes:

1. 'Means-tested benefits' are defined as Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance (Income Based), Family Credit, Disability Working Allowance, Housing Benefit, Community Charge Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest million.
3. Totals for all ages include recipients over age 65 and do not sum.
4. Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance (Income Based), Family Credit, Housing Benefit, Community Charge Benefit and Council Tax Benefit estimates are based on caseload samples taken in May in each of the years and are subject to a degree of sampling error. Disability Working Allowance figures are based on a 100 per cent. scan of all Disability Working Allowance claimants.
5. Jobseeker's Allowance (Income Based) replaced Income Support for the unemployed from October 1996.
6. Community Charge Benefit was replaced by Council Tax Benefit from April 1993.
7. Family Credit was replaced by Working Families Tax Credit from October 1999.

8. Disability Working Allowance was replaced by Working Families Tax Credit from October 1999.
9. Housing Benefit and Council Tax benefit figures include all local authority spending on benefit payments in addition to the money funded directly from Central Government.
10. The latest GDP deflator was used in the calculation of the amounts of benefits in real terms.
Sources:
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, May 1992 to May 1999.
Jobseeker's Allowance Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, May 1997 to May 1999.
Family Credit 5 per cent. sample of awards.
Housing Benefit Management Information System, annual 1 per cent. sample inquiries, May 1992 to May 1999.
Disability Working Allowance 100 per cent. count of claims.
Departmental Report 2000.
Pre-Budget Report 2000.

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in Scotland were in receipt of means-tested benefit in Scotland, *(a)* aged 15 to 25, *(b)* aged 26 to 40, *(c)* aged 41 to 65 and *(d)* in total for each year since 1992. [145650]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Number of means-tested benefits recipients by age of claimant in Scotland, 1992–99

Thousand

Year	Total all ages	Aged 15 to 25	Aged 26 to 40	Aged 41 to 65
1992	930	130	210	240
1993	900	130	220	240
1994	890	120	220	240
1995	890	120	230	240
1996	890	120	230	250
1997	860	100	230	250
1998	840	90	230	250
1999	830	90	220	250

Notes:
1. 'Means-tested benefits' are defined as Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance (Income Based), Family Credit, Disability Working Allowance, Housing Benefit, Community Charge Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest ten thousand.
3. Recipients of more than one benefit have been counted only once.
4. Figures do not include dependent members of a claimant's family.
5. Totals for all ages include recipients over age 65 and do not sum.
6. Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance (Income Based), Family Credit, Housing Benefit, Community Charge Benefit and Council Tax Benefit estimates are based on caseload samples taken in May in each of the years and are subject to a degree of sampling error. Disability Working Allowance figures are based on a 100 per cent. scan of all Disability Working Allowance claimants.
7. Jobseekers Allowance (Income Based) replaced Income Support for the unemployed from October 1996.
8. Community Charge Benefit was replaced by Council Tax Benefit from April 1993.
9. Family Credit was replaced by Working Families Tax Credit from October 1999.
10. Disability Working Allowance was replaced by Working Families Tax Credit from October 1999.
Sources:
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, May 1992 to May 1999.
Jobseekers Allowance Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, May 1997 to May 1999.
Family Credit 5 per cent. sample of awards.
Housing Benefit Management Information System, Annual 1 per cent. sample enquiries, May 1992 to May 1999.
Disability Working Allowance 100 per cent. count of claims.

Circulars and Guidelines (Housing/Council Tax Benefits)

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the adjudication and operations circulars and guidelines on *(a)* Housing Benefit and *(b)* Council Tax Benefit that have been issued to local authorities since May 1997; and place copies of these in the Library. [146343]

Angela Eagle: As well as giving local authorities advance notice about changes in the operation of the scheme, the circulars provide them with routine information: for example, advising them of changes to DSS personnel contact phone numbers, or notifying them of uprating changes.

A list of the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit circulars issued since May 1997 has been placed in the Library. Copies of these circulars are already in the Library.

Council Tax Benefit Regulations

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress has been made in his review of Council Tax Benefit regulations; and if he will make a statement. [147127]

Angela Eagle: In March 1999, we commissioned independent researchers to monitor the effects of the Council Tax Benefit restrictions introduced in April 1998. The report has now been finalised. However, the data obtained for this project proved to be of variable quality and therefore the findings are not generally reliable. Copies of the report will be placed in the Library in February and will be available on request.

We are continuing to keep the current Council Tax Benefit restrictions under review.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if a client of the Child Support Agency may request the agency to close his case prior to the introduction of the new scheme with the intention of re-applying after April 2002. [146600]

Angela Eagle: The Child Support Agency may close a child support case when asked to do so by the person who originally made the application, provided that the parent with care is not in receipt of Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance.

The new child support scheme will start first for new cases from April 2002. Existing cases will be transferred at a later date once we are sure that the new scheme is working well and changes in the levels of assessment will be phased in.

If an existing case is closed before conversion to the new scheme, any fresh application made within 13 weeks will lead to an old scheme maintenance assessment, followed by conversion to the new scheme on the same date as other existing assessments. It would not be right for existing clients to be able to manipulate the rules for their own advantage by going off the books for short periods.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what increase in resources the CSA plans for the Independent Case Examiner; [147004]

(2) what are the processing times by the Independent Case Examiner for the CSA for cases referred *(a)* by a Member of Parliament and *(b)* by members of the public; [147005]

(3) how many CSA cases have been referred to the Independent Case Examiner for each year since its establishment; what was the annual funding for the ICE since its inception; how many outstanding cases are with the ICE; and what is the waiting time for ICE referred cases to be processed. [146924]

Angela Eagle: The current clearance time for cases referred to the Independent Case Examiner by Members of Parliament and members of the public is 29 weeks. This is an improvement on the financial year 1999–2000 when clearance took 33.7 weeks on average. Additional funding was allocated in September 2000 for the recruitment of seven extra staff. The office of the Independent Case Examiner is currently in the process of recruiting the extra staff, which will result in a 17 per cent. increase in investigative resources.

The office of the Independent Case Examiner opened in April 1997. There are currently 227 cases awaiting investigation. Cases referred currently wait around 11 weeks for an investigation to begin.

Annual funding figures and the number of complaints received

Financial year	*Complaints received*	*Annual funding (£)*
1997–98	1,087	[1]1,025,675
1998–99	1,226	[1]920,960
1999–2000	1,536	[1]1,040,811
2000–01 (to date)	1,195	[1]1,176,040

[1] Actual costs

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the average waiting time is for clients awaiting investigations by the Independent Case Examiner's Office looking at the work of the CSA; and if he will make a statement. [146506]

Angela Eagle: Cases referred to the Independent Case Examiner currently wait around 11 weeks for investigation to begin. Average clearance times are currently around 29 weeks overall. Additional funding was allocated in September 2000, representing a 17 per cent. increase in investigative resources.

Widow's Bereavement Allowance

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make Widow's Bereavement Allowance available to widowers. [148209]

Angela Eagle: We are introducing bereavement benefits in April which will be available to both men and women equally for the first time. There will be a new weekly benefit for widowed parents who satisfy the qualifying conditions and a new lump sum bereavement payment of £2,000—double the existing widow's payment.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Livestock Farmers

10. **Mr. Baldry:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what meetings he has held with livestock farmers' representatives in the last month. [146785]

Mr. Nick Brown: I last met livestock farmers' representatives only yesterday at the MLC Outlook Conference. I met the President of the NFU on 30 January, and livestock farmers in Cirencester, Kirton, Corby, Norfolk, Great Yarmouth and Braintree on 6, 18, 19, 23 and 24 January respectively.

Sugar Producers (Everything but Arms Initiative)

11. **Mr. Peter Bradley:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the implications of the everything but arms initiative for British sugar producers and processors. [146786]

Ms Quin: The Commission's proposal would progressively reduce duties on imports of sugar from the least developed countries and the principle of access for LDC's is one which the Government support (which, depending on the volume of imports the LDCs were able to supply, could require the EU to respond by taking action to reduce existing cane or beet supplies.) However, the proposal also contains a safeguard clause to guard against any large-scale disruptive increase in imports. We are pressing for the implications of the LDC proposal to be fully examined in the context of current discussions on the future shape of the EU sugar regime.

Fish Stocks

12. **Mr. Andrew George:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with United Kingdom fishing industry representatives on the level of fish stocks. [146787]

Mr. Morley: Prior to the December Fisheries Council, I met with the UK fishing industry to discuss the scientific advice on the state of fish stocks as well as prospects for the 2001 TACs and quota package. I also saw the UK industry on 10 January to discuss their ideas about the North Sea cod and Northern hake recovery plans.

BSE

13. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he has taken to ensure that scientific advice to Ministers relating to BSE is placed in the public domain. [146788]

Ms Quin: Under this Government, several steps have been taken to ensure that scientific advice on BSE is put into the public domain, including the establishment of the Food Standards Agency and greater openness for the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee. There are no restrictions on the publication of scientific advice to Ministers on BSE risks.

26. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what contingency plans he has made in the event of research showing that the BSE causative agent crosses further species barriers. [146802]

Ms Quin: As part of the Government's approach to risk management, officials from a number of Departments have been preparing a contingency plan in case in the future BSE is found to be occurring naturally in sheep. I shall want to discuss the draft plan, when it is ready, with those who would be involved in its implementation. It will be a public document.

EU Enlargement

14. **Mr. Best:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with his counterparts in central and eastern Europe concerning the effect of enlargement of the European Union on agriculture in the United Kingdom. [146789]

Ms Quin: Over the past 12 months, my Ministerial colleagues and I have held discussions with our counterparts from Poland, Hungary, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Latvia, Bulgaria and Romania. Further meetings are planned.

Animal Welfare

15. **Mr. McCabe:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the priorities are of his Department's programme of research and development for animal welfare. [146790]

Mr. Morley: MAFF's research on animal welfare has funding up to £3.7 million in the current year. Its aim is to support our objective of ensuring farmed animals and fish are protected by high welfare standards and do not suffer pain or distress.

We have 45 projects in three programmes covering:

On-farm welfare

Welfare during handling and transport

Welfare at slaughter.

All receive equal priority.

21. **Mr. Hilary Benn:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received concerning animal welfare in advance of the next round of World Trade Organisation negotiations. [146797]

Mr. Morley: I have received a number of representations on this subject, and have supported the Commission's proposal to the WTO that animal welfare issues be considered in trade liberalisation negotiations.

Scientific Advisory Committees

16. **Mr. Geraint Davies:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he has taken to promote openness and transparency in his Ministry's scientific advisory committees. [146791]

Ms Quin: All chairmen and members of MAFF scientific advisory committees which are also non-departmental public bodies are appointed in accordance with the Guidance of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. In addition, we have taken a number of steps to increase openness, including holding open sessions, publishing agendas and minutes of meetings and issuing public reports.

Farm Woodland Schemes

17. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many farmers participate in farm woodland schemes. [146793]

Mr. Morley: Between 1988 and end 2000, there were 8,225 approved applications under the Farm Woodland Premium Scheme and/or its predecessor the Farm Woodland Scheme. Individuals may make more than one application.

Food Supply Chain

18. **Mr. Rammell:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to improve co-operation in the agri-food chain. [146794]

Ms Quin: Government and industry are working in a number of ways to promote improved levels of co-operation and working together in the food chain. For instance, some £5 million of grant aid has been allocated to projects under the Agriculture Development Scheme and many of these are being taken forward by supply chain partnerships.

23. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with *(a)* the Department of Trade and Industry, *(b)* supermarkets and *(c)* growers on proposed codes of practice defining their respective relationships. [146799]

Ms Quin: The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has asked the Director General of Fair Trading to seek the agreement of the major supermarkets to a binding Code of Practice that addresses the specific concerns identified by the Competition Commission in its recent report on the supply of groceries from multiple stores. Officials have been kept informed of progress on the drafting of the Code by the Office of Fair Trading and have maintained contact with the DTI. We have received a number of representations about the proposed Code from individual supermarket companies and representatives of suppliers.

Farm Diversification

19. **Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to help farm businesses seeking to diversify. [146795]

Mr. Morley: The England Rural Development Programme supports farm diversification through the £152 million Rural Enterprise Scheme (RES), Processing and Marketing Grants, the Vocational Training Scheme and tree-planting schemes. MAFF is producing a free guide on farm diversification and aims to make available free planning advice to RES applicants for farm diversification. The Rural White Paper contains a number of extra initiatives on planning to help diversification and we have consulted on providing time-limited rate relief for farmers wishing to diversify into non-farming activities.

Dairy Market

20. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he had with British Creameries before it went into receivership concerning the state of the milk and cheese market. [146796]

Ms Quin: No such discussions took place with British Creameries.

Horticulture

22. **Mr. Pollard:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he has taken to reduce the level of regulation on the horticulture sector. [146798]

Ms Quin: As part of the Red Tape reviews initiated in September 1999, we have examined those areas of concern identified by the industry and secured changes in EU provisions and also simplified our own procedures. On the former, we have successfully argued in Brussels that non-grower members should be able to become full members of Producer Organisation (PO) Boards; and for a fixed level of aid to be paid under the EU scheme, as requested by the UK industry. On the latter, improvements have been made to the forms and explanatory material, issued by this Department, for producer organisations.

Farm Incomes (Blaby)

24. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will visit farmers in Blaby to discuss farm incomes. [146800]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Minister has no immediate plans to visit Blaby. However my right hon. Friend and I will be meeting many farmers at the Annual General Meeting of the National Farmers Union on 7 February and I am sure that the issue of farm incomes will be discussed.

Local Authority Tenanted Farms

25. **Mr. Kidney:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the future viability of local authorities' tenanted farms. [146801]

Ms Quin: Local authorities' tenanted farms are important in providing a first rung on the farming ladder. Day-to-day management of these estates is the responsibility of individual smallholdings authorities. I welcome the initiative shown by authorities which pursue active and imaginative policies to maintain their estates' viability.

Chicken Welfare

27. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proportion of eggs are produced by free range hens; and what steps the Government are taking to promote higher welfare standards for chickens kept to produce eggs. [146803]

Mr. Morley: Some 17 per cent. of egg production in the UK comes from free range systems.

Regulations are currently being drafted to implement EU Directive 99/74/EC which sets down improved welfare standards for laying hens in all production systems.

Agricultural Support

Paddy Ashdown: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his estimate is of the total financial support for *(a)* United Kingdom and *(b)* English agriculture (i) directly and (ii) indirectly in each year since 1990–91; and if he will make a statement. [145954]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* Agricultural producers receive financial support in two ways: from consumers, as a result of the maintenance of market prices for some commodities at levels above those obtaining on world markets; and from taxpayers, in the form of direct receipts from the Exchequer.

The value of producer support receipts from consumers can only be estimated and is dependent upon several assumptions, including the level of world prices which would have obtained in the absence of the CAP. An estimate by research analysis of the value of market support received by producers and direct producer receipts from the Exchequer for the year 1997–98 has been published in a Ministry report "Reducing Farm Subsidies; Economic Adjustment in Rural Areas", which can be found on the Ministry website.

Total support received by UK producers from both of these sources was estimated to be a little under £6 billion in that year. A copy of the relevant table is to be found at Table 2. Some information concerning support receipts by English producers is also given.

Exchequer expenditure on UK agriculture for the years 1990–91 to 1999–2000 is also given. Expenditure peaked in 1996–97 as a result of the MacSharry reforms of the CAP—which shifted the burden of support from consumers to taxpayers—and the measures put in place in respect of BSE. Not all of these expenditures will have benefited farmers directly: for example, some expenditures relating to the cost of storing surplus produce are not a direct receipt by producers. Corresponding figures are not available in England.

Table 2: Estimated CAP support to UK agriculture by sector, 1997–98

£ million

	Cereals		*Sugar beet*	*Fruit and vegetables*	*Oilseeds*	*Proteins*	*Linseed*	*Set aside and AAPS simplified*
Arable	*Total*	*of which price support*	*Price support*	*Price support*	*Direct aid*	*Direct aid*	*Direct aid*	*Direct aid*
England	905	230	140	145	140	70	35	115
Wales	10	5	0	1	1	0	0	5
Scotland	138	42	0	13	23	1	0	21
Northern Ireland	7	4	0	3	0	0	0	6
United Kingdom	1,060	281	140	160	165	70	35	145
Percentage price support	26	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Value of output, 1997	2,913	—	300	1,153	406	129	51	—
Percentage of 1997 UK output	36	—	47	14	41	53	67	—

£ million

Livestock	Beef: Total	Beef: of which price support	Sheep: Total	Sheep: of which Price support	Dairy: Price support	Poultry[1]: Price support	Grand total	Price support as a percentage of total support
England[2]	625	150	215	85	1,070	165	3,625	53
Wales	138	34	148	44	153	16	473	52
Scotland	249	56	124	40	125	22	715	40
Northern Ireland	223	55	40	13	154	20	453	53
United Kingdom	1,240	295	525	180	1,505	220	5,270	53
Percentage price support	24	—	35	—	—	—	—	—
Value of output, 1997	2,269	—	1,199	—	3,160	1,482	18,094	—
Percentage of 1997 UK output	55	—	44	—	47	15	29	—
Total UK CAP commodity support (£ billion)								5.27
Other national and structural spending (£ billion)								0.61
Total support received by UK farmers (£ billion)								5.88
As a proportion of gross output (percentage)								32

[1] Price support estimated by multiplying production volumes by the estimated UK-world price gaps.
[2] English and UK figures rounded to the nearest £5 million. Figures may not add up due to rounding.
[3] Price support for other intensive livestock, net of excess feed costs arising from cereals market support, is assumed to equal zero.
Notes:
1. Direct payments include: AAPS; for beef—BSPS, SCPS, OTMS and de-seasonalisation premium (NI only), but excluding BSE-emergency measures paid in 1997; for sheep—SAPS; plus HLCAs for beef and sheep (worth £0.1 billion). Other national and structural funding is not included in the detailed figures.
2. Ornamentals and potatoes are assumed to receive no direct or market support.
Source:
MAFF, Economic and Statistics Group, August 1999

Table 1: UK public expenditure under the CAP and on national grants and subsidies

Year (April-March)	£ million
1990–91	1,910
1991–92	1,977
1992–93	2,028
1993–94	2,905
1994–95	2,512
1995–96	2,897
1996–97	4,318
1997–98	3,583
1998–99	3,482
1999–2000[1]	3,172

[1] Forecast
Source:
Agriculture in the United Kingdom

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish details of recipients of agricultural support in excess of £500,000 per annum. [147543]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* The Code of Practice on Access to Government Information defines the categories of information which are exempt from the commitments to provide information. Part II indent 12 (Privacy of an Individual) exempts disclosure to a third party of personal information which could facilitate a unwarranted invasion of privacy.

Additionally, Article 9 of Council Regulation (EC) No. 3508/92 of 27 November 1992 establishing an integrated administration and control system for certain Community aid schemes, states that

"member states shall take the measures necessary to ensure protection of the data collected".

This is reinforced by indent 15 (Statutory and other restrictions) of the Code of Practice which indicates exemption where such cases are prohibited under European Community law.

It is therefore not appropriate to publish such details of recipients of agricultural support for reasons of confidentiality.

Badger Culling

28. **Mr. David Taylor:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress reports he has recently received in relation to the selective culling programme for badgers. [146804]

Ms Quin: Ten areas have been enrolled in the badger culling trial and initial culling has been carried out in seven of these, in line with the timetable set down by the Independent Scientific Group (ISG) on cattle TB. The ISG has advised that the trial is on course to produce results by the end of 2004 and possibly earlier.

Rural Development Funding

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food at what rate rural development funding obtained though the modulation scheme will be matched by Government funding. [147852]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* The Spending Review 2000 plans include match funding of modulation receipts at a rate of 100 per cent.

Agricultural and Food Imports

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the volume of (1) food imports into the United Kingdom; [147853]

(2) agricultural imports into the United Kingdom. [147854]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* The tables show summaries of the volume and value of agricultural and food imports into the UK in 1999, as recorded by the Overseas Trade Statistics. More detailed information on processed and unprocessed imports,

covering the period 1988 to 2000, is available on the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food website at: http://www.maff.gov.uk/esg/excel/webindig.xls.

Livestock imports in 1999

	Number (000 head)	*Value (£ million)*
Cattle	3.0	2.3
Sheep and goats	123.4	4.5
Pigs	180.3	10.0
Poultry, including chicks	9,134.6	5.5

Agricultural and food imports in 1999

	Quantity (000 Tonnes)	*Value (£ million)*
Unprocessed		
Eggs	16.0	11.5
Fish: live, fresh or chilled	82.2	141.7
Cereals, unmilled	2,625.8	286.8
Fruit and vegetables: fresh, chilled or frozen	3,974.3	2,364.7
Honey	23.2	16.1
Cocoa and coffee	351.0	341.1
Animal feedingstuffs	141.8	9.7
Oil seeds and oleaginous fruits	1,149.2	199.4
Total unprocessed	8,363.5	3,371.1
Processed		
Meat and meat products	1,298.5	2,194.9
Dairy products and egg products	760.7	1,175.9
Fish, frozen or prepared	469.0	1,148.5
Cereals and bakery products	1,145.5	847.9
Fruit and vegetables, processed or preserved	2,949.7	1,768.6
Sugar and sugar confectionery	2,258.6	725.2
Cocoa and chocolate, coffee, tea and spices	472.3	893.6
Animal feedingstuffs	4,624.4	639.9
Cooked and prepared foods, sauces	578.4	963.5
Alcoholic drinks	2,427.4	2,854.5
Animal oils and fats	1,570.9	617.9
Total processed	18,555.3	13,830.3
Total imports	26,918.8	17,201.4

Livestock Imports (France)

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on livestock imports from France. [147851]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* The Chief Veterinary Officer's report for 1999 shows that livestock imports from France during 1999 were as follows:

		Number
Cattle	Breeding	175
Cattle	Fattening	1,458
Sheep	Breeding	86
Sheep	Fattening	184

The importation of all these animals is subject to harmonised Community rules.

Public Interest Immunity Certificates

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many public interest immunity certificates *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers of State, *(c)* junior Ministers and *(d)* civil servants in his Department have signed in each calendar year from 30 May 1997 [147733]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* There have been no public interest immunity certificates issued from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in respect of civil or criminal litigation from 30 May 1997.

Pet Travel Scheme

Ms Dari Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress is being made in the extension of the Pet Travel Scheme to rabies-free islands. [146776]

Ms Quin: The Pet Travel Scheme was extended from 31 January to include cats and dogs from 28 rabies-free islands, including Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Cyprus. Over 14,500 cats and dogs have now successfully entered the UK using the scheme since it was launched last February.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Members of Parliament (General Election Statistics)

Mr. Ashton: To ask the President of the Council how many hon. Members left the House through *(a)* retirement and *(b)* losing their seats in (i)1983, (ii) 1987, (iii) 1992 and (iv) 1997. [148264]

Mrs. Beckett: This information requested is not held centrally.

However, unofficial publications provide the following information:

	Stood down	*Defeated*
1983	77	63
1987	87	41
1992	79	60
1997	117	132

NORTHERN IRELAND

Speeding Fines

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much was collected in fixed-penalty speeding fines on Northern Ireland's *(a)* M1 and M2 motorways, *(b)* urban non-motorway roads and *(c)* rural non-motorway roads for each year since 1996. [144693]

Mr. Lock: I have been asked to reply.

Information detailing the amounts collected in fixed-penalty speeding fines in Northern Ireland since 1996 by category or road is not held centrally.

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much money was collected in speeding fines in Northern Ireland in the years 1996 to 2000; and how and where this money was spent. [144685]

Mr. Lock: I have been asked to reply.

Information detailing how much money was collected in speeding fines in Northern Ireland during the years 1996 to 2000 is not held centrally. Such fines are paid over directly to HM Treasury's Consolidated Fund.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Entertainment Expenses

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to the answers of 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 71W, if she will publish the full list of invitees to the party at Haymarket House on 22 September 1999 for the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz); and if the Lord Chancellor spoke at that function to welcome guests. [148265]

Jane Kennedy: As I have already made clear, the reception was hosted by The Hinduja Foundation who determined the invitation list, which was cross-party. The Lord Chancellor spoke briefly at the function.

Asylum Appeals

Mrs. Fitzsimons: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what provision the Government are making for the general public, asylum seekers and their representatives to access information about the asylum appeals system. [148633]

Jane Kennedy: The Immigration Appellate Authority is today launching a website www.iaa.gov.uk. The site features up-to-date information on the organisation, the two judicial tiers it administers and the appeal procedures that apply. The IAA website will have links to the Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate and Community Legal Service sites www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk and www.justask.org.uk. The IAA website will provide a useful entry point to gain information on the process of applying for asylum.

A key feature of the IAA site is the provision of detailed daily court lists for all the Authority's hearing centres—allowing parties involved in appeals access to listing information as early as possible. Supporting the lists with on-line access to leaflets, guidance and travel maps, the website provides asylum seekers and their representatives with easily obtained practical information.

Judges (Political Neutrality)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what guidance he issues to judges on maintaining a politically neutral stance in public in respect of bills before Parliament. [147474]

Mr. Lock: The current guidance given to judges on appointment advises them against engagement in any capacity which might undermine, or be reasonably thought to undermine, their judicial independence or impartiality. A statement about the position of the Lords of Appeal in Ordinary was made by the Senior Law Lord in another place on 22 June 2000, *Official Report, House of Lords*, columns 419–20, setting out the general principles on the participation of the Lords of Appeal in the business of the House of Lords.

Fines (Greater Manchester)

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department for the last 12 month period for which figures are available, what the total value was of fines imposed by each magistrates court in Greater Manchester; what percentage was collected in each case; and how much each court has written off as uncollectable. [147947]

Jane Kennedy: The information is in the table, with footnotes.

Fines etc. in Greater Manchester, October 1999 to September 2000

£

	New amount owed	*Amount paid*	*Percentage paid*	*Net amount written off*	*Percentage written off*
Manchester	7,149,567	3,371,738	47.2	2,115,156	29.6
North and West Manchester	11,120,286	6,457,388	58.1	2,322,087	20.9
Oldham	1,514,404	895,342	59.1	519,254	34.3
Stockport	2,225,873	1,052,881	47.3	480,070	21.6
Tameside	1,632,282	816,770	50.0	320,291	19.6
Trafford	1,874,208	984,091	52.5	325,158	17.3
Greater Manchester total	25,516,620	13,578,210	53.2	6,082,016	23.8
England and Wales total	391,750,916	224,194,079	57.2	67,628,658	17.3

Notes:

1. New amount owed includes fines, fee orders, costs orders, compensation and confiscation orders, imposed either by magistrates, or by Crown court judges and transferred to magistrates courts for enforcement
2. Debt analysis data are collected centrally from Magistrates Courts Committee areas. They do not distinguish between individual courts in the area. North and West Manchester MCC is responsible for administration in Bury, Wigan, Rochdale, Middleton, Leigh, Salford and Bolton magistrates courts.
3. Amounts paid and written off may relate to amounts imposed before the current 12 month period.
4. The net amount written off includes amounts written back.

Source:

LCD Management Information System

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 2 February 2001

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

BSE

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the EU's position regarding the control of BSE, with particular reference to the export of processed meat. [146077]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 18 January 2001]:* Under Commission Regulation 2777/2000 no beef from animals over 30 months old may be sold for human consumption unless it has been tested for BSE with a negative result, and specified risk material has to be removed from all beef going into the food chain.

In addition, the European Community has imposed controls on the export of processed bovine meat from the United Kingdom and from Portugal.

Export from the UK may take place only in accordance with Council Decision 98/256/EC, which sets out emergency measures to protect against BSE. No plants are approved to export processed beef of UK origin. A list of plants approved to export processed beef of foreign origin is available on the MAFF website at http//:www.maff.gov.uk/animalh/int-trade/default.htm.

Commission Decision 98/653/EC (as amended) prohibits the export of processed beef from Portugal.

Farmers' Income

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will estimate the number of farmers in the UK with an annual income of *(a)* £25,000 or less, *(b)* £25,000 to £50,000, *(c)* £50,000 to £100,000 and *(d)* over £100,000. [146152]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* The data for the precise income bands requested are not readily available but similar information is given in the table.

Distribution of farmers' incomes assessed for tax: 1998–99
United Kingdom

Total income assessed for tax [1]	*Number of farmers* [2]
Less than £20,000	265,000
£20,000 to £30,000	29,000
£30,000 to £50,000	21,000
£50,000 to £100,000	8,000
£100,000 and over	5,000
Total	328,000

[1] Income from sources other than agriculture is also included
[2] Individuals whose self-employment income from agriculture forms the major part of their self-employment income
Source:
Inland Revenue, Survey of Personal Incomes

Fishmeal

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food from which bodies the Government have sought advice on the scientific justification for a ban in the United Kingdom on the use of fishmeal in animal feed. [146404]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* The list of organisations and individuals consulted by the Ministry on the implementation of the feed ban, including fishmeal, can be found on the BSE internet site http://www.maff.gov.uk/animalh/bse/index.html.

Laying Hens

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans his Department has to fund research into the enriched cage system for laying hens; and if he will make a statement. [148110]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* My Department has commissioned research into the enriched cage system for laying hens. We need to be sure that our thinking on the welfare outcome of enriched cages and our position when reviewing Directive 1999/74/EC in 2005 is based on robust science.

New Forest Ponies

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his policy is on the welfare and protection of New Forest ponies. [148325]

Mr. Morley: Policy towards the welfare and protection of New Forest ponies is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department using powers from the Protection of Animals Acts 1911–88. My responsibility is limited to welfare at markets including horse sales, during transport and at slaughter. Within my responsibility, I seek to ensure that the ponies are treated so as to avoid any suffering.

Flood Defences

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent representations he has received on the powers of the Environment Agency as they relate to the responsibilities of local authorities for flood defence. [148279]

Mr. Morley: I am aware of the recommendation in paragraph 12 of the Third Report, Session 2000–01, of the Agriculture Committee. While no such representations have been made, the Environment Agency has made me aware of difficulties whereby over 119 local authorities are either unwilling or unable to inspect flood defences and critical ordinary watercourses.

While flood and coastal defence legislation is permissive, the Government do look to local authorities and others to take flood defence responsibilities seriously, recognising the potential threat to human life and the damage and distress that flooding can cause. I therefore agreed with the Local Government Association that such inspections would take place, and the requirement appears in the High Level Targets for the flood and coastal defence operating authorities. These targets took effect from April 2000 and were published alongside an

elaboration of the Environment Agency general flood defence supervisory duty, which sets out the arrangements for inspection in more detail.

I have asked the Agency for details of the local authorities who will not be undertaking inspections, together with details of the significance of the defences and watercourses in their areas. I shall then consider taking the matter up with the Local Government Association.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Line of Route

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee when the Committee will make the results of the summer re-opening of the Line of Route available to the House. [148717]

Mrs. Roe: I am pleased to advise the hon. Member that the Committee has now concluded its review of the summer re-opening and has agreed its Report to the House. The Report, "The Trial Summer Re-opening of the Line of Route" (HC (2000–01) 213) will be published at 11.00 am on Thursday 8 February; copies will be available to hon. Members, from this time, in the Vote Office.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

School Teachers' Pay

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on school teachers' pay and conditions. [148715]

Mr. Blunkett: The report of the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) on teachers' pay in England and Wales in 2001–02 has been published today and copies placed in the Library. I will now consult with the teacher employers and unions on my proposals in response to the recommendations. The key proposals are set out. I welcome the report which enables the Government to press on with their drive to raise the status and quality of the teaching profession and its attractiveness as a career to good graduates.

The Government propose to accept the STRB's recommendations that with effect from 1 April 2000:

All teachers will receive a basic pay increase of 3.7 per cent., with a larger 5.9 per cent. increase at the lower end of the main pay scale to establish a minimum starting salary for a new entrant with a good honours degree of £17,001, with some consequential adjustment of other points on the scale.

The rates of London area allowances (other than the discretionary Inner London area supplement) should be increased by 30 per cent. to the following values: Inner London £3,000; Outer London £1,974; and Fringe £765.

A new fifth recruitment and retention allowance should be created of £5,085; red tape is being cut so that in future all schools will be able to use whichever of the five allowances they wish, and schools in challenging circumstances will be able to pay the allowances as a cumulative bonus to a teacher who remains in post for up to three years.

A general provision to allow employers to offer recruitment incentives such as housing assistance should be introduced.

In respect of the mark time safeguarding arrangements for teachers assimilating to the new pay structure, the maximum offset on any one occasion against increases in salary, other than the threshold uplift, will be reduced from £500 to £250. We intend to make available in time for the 1 April pay calculations a revised version of the software sent to schools and LEAs last year to enable them to calculate teachers' pay.

Salaries are rising significantly. A newly qualified teacher starting in Inner London will earn £20,000, 21 per cent. more than in 1997 and 9 per cent. more than in April last year. A good experienced classroom teacher outside London who has passed the performance threshold will earn almost £27,000, 25 per cent. more than in 1997 and £3,000 (or 12 per cent.) more than in April last year. And the pay structure will contain more flexibility for schools to reward good performers and for schools in challenging circumstances to attract and retain good teachers.

In addition the assessment for Advanced Skills Teachers will be resumed later this spring on the basis that selection standards and procedures should be those that were being used up to July 2000; and that with effect from 1 January 2002, applicants for AST assessment must first have crossed the performance threshold for classroom teachers. ASTs should have a duty to undertake 'outreach' and 'inreach' work and we will consult with interested parties on the detail.

In recognition of the additional Bank Holiday which has been announced for June 2002 to commemorate Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's Golden Jubilee, the 190 days in the school year on which teachers must be available for work and may be required to teach pupils will be reduced by one day in 2001–02. There will be consequential reduction in the overall total of 1,265 hours allocated over 195 days for which the teacher must be available for work.

The criterion for progression above the starting point of the upper pay scale will be substantial and sustained performance and contribution to the school as a teacher. Teachers who move up the upper pay scale should be performing above the level of the threshold. The Department will offer guidance on how the criterion will apply, but decisions will be for governing bodies to take, advised by the head. My Department is planning to provide a substantial amount of funding to support performance awards in England. Funding in Wales is provided by the National Assembly through the revenue support grant.

New awards of the 5th management allowance will be discouraged, pending further examination by the STRB of whether it should be retained in the longer term.

Special Educational Needs Allowance 1 should be awarded on a mandatory basis to teachers in special schools; teachers of children who are hearing-impaired or visually-impaired; and teachers appointed to Special Educational Needs units in mainstream schools. The award of SEN allowance 1 in other mainstream schools should be on a discretionary basis. The award of SEN allowance 2 should continue to be on a discretionary basis, as at present.

As many schools are still working on the development of their leadership group within the new structure, there will continue to be flexibility to adjust heads' Individual School Ranges (ISRs) and salary ranges for other members of the leadership group and Advanced Skills Teachers.

The STRB has acknowledged concerns about teachers' workload. Teaching is a challenging profession. While I make no apology for the programme we introduced to improve standards—the results of which are now becoming evident—I have already acted to cut external Government bureaucracy by, for example, reducing my Department's mailings to schools; radically simplifying the Standards Fund with an end to bidding and claiming; and increasing the use of ICT. We have also been dealing with the causes of poor morale in the mid-90s by increasing resources substantially for buildings, books and computers.

I agree with the STRB that the way forward lies not in crude limits on the hours teachers spend at work or in the classroom, which would be unworkable and would not go to the core of the problem, but in action to identify clearly the problems of excessive workload and to tackle them. We are taking forward the work the STRB has recommended to identify good practice and stimulate change. In particular, we will review the implementation of my Department's 1998 guidance to schools on cutting bureaucracy, and will continue to follow through the current drive to reduce external paperwork going to schools. The figures I announced last December show that about 40 per cent. fewer documents were sent to primary schools last term, and 66 per cent. fewer to secondary schools.

We will consult with interested parties on the detailed processes, criteria and standards for the "fast track" scheme. This scheme operates in England only; the National Assembly for Wales is considering the position in Wales.

The answer applies to England and Wales in relation to teachers' pay and conditions and the School Teachers' Review Body. References to other issues apply in England only.

Delegated Schools Budgets

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what guidance he has issued to local education authorities for the phasing out of additional revenue payments to former grant-maintained schools; [148379]

(2) over what period local education authorities will move to the delegation of 90 per cent. of their total education budget where the local education authority is delegating less than this amount; [148381]

(3) what guidance he has given to local education authorities in using the requirement for delegated schools budget to move 90 per cent. of the total local education authority budget to phase out the additional payments made to former grant-maintained schools; [148380]

(4) what arrangements have been made to phase out the additional revenue payments made to former grant-maintained schools. [148274]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has called on all local education authorities to delegate at least 85 per cent. of their local schools budgets in 2001–02 and at least 87 per cent. in 2002–03. The intention is to achieve a national average level of delegation of 90 per cent. in 2003–04, on a basis which takes account of the differing circumstances of individual local education authorities.

The regulations requiring LEAs to provide a guaranteed level of funding for former grant-maintained schools are not directly connected with the minimum delegation requirements set by the Government, although the amount of transitional funding is likely to be influenced by the LEA's level of delegation. The existing arrangements for transitional funding will remain in place for 2001–02, subject to minor adjustments: no decision has yet been taken in respect of subsequent years.

Public Service Agreements

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the public service agreements set up with local authorities and set out the inhibitors to achieving educational targets that have been identified by local authorities. [148351]

Ms Estelle Morris: The negotiations on local PSAs centre on giving pilot authorities greater flexibility in exchange for more demanding performance targets. These negotiations are still in progress. We expect to conclude agreements with the first pilot authorities shortly.

New Deal (Sussex)

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people in *(a)* West Sussex and *(b)* Mid-Sussex constituency are on the New Deal, broken down by each option. [148354]

Ms Jowell: Figures at the end of November 2000 show that the following numbers of young people are participating in New Deal for Young People in Mid and West Sussex:

	Total
Mid-Sussex constituency	
Total on New Deal	21
Number on Gateway	12
Number on ND Options	6
Employment	0
Education and Training	1
Voluntary Sector	3
Environment Taskforce	2
Numbers on follow-through	3
West Sussex coastal plain unit delivery	
Total on New Deal	114
Number on Gateway	55
Number on ND Options	39
Employment	8
Education and Training	26
Voluntary Sector	4
Environment Taskforce	1
Numbers on follow-through	20

School Buildings (Waveney)

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many schools in Waveney constituency have benefited from investment in school buildings since May 1997. [148511]

Jacqui Smith: Table A shows the schools in the Waveney constituency which have benefited from investment through the New Deal for Schools programme, which commenced in 1997–98. These allocations formed

part of the £13.331 million investment made so far in schools in Suffolk local education authority under the New Deal for Schools programme.

The New Deal for Schools was introduced as a new additional programme targeted specifically at addressing the backlog of urgent repairs in school buildings that had built up after 18 years of under-funding under the previous Administration. It is in addition to other capital funds made available to Suffolk local education authority.

In total, since 1997, Suffolk local education authority has received some £56.34 million of funding for capital investment in school buildings as shown in the following Table B. Nationally, investment in school buildings has tripled from £683 million a year in 1996–97 to over £2 billion in 2000–01. It will be £3.2 billion in 2003–04, including grant, credit approvals and Private Finance Initiative credits. There will be central Government investment of £7.8 billion in school buildings in total from 2001–02 to 2003–04.

Table A: New Deal for Schools: Allocations to schools in the Waveney constituency

Year/school	*Project*	*Total allocation (£)*
1997–98		
Included within a 13 school package: Kirkley High	Improvements	'1,065,000
1998–99		
Included within a three school package: Kirkley High	Upgrading fire alarm systems	'70,000
64 schools	Safety glazing	'250,000
8 schools	Safety glazing	'38,900
12 schools	Re-roofing	'325,000
9 schools	Electrical safety work	'90,000
6 schools	Re-roofing	'148,000
1999–2000		
Carlton Colville Primary	Replacement of condemned temporary accommodation	110,000
St. Edmund's Roman Catholic Primary	Replacement of condemned temporary accommodation	127,500
Warren Special School	Replacement of condemned temporary accommodation	60,000
Included within an 18 school package: Albert Pye Primary, Sir John Leman High, Kirkley High	Removal of friable asbestos	'350,000
Included within a 22 school package: Beccles Middle, Bungay Primary, Bungay Middle, St. Edmund's Primary, Benjamin Britten High, The Denes School, Elm Tree Middle, Fen Park Middle, The Harris Middle, Kirkley High, Pakefield Middle, Roman Hill Middle	Re-roofing works	'525,000
Included within a five school package: Elm Tree Middle, Worlingham Middle	Curtain walling replacement	'200,000
Included within a 12 school package: Elm Tree Primary	Replacement of obsolete boilers	'350,000
2000–01		
Woods Loke Primary	Replacement of temporary accommodation	185,000
Ringsfield Primary	Replacement of temporary accommodation	60,000

Table A: New Deal for Schools: Allocations to schools in the Waveney constituency

Year/school	*Project*	*Total allocation (£)*
Kirkley High	Replacement of Horsa buildings	280,000
Included within a three school package: Ashley School Primary	Removal of asbestos panels	'185,000
Included within 36 school package: Albert Pye Primary, Elm Tree Primary, Benjamin Britten High	Removal of friable asbestos	'295,000
Included within a 20 school package: Carlton Colville Primary, Denes High, Whitton Green Primary	Re-roofing works	'760,000
Included within a 29 school package: Blundeston Primary Primary, Northfield St. Nicholas, The Poplars Primary, Roman Hill Middle, Kessingland Primary, Denes High, Fen Park Primary, St. Margaret's Primary, Ringsfield Primary, Worlingham Middle	Replacement of obsolete boilers	'235,000
Included within a 10 school package: Woods Loke Primary	Curtain walling replacement	'630,000
Included within a 16 school package: Benjamin Britten High, Elm Tree Middle, Harris Middle, Pakefield Middle, Roman Hill Middle	Re-roofing	'520,000
Included within a 12 school package: Albert Pye Primary, Beccles Middle, Benjamin Britten High, Kirkley High, Somerleyton Primary	Replacement of obsolete boilers	'235,000
Included within a 116 school package: Carlton Colville Primary, Meadow Primary, Roman Hill Middle, Elm Tree Primary, Harris Middle, Oulton Broad Primary, Pakefield Primary, Roman Hill Primary, The Denes High, The Poplars Primary, Worlingham Middle	Urgent electrical works	'500,000

' Denotes total allocations made to package projects covering more than one school. Suffolk local education authority will be able to advise the value of projects and schools in the Waveney constituency which benefited from these allocations.

Table B: All capital allocations to Suffolk local education authority

£000

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Basic Credit Approvals	5,067	5,337	6,700	9,051
Supplementary Credit Approvals	623	357	239	349
Grant to Voluntary Aided Schools	181	846	221	260
New Deal for Schools	1,065	1,579	2,938	7,749
School Security Grant	177	223	227	228

Table B: All capital allocations to Suffolk local education authority

£000

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
Removal of Outside Toilets	—	20	—	—
Energy Efficiency Initiative	—	196	—	—
Key Stage 1 Class Size Initiative	—	—	883	1,073
National Grid for Learning Grant	—	1,455	975	2,296
Assistance with Asset Management Plans	—	—	107	—
Seed Challenge Funding	—	—	—	355
Formula Capital for Schools	—	—	—	5,012
Renewal of School Laboratories	—	—	—	358
Provision of Secondary Learning Support Units	—	—	—	161
Schools Access Initiative	12	7	11	2
Total	7,125	10,020	12,301	26,894

DEFENCE

Gulf War Syndrome

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what *(a)* blood, *(b)* biopsy and *(c)* tissue samples taken from any Gulf War veterans have been sent to Porton Down for tests; and what the results of such tests were. [148210]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* A number of blood samples that were collected from the UK Service personnel during the Gulf conflict at various stages of the anti-biological warfare agent vaccination programme are currently stored at Chemical Biological Defence (CBD), Porton Down. These samples were analysed in 1991 with the aim of investigating the level of protection conferred by giving anthrax vaccine in combination with pertussis vaccine. The results of the study were given in a paper "Operation GRANBY: The effect of co-administration of the pertussis vaccine on specific antibody titre development to the anthrax vaccine in man", which was declassified and made publicly available on 28 October 1997.

There are 244 vials of sera held at CBD Porton Down. We know of another 38 vials that have been destroyed or lost. We have identified 188 donors of 245 of this total of 282 that we either have, or have been lost. In February and March 2000, all the donors who had been identified were contacted. The Ministry of Defence offered to send them the sample or to keep it at CBD Porton Down.

Apart from these blood samples, we have no records of other biological samples form Gulf veterans having been tested at CBD Porton Down. However, blood samples taken for the Gulf Veterans' Medical Assessment Programme (GVMAP) at St. Thomas' Hospital, London, are either tested on site or sent to laboratories that have particular expertise in specific tests. Up until December 2000, 0.5 ml of blood taken from Gulf veterans was sent to the Centre for Applied Microbiological Research (CAMR) at Porton Down for sandfly fever testing. CAMR is a Department of Health Special Health Authority. It is completely separate from CBD Porton Down, which is a Ministry of Defence facility.

HMS Tireless

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions his Department has had with Offshore Heavy Transport ASA regarding the return of HMS Tireless to the UK using a transporter ship. [148348]

Mr. Spellar: No discussions have been held with Offshore Heavy Transport ASA to return HMS Tireless to the UK using a transporter ship. I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) on 15 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 48W.

Equal Opportunities

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects women to serve as submariners; and if he will make a statement. [148171]

Mr. Hoon: The current medical advice is to the effect that women should not serve in submarines because no assurance can be given regarding the safety of a foetus due to the presence of contaminants in the submarine atmosphere. The medical advice on this question is kept under regular review and is in the process of being reassessed. Currently, there are no plans to change the policy of excluding women from the submarine service.

Combat Effectiveness and Gender Study

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Combat Effectiveness and Gender Study will be complete; and when he will publish its findings. [148344]

Mr. Hoon: The study into the effects of gender upon combat effectiveness will be completed later this year. An announcement will be made once Ministers have received the results and considered advice from the Chiefs of Staff.

Management Consultants

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much his Department has spent on management consultants in each year since 1997. [148345]

Dr. Moonie: The Department's annual returns of expenditure on External Assistance, which include outside consultants, for the last five financial years are available in the Library of the House.

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which management consultancy firms have been contracted by his Department since May 1997; and how much has been paid to each of them. [148347]

Dr. Moonie: This information is not held centrally. It could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which aircraft in service with the armed forces use depleted uranium for ballast; and if he will make a statement. [148349]

Mr. Spellar: The following aircraft contain depleted uranium:

Tristar—elevator and rudder balance weights are made from depleted uranium.

C130—elevator counterbalance weights are made from depleted uranium.

Wessex—a small number of Wessex helicopters in MOD museums and training schools are fitted with depleted uranium ballast weights on their main rotor blade tips.

We are continuing to investigate whether depleted uranium is also present in Gazelle helicopter tail rotor tip weights. I will write to the hon. Member to advise him of the outcome of this work.

Officers' Houses

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many officers' houses are now occupied by officers and families serving at RAF Sealand; how many are occupied by families of officers serving overseas; and if he will make a statement. [148520]

Dr. Moonie: A total of 23 properties at Little Roodee serve the requirements of those serving at RAF Sealand and the surrounding area. Of these properties nine are occupied by officers serving at RAF Sealand and their families; three are occupied by officers belonging to local units; one is occupied by the family of a Lieutenant Colonel who is serving overseas. Of the remaining properties, eight are occupied by other ranks serving at RAF Sealand and two are currently void.

All 23 properties were officers' quarters, but in 1997, it was agreed that nine of these would be redesignated to accommodate senior other ranks.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Government Grants (Central London)

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list each category of grant, and the amount of each grant, paid by his Department to *(a)* Westminster and *(b)* Kensington and Chelsea in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99, (iii) 1999–2000 and (iv) 2000–01; and what the projected figure is for 2001–02. [146311]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information requested is, as far as possible, given in the following table:

£ million

	1997–98	1998–99	(a) 1999–2000	2000–01	(b) 2001–02
London Borough of Westminster					
(i) Revenue Support Grant[1]	151.611	125.687	127.661	127.047	135.969
(ii) National Non-domestic	42.627	46.452	52.372	61.301	62.783
(iii) SSA Reduction Grant	0.000	15.580	8.500	1.624	0.000
(iv) Central Support Protection Grant	[2]—	[2]—	4.206	4.866	0.000
(v) Housing Investment Programme (HIP)	10.275	7.554	8.385	25.535	17.364
(vi) HIP Basic Credit Approval	2.789	4.476	6.271	22.722	—
(vii) Single Regeneration Budget					32.882[3]
(viii) Transport Supplementary Grant	0.472	0.419	0.000	0.000	0.000
Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea					
(i) Revenue Support Grant	66.642	66.196	66.194	65.610	69.350
(ii) National Non-domestic Rates	33.804	36.203	40.468	47.167	48.567
(iii) SSA Reduction Grant	8.412	5.487	3.158	0.000	0.000
(iv) Central Support Protection Grant	[2]—	[2]—	1.121	0.000	0.000
(v) Housing Investment Programme (HIP)	6.358	5.723	6.306	16.395	12.910
(vi) HIP Basic Credit Approval	5.757	4.181	5.447	16.263	—
(vii) Single Regeneration Budget					6.778[3]
(viii) Transport Supplementary Grant	0.437	0.196	0.298	0.000	0.000

[1] Figures supplied for 1997–98 and 1998–99 are based on the Local Government Finance Report (England) Amending Reports dated February 1999 and February 2000 respectively

[2] Grant introduced in 1999–2000

[3] Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding figures relate to the lifetime amount awarded to schemes since round three (round three being the 1997–98 award period). As these are lifetime figures this does not reflect the annual amount spent, rather the figures represent the amount paid plus the amount outstanding within the award. However where an award is agreed, in principle, funding is released on an annual basis and this release is dependent upon the total available budget at the time of the annual review Figures are given for those schemes where the relevant Borough Council is the Accountable Body. Funding may have been awarded to organisations within the borough, or working within the borough, over and above these figures. Figures provided reflect the amounts that were awarded directly to the Local Authority only—source London Development Agency.

Unlicensed Vehicles

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many owners of vehicles found in Slough were prosecuted in 2000 for *(a)* not registering and *(b)* not paying tax on their vehicles in 2000. [147746]

Mr. Hill: The Slough area is covered by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's Reading local office, which prosecuted 2,103 motorists for evasion in 2000. A further 2,462 motorists paid out of court settlements in connection with VED evasion.

The Reading Office has only recently started enforcement action relating to the statutory off-road notification registration requirements. In 2000, 44 motorists in the Reading area paid out of court settlements in connection with SORN offences.

Concessionary Bus Passes

Mr. Martin Bell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to equalise, between men and women, the age at which the concessionary bus pass is available. [147844]

Mr. Hill: The law currently provides for equalisation in respect of travel concessions on the same basis, and to the same timetable, as for national pensions—that is, over a transitional period of 10 years starting in 2010.

The matter is however presently the subject of a case currently before the European Court of Human Rights, and we will consider our position in the light of developments.

Central Railways Plc

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what representations he has received since 1 January from Central Railway; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the recent letter to him from that company; [148205]

(2) what his policy is towards the introduction of a Private Bill to authorise the rail freight line proposed by Central Railway. [148206]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* Central Railway has written to Ministers twice this year. The second letter sought Government support for a hybrid bill. A reply will be sent as soon as possible. It is for the company to decide whether to make its letter public.

Housing

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what steps the Government will take to ensure that low-cost homes built as a result of the additional council tax income received from second homes will be occupied by low-income earners; [148085]

(2) what plans he has to end the 50 per cent. council tax discount on second homes. [148179]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* In our Rural White Paper, we said that we would consult on our proposals to give local authorities discretion to end the 50 per cent. discount and to allow them to retain the additional proceeds, and that we would seek views on whether these should be spent on affordable housing. We intend to issue a consultation paper shortly.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the total value in England and Wales is of the second home rating rebate. [148099]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* Some 523,000 dwellings in England, some 2.6 per cent. of the total chargeable dwellings, are subject to the 50 per cent. council tax discount. We do not know how many of these are second and holiday homes. However, from the survey of English Housing we estimate that in 1998–99 there were about 248,000 second and holiday homes, which would be about 1.2 per cent. of the total number of dwellings that year. On that basis, if all local authorities ended the 50 per cent. discount the extra council tax raised would be around £100 million.

As council tax in Wales is a devolved matter, it is for the National Assembly for Wales to answer questions about the position in Wales.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received concerning the estimated financial benefits to local councils of second home ownership in England. [148180]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* Since we published the Rural White Paper on 28 November, we have received four representations which raise the subject of the financial benefits which second home ownership can bring to local communities.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set a deadline for an exchange of contracts with Legacy plc over the sale of the Millennium Dome. [148521]

Ms Armstrong: When I announced the preferred bidder status on 20 November 2000, I said that if all went well we expected to exchange contracts during February 2001. The Government continue to monitor progress towards that goal.

Radon Contamination

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to collate information and inform the public about levels of radon contamination in drinking water in the United Kingdom. [148424]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Last year the Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI) collated the available information from water undertakers in England and Wales on their monitoring of public water supplies for radioactive substances, including radon. There is no information to suggest that any public water supplies contain significant concentrations of radon. Where the information is incomplete, water companies have been asked to arrange a sampling and analysis programme and to report the results to DWI.

Some 1 per cent. of the population obtains its drinking water from private supplies, where responsibility for monitoring its quality lies with local authorities. Following a recent study which found elevated levels of radon gas in some private water supplies in West Devon, my Department has written to district, borough and unitary authorities in England, alerting them to the results of the study, reminding them of their responsibilities in this respect, and identifying for them sources of relevant advice.

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers he has to regulate the presence of radon and similar contaminates in drinking water in the United Kingdom. [148423]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Regulations governing the quality of public water supplies require water undertakers to ensure that the water supplied contains no element, organism or substance in the water at a concentration or value which would be detrimental to human health. These regulations are enforced in England and Wales by the drinking water inspectorate on behalf of the Secretary of State and the National Assembly for Wales. Local authorities have powers to enforce similar provisions in respect of private water supplies.

London Underground

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reason there is no published maximum number of passengers that can be carried in a carriage on the London Underground. [147896]

Mr. Hill: I understand from London Underground that the maximum number of passengers that can be carried in a carriage on the London Underground varies with the type of rolling stock in question. There are currently 12 different types of rolling stock in service. The maximum passenger capacity for each type of stock is published in a series of "fact sheets" available from London Underground Ltd. which give full technical specifications. The following table sets out the capacity (per carriage) for each type of London Underground rolling stock.

Stock type	*Maximum capacity*	*Operational lines*
C69 Stock	212	Circle, Hammersmith & City
C77 Stock	212	Circle, Hammersmith & City
C60 Stock	185	Metropolitan, East London
A62 Stock	185	Metropolitan, East London
D Stock	232	District
1967 Tube Stock	192	Victoria
1972 Mk I Tube Stock	194	Bakerloo
1972 Mk II Tube Stock	194	Bakerloo
1973 Tube Stock	227	Piccadilly
1992 Tube Stock	210	Central, Waterloo & City
1995 Tube Stock	159	Northern
1996 Tube Stock	180	Jubilee

National Air Traffic Services

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment has been made by the Safety Regulation Group of the CAA of the proposed price regulation regime for the NATS PPP; and if this takes full account of the RPI-X method, as affected by the proposed delay term factor. [148590]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The advice the Government received from the Civil Aviation Authority on the price regulation regime included advice on a delay term factor. My Department had a meeting with the Group Director of Safety Regulation at which he confirmed that he was satisfied that there would be no adverse implications for safety if the CAA's advice was adopted in full.

In the event, so as to ensure a smooth transition for NATS from the public sector to the PPP, the Government set a somewhat lower price cap and a somewhat lower maximum delay term for the NATS PPP in its early years than those recommended by the CAA.

Road Safety

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the outcome was of the meeting on 15 January between road safety campaigners and the Minister with responsibility for roads; and if he has ordered a critical summary of relevant controlled road safety evaluation studies. [148588]

Mr. Hill: My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Lord Whitty), had a useful meeting with my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), representatives of RoadPeace and other road safety campaigners, at which a variety of issues were discussed. The proposal for a critical summary of relevant controlled road safety evaluation studies has been made by the Institute of Child Health, and my noble Friend has invited the Institute to discuss their ideas with Departmental officials.

Travel Plan Bursaries

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about bursaries to local authorities for the promotion of travel plans. [148735]

Mr. Hill: Following an invitation last November we received 263 bids from a total of 153 local traffic authorities and passenger transport executives in England for bursaries to employ dedicated staff to promote travel plans to schools and businesses in their area. I am happy to announce today that we have been able to accept bids for 111 posts across the country. The successful authorities with the number of posts that have been accepted are as listed. Funding will normally be for three years within a limit of £30,000 a year per post.

Authority	*Number*	*Type*	*GO region*
Bedfordshire	1	CC	East
Buckinghamshire	2	CC	South East
Cambridgeshire	1	CC	East
Derbyshire	1	CC	East Midlands
Devon	1	CC	South West
Dorset	1	CC	South West
Durham	1	CC	North East
Essex	1	CC	East
Gloucestershire	1	CC	South West
Hampshire	2	CC	South East

Authority	Number	Type	GO region
Hertfordshire	1	CC	East
Lancashire	1	CC	North West
Lincolnshire	1	CC	East Midlands
Norfolk	2	CC	East
North Yorkshire	1	CC	Yorkshire & Humberside
Shropshire	2	CC	West Midlands
Somerset	2	CC	South West
Warwickshire	1	CC	West Midlands
West Sussex	1	CC	South East
Wiltshire	2	CC	South West
Worcestershire	2	CC	West Midlands
Cheshire	2	CC	North West
Bournemouth	2	U	South West
Bristol City	2	U	South West
Hartlepool	1	U	North East
Luton	1	U	East
Medway	2	U	South East
Middlesbrough	1	U	North East
Nottingham City	2	U	East Midlands
Peterborough City	1	U	East
Poole	2	U	South West
Portsmouth City	2	U	South East
Rutland	1	U	East Midlands
South Gloucestershire	2	U	South West
Southend-on-Sea	2	U	East
Stockton-on-Tees	2	U	North East
Stoke-on-Trent	2	U	West Midlands
Swindon	1	U	South West
Telford and Wrekin	2	U	West Midlands
York	1	U	Yorkshire and Humberside
Bromley	1	LB	London
Croydon	1	LB	London
Greenwich	1	LB	London
Hammersmith and Fulham	1	LB	London
Harrow	2	LB	London
Lambeth	2	LB	London
Merton	1	LB	London
Redbridge	1	LB	London
Wandsworth	1	LB	London
Kingston upon Thames	1	LB	London
Transport for London	2	TFL	Transport for London
Birmingham City	1	MET	West Midlands
Bradford City	1	MET	Yorkshire and Humberside
Coventry City	1	MET	West Midlands
Dudley	2	MET	West Midlands
Gateshead	2	MET	North East
Kirklees	1	MET	Yorkshire and Humberside
Leeds City	2	MET	Yorkshire and Humberside
Newcastle upon Tyne	2	MET	North East
North Tyneside	1	MET	North East
Sheffield City	1	MET	Yorkshire and Humberside
Sunderland	1	MET	North East
Wakefield	1	MET	Yorkshire and Humberside
Walsall	1	MET	West Midlands
Greater Manchester	11	PTA	North West
Merseyside	5	PTA	North West
Centro	1	PTE	West Midlands
South Yorkshire	1	PTE	Yorkshire and Humberside
Tyne and Wear Nexus	1	PTE	North East
West Yorkshire	2	PTE	Yorkshire and Humberside

Full time equivalent posts

Community Transport Schemes

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 26 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 739W, on community transport schemes, if applications for continued funding of existing schemes were *(a)* permitted and *(b)* encouraged. [148342]

Mr. Hill: The Rural Bus Challenge is intended to promote innovation in the provision and promotion of rural bus transport by seeking to support new approaches and projects. The bidding guidance for the 2000 competition neither prohibited nor encouraged the submission of bids for continuation funding of existing schemes. A number of authorities have submitted bids for continued funding of schemes funded by previous Challenge competitions and these are being considered alongside all the other bids. Successful bids to the 1999 competition included further funding for schemes successful in the 1998 competition.

MOX Fuel Shipments

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations have been received by Her Majesty's Government from other Governments in respect of the current shipment of MOX plutonium fuel to Japan in ships operated by BNFL. [147741]

Mr. Battle: I have been asked to reply.

To date, a representation has been made by the Government of New Zealand about the current shipment of MOX fuel to Japan. A meeting with the New Zealand High Commissioner took place on 19 January.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Winter Fuel Payments

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women living in the Richmond Park constituency are entitled to winter fuel allowance; [148086]

(2) how many claims had been made by people living in the Richmond Park constituency for the winter fuel allowance by 26 January. [148084]

Mr. Rooker: The administration of Winter Fuel Payments is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Dr. Jenny Tonge, dated 1 February 2001:

The Secretary Of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent parliamentary questions asking how many claims had been made by people living in the Richmond Park constituency for the Winter Fuel allowance by 26 January and how many (a) men and (b) women living in the Richmond Park constituency are entitled to Winter Fuel Allowance.

Information regarding how many claims were made by 26 January is not available in constituency format and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Approximately 17,400 people may have been entitled to a Winter Fuel Payment for Winter 2000 in the Richmond Park constituency. This information is not available for men and women separately.

I hope the information provided is helpful.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what records the Child Support Agency maintains about fathers' employment status at the time an assessment is made; and what percentage of fathers in employment chose to give up their jobs within 12 months of a Child Support Agency assessment in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [146241]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mr. Doug Smith. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Mike Isaac to Mr. Mark Todd, dated 1 February 2001:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Questions to the Secretary of State for Social Security about the Child Support Agency.

Mr. Smith is unavailable and therefore I am writing to you on his behalf.

You have asked what records the Agency maintains about the employment status of the father at the time an assessment is made. The Agency requests the employment status of the Parent With Care on the Maintenance Assessment Form and the Non Resident Parent on the Maintenance Enquiry Form. These are then recorded on the Child Support Computer System.

You ask how many people there were in paid employment who had been assessed for child maintenance but who have, during the last 12 months, chosen to give up their jobs. The information is not available in the format requested. Such information that is available is shown in Table 1 in the attached annex. This shows those who were employed as at 31 August 1999 and their employment status as at 31 August 2000 broken down by CSA Business Unit.

Table 2 shows those who were not in employment in August 1999 and their employment status at August 2000. Comparing both sets of data in the enclosed tables you will note that there was movement both into and out of employment during that period.

The Department produces a CSA Quarterly Summary of Statistics which is available in the House of Commons Library and you may find the information it contains of further interest.

Table 1: Number of non-resident parents who were in employment at 31 August 1999 and employment status at 31 August 2000, by CSA Business Unit: all cases[1]

Agency Business Units	*(1) Number in employment*[2] *at 31 August 1999*	*(2) Number of (1) in employment*[2] *at 31 August 2000*	*Number of (1) not in employment at 31 August 2000*	*Number of (1) no longer CSA customers at 31 August 2000*
Midlands	80,000	71,000	5,000	4,000
South Eastern	67,000	63,000	3,000	1,000
Scotland and North East England	87,000	80,000	6,000	1,000
South Western	86,000	78,000	4,000	4,000
Wales and North West	83,000	70,000	6,000	7,000
Eastern	89,000	83,000	5,000	1,000
All	491,000	445,000[3]	28,000[3]	18,000
Number of population in paid employment[4]	27,500,000	28,000,000	28,000,000	—
Percentage of CSA customers in paid employment against population as a whole	1.78	1.59	—	—

[1] All cases employed and self-employed with full and interim assessments.
[2] Those cases employed as at August 2000 may have had periods of unemployment during the year.
[3] NRP benefit status is more indicative of the case at take-on rather than at the current time.
[4] Source: Labour Force Survey (seasonally adjusted) rounded to nearest half million.

Notes:
1. Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand, therefore totals may not tally.
2. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample of CSCS.

Table 2: Number of non-resident parents who were not in employment at 31 August 1999 and employment status at 31 August 2000, by CSA Business Unit:all cases

Agency Business Units	*(1) Number not in employment at 31 August 1999*	*(2) Number of (1) not in employment at 31 August 2000*[1]	*(3) Number of (1) in employment at 31 August 2000*[2]	*(4) Number of (1) no longer CSA customers at 31 August 2000*
Midlands	78,000	69,000	4,000	5,000
South Eastern	77,000	71,000	3,000	3,000
Scotland and North East England	90,000	79,000	6,000	5,000
South Western	57,000	46,000	5,000	6,000
Wales and North West	95,000	84,000	5,000	7,000
Eastern	85,000	79,000	4,000	2,000
All	483,000	429,000	27,000	27,000

[1] The table does not show whether there were short term periods of employment during the year.
[2] Employed figure includes self-employed cases.

Notes:
1. Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand, therefore totals may not tally.
2. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample of CSCS.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps are being taken to improve the accuracy of Child Support Agency assessments. [146242]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mr. Doug Smith. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Mike Isaac to Mr. Mark Todd, dated 1 February 2001:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Questions to the Secretary of State for Social Security about the Child Support Agency.

Mr Smith is unavailable and therefore I am writing to you on his behalf.

You have asked what steps are being taken to improve accuracy of Child Support Agency assessments.

I fully accept that the current level of accuracy is unacceptable and since I joined the Agency last September I have made it a top priority to improve it. Revised checking arrangements, with built in feedback loops to decision makers, have recently been introduced and each of my Area Directors has developed an accuracy plan setting out specific actions for which I will hold them accountable. We have also targeted training at areas of weakness and developed guidance to help deal with particular problem areas.

That said, it is unlikely that accuracy will be brought to an acceptable level until the Child Support Reforms are introduced. The complexity of the current calculation, requiring over a hundred separate pieces of information is well documented.

However, I will not let the problems of the current system become an excuse for simply waiting for the new scheme and, as already indicated, we will continue to strive to improve accuracy levels.

I trust that this is helpful.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many cases the Child Support Agency is currently dealing with; and what the average cost was per case over the last 12 months; [146243]

(2) what is the cost to the Child Support Agency of every £100 it recovers. [146244]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mr. Doug Smith. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Mike Isaac to Mr. Mark Todd, dated 1 February 2001:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Questions to the Secretary of State for Social Security about the Child Support Agency.

Mr. Smith is unavailable and therefore I am writing to you on his behalf.

You asked how many cases the Child Support Agency is currently dealing with; what the average cost was per case over the last 12 months and what is the cost to the Child Support Agency for every £100 it recovers.

The Agency currently (at 31 December 2000) has a Live and Assessed caseload of 1,042,700. This includes Full Maintenance Assessments, Interim Maintenance Assessments and Closures and Suspensions.

The average cost per case is £203.10 and is based on the Agency's current running costs (excluding the costs associated with the Child Support Reforms) between January to December 2000 of £211,769,683.

The cost to the Agency for every £100 recovered is £25.98. This has been calculated using the total maintenance collected and arranged for the period April to December (£577,930,287) and the Agency running costs (excluding the costs associated with the Child Support Reforms) for the same period (£150,134,117).

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what information is contained in Child Support Agency records about the nature of a father's relationship to the child's mother; and how the CSA categorises such relationships. [146246]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mr. Doug Smith. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Mike Isaac to Mr. Mark Todd, dated 1 February 2001:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about the Child Support Agency.

Mr Smith is unavailable and therefore I am writing to you on his behalf.

No records are held about the nature of a Non Resident Parent's relationship with a child's Parent With Care, nor are categories of relationships held. This information is not relevant to the calculation of Child Support and therefore, is not requested.

For the Agency to collect information which is not relevant would not only go beyond its legal powers, but would also be in breach of the Data Protection Act 1998 which requires that information must only be obtained to meet legitimate business needs, must be relevant, and not excessive.

I hope this is helpful.

Pensioners' Incomes

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in Mid-Sussex receive the over-80s premium on the basic state pension; and if he will make a statement. [148358]

Mr. Rooker: It is estimated that there were 2,321,800 pensioners residing in Great Britain and overseas, at 31 March 2000, who were in receipt of a basic state pension including the over-80s age addition. We further estimate that 6,300 resided in the Unitary Authority of Mid-Sussex.

Note:

The case count figures quoted are in thousands and are rounded to the nearest hundred.

Source:

5 per cent. sample from the Pension Strategy Computer System at 31 March 2000.

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in Mid-Sussex constituency have a weekly gross income of *(a)* under £100, *(b)* under £150, *(c)* under £200, *(d)* under £500 and *(e)* under £1,000. [148356]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available.

Acquired Brain Injury

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what plans he has to help individuals with acquired brain injury back into work; [147961]

(2) what guidance he gives to local authorities in Greater Manchester on support for vocational rehabilitation for individuals with acquired brain injury. [147962]

Mr. Bayley: This Department does not give guidance to local authorities on support for vocational rehabilitation. But, in partnership with the Department for Education and Employment, we are setting up a national network of Job Brokers under the auspices of the New

Deal for Disabled People. The brokers will offer people receiving incapacity benefits, including those with acquired brain injury, support, guidance and preparation to find paid work and move off benefit dependence.

One of our current New Deal for Disabled People innovative schemes is run by Rehab UK in conjunction with Rehab Scotland, the Shaw Trust and the Employment Service. Referrals to the scheme are made by employers, and three rehabilitation hospitals provide a programme to support adults with acquired disabilities, especially acquired brain injury, to retain or secure new employment. The project has created unique pathways between medical rehabilitation, vocational assessment, job coaching and supported employment to help employees return to work or find new employment.

Benefits (Mid-Sussex)

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of people of working age in the Mid-Sussex constituency receive *(a)* Income Support and *(b)* disability benefits; and if he will make a statement. [148357]

Mr. Bayley: Information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

As at May 2000, 1,600 people of working age were receiving Income Support in the Mid-Sussex constituency, with a further 2,000 people receiving disability benefits.

Notes:

1. Working age is 16 to 59 for females and 16 to 64 for males.
2. Disability benefits are Incapacity Benefit, Severe Disablement Allowance, Disability Living Allowance or Income Support with a disability-related premium. No constituency level data are available on the number of Industrial Injury Benefit recipients.
3. Although benefit recipients can receive a combination of disability benefits, each person is counted only once.
4. Figures quoted are rounded to the nearest hundred.
5. Figures are not held for the total number of people of working age in the constituency, so it is not possible to express these figures in percentage terms.

HEALTH

Child Support

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many parents with care spent the Christmas and New Year holiday period with no regular payments from non-resident parents in respect of the maintenance of their children; and how many children were affected. [146167]

Angela Eagle: I have been asked to reply.

The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mr. Doug Smith. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Mike Isaac to Mr. Ronnie Fearn, dated 1 February 2001:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Health about the Child Support Agency.

Mr Smith is unavailable and therefore I am writing to you on his behalf.

The information is not available in the format or for the time period requested. Such information as is available is in the table at Annex A, and shows statistics for the quarter ending August 2000.

The figures have been broken down to show the status of the Parent With Care.

Parents with Care on Income Support (IS) or Jobseekers' Allowance (Income Based) (JSA(IB)) whose Child Maintenance is paid to the Agency by the Non Resident Parent are protected against non payment of Child Maintenance. This is because IS/JSA(IB) is paid in full to the customer and any maintenance received by the CSA is retained by the Secretary of State to offset benefit payments.

Figures do not include cases that are not paid through the Agency collection service. In these cases the Non Resident Parent (NRP) pays Child Maintenance directly to the Parent With Care (PWC) is in receipt of IS or JSA(IB) the amount of benefit they receive will be reduced by an amount equal to the maintenance due.

These figures do not include any cases where an assessment of maintenance is yet to be made.

The Agency currently exceeds its Secretary of State target of making 98% of payments to Parents With Care within 10 days of receipt from the Non Resident Parent. From April 2000 to December 2000 2,397,676 payments were made to Parents With Care; 2,353,877 (98.9%) of these were made within 10 days of receipt.

The Department's Analytical Services Division produces a CSA Quarterly Summary of Statistics that is available in the House of Commons Library and you may find the information it contains of further interest.

Annex A:

Table 1: Cash compliance levels for the quarter ending 31 August 2000, by status of the Parent with Care

Numbers are in thousands

Parent With Care receiving	*Total number of PWCs*	*NRP fully cash compliant*	*Percentage*	*NRP partially cash compliant*	*Percentage*	*NRP nil cash compliance*	*Percentage*
Income Support	95.1	45.5	48	22.9	24	26.7	28
JSA (IB)	1.7	0.7	41	0.4	24	0.6	35
WFTC	79.6	44.1	55	20.7	26	14.8	19
Not receiving any of the above benefits	104.2	58.2	56	23.3	22	22.7	22
All	280.6	148.5	53	67.3	24	64.8	23

Notes:

1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent sample of the Child Support Computer System, therefore are subject to sampling error.
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred, and are shown in thousands.
3. The table does not include those cases where payment is not made via the Agency's collection service

I hope this is helpful.

NHS Beds

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will set out the definitions of *(a)* critical care, *(b)* intensive care, *(c)* high dependency, *(d)* intermediate care, *(e)* continuing care and *(f)* acute care beds; and if he will provide the numbers of beds and associated staff in each case as at 1 December 1999 and 1 December 2000 for each relevant NHS region, health authority and NHS trust; [141498]

(2) how many extra *(a)* critical care beds and *(b)* acute care beds there were in each London NHS trust on (i) 1 December and (ii) December 1999; how many extra staff are required to make each bed fully operational; how many staff were in post, broken down by professional group, on (A) 1 December and (b) 1 December 1999; and what the vacancy level was in each case. [141508]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 13 December 2000]:* The definitions of critical care, intensive care, high dependency and acute care beds, as used in central returns to the Department, have been placed in the Library. Intermediate care beds are not currently identified separately in central returns. The working definition of an intermediate care bed for future monitoring purposes is included. Continuing care is defined by the service provided.

A special bed census, set up to inform the winter planning process, counted the number of available beds in the following categories—critical care (which includes both intensive care and high dependency) and general and acute. A table showing the number of critical care and general and acute beds on 1 December 1999 and 1 December 2000 for each National Health Service region and health authority will be placed in the Library. More detailed information on in-patient bed numbers by ward type and numbers of NHS residential care beds are published annually in "Bed availability and occupancy, England"; and on adult critical care beds in "Intensive care and high dependency provision, England". Both publications are in the Library.

It is not possible to distinguish staff by bed category. The workforce censuses are collected as at 30 September of each year and copies of the 1999 census detailed results—"Department of Health NHS Hospital and Community Health Services Non-Medical Workforce Census England: 30 September 1999" and "Department of Health NHS Hospital, Public Health Medicine and Community Health Service Medical and Dental Workforce Census England at 30 September 1999" are available in the Library. The September 2000 workforce censuses information will be published shortly. The Department of Health Vacancy Survey is carried out as at 31 March of each year and copies of the 1999 and 2000 surveys are available in the Library.

Critical care beds

The twice yearly census of available adult critical care beds counts open and staffed beds by location and the level of care, i.e. intensive or high dependency, provided on the census day. Use of critical care beds will vary depending on the clinical needs of the patient and the staffing available. This definition was also used for the 1 December special census.

Critical care beds include both general and specialist intensive care and high dependency beds in the following locations:

intensive care unit
high dependency unit
combined intensive care and high dependency unit
combined intensive care, high dependency and coronary care unit
cardiothoracic unit
neurological unit
liver unit
spinal injury
burns unit
general or specialist high dependency beds outside units.

Beds excluded from the census are those in coronary care units, short-term post-operative units linked to theatres, renal units and critical care for babies and children in paediatric and neonatal units.

Intensive care beds

An intensive care bed is a critical care bed that was being used for intensive care on the census day.

High dependency beds

A high dependency bed is a critical care bed that was being used for high dependency care on the census day.

Intermediate care beds

An intermediate care bed is a bed in a residential setting (such as community hospital, nursing home, rehabilitation centre, residential care home or step-down facility in an acute hospital) for people who are medically stable but need a short period of rehabilitation to enable them to re-gain sufficient physical functioning and confidence to return safely to their own home. This "residential rehabilitation" service model may be either 'step-down', i.e. following a stay in an acute hospital, or 'step-up', i.e. following a referral by (say) general practitioner, social services or rapid response team in cases which would otherwise necessitate acute admission or admission to longer-term residential care.

Acute beds

Acute beds include beds for adults and children, critical care for adults and children, coronary care, palliative care and younger physically disabled. The count of acute beds does not include maternity beds or beds on wards designated for older people or for people with mental illness or learning disabilities or residential care beds.

Personal Social Services

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the services listed as personal social services for the purposes of allocating money to local government through the Personal Social Services SSA. [148186]

Mr. Hutton: The personal social services standard spending assessment comprises sub-blocks for services for elderly people in residential care, services for elderly people receiving domiciliary care, services for other adults and services for children.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much of the money designated for intermediate care services in the NHS Plan has already been allocated; how much of this money was allocated to local government through the Personal Social Services SSA for 2001–02 to 2003–04 announced on 27 November 2000; and if he will make it his policy to guarantee that the money allocated

to local government will be spent on the provision of intermediate care services as envisaged by the NHS Plan. [148187]

Mr. Hutton: Details of the funding of intermediate care and community equipment services were set out in a joint health service and local authority circular (HSC 2001/001—LAC (2001)1)) Intermediate Care, issued on 19 January 2001, copies of which are available in the Library.

In determining the personal social services settlement for 2001–02 to 2003–04, as part of the general settlement for local government, we took specifically into account the need for additional council investment in services that promote independence, particularly for older people. Special grants such as the promoting independence and carers' grants, and the performance fund will play a particular part in funding growth in services which deliver or support intermediate care. The increases in standard spending assessment for 2001–02 to 2003–04 announced following the spending review, and included in the local government settlement announced on 27 November 2000, are intended to enable councils to contribute to the expansion of these services. The deployment of resources made available through SSA remains a decision for councils to make in the light of local circumstances.

MMR Vaccinations

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many requests have been received by doctors in England and Wales for separate vaccinations for *(a)* measles, *(b)* mumps and *(c)* rubella in the last 12 months; and how many of these requests have been granted. [144935]

Yvette Cooper: The information requested is not held centrally.

The policy for protecting children from measles, mumps and rubella is a two dose schedule of the combined measles, mumps and rubella vaccines. This is based on the advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), and the assessment of the safety of the vaccine by the Committee on Safety of Medicines. This policy has been endorsed on 12 January 2001 by the British Medical Association, the Royal College of General Practitioners, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the Royal College of Nursing and the Community Practitioners and Health Visitors Association.

Separate doses of single antigen vaccines given at intervals leave children vulnerable to the risk of potentially serious disease. The JCVI advises that there are no benefits from giving the single antigen vaccines compared with the combined vaccine and that a schedule of separate vaccines is less safe than the combined vaccine. It is not the policy of the Department to offer this schedule

Cloning

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the companies involved in cloning research with which his Department has held meetings in the last three years. [146860]

Yvette Cooper: One meeting took place at the Department of Health between officials and Geron Bio-med in 2000.

Officials from the Department regularly meet with United Kingdom and international companies and research centres that are working in the field of biological research. Some of these may have an interest in cloning research.

In addition, officials will have attended a number of scientific meetings hosted by external bodies such as the Wellcome Trust and the Roslin Institute to discuss cloning.

Health Spending

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what levels of spending on health per head of population were in each health authority area in each year since 1998–99, calculated on the same basis as used in his answer of 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns 473–75W. [146726]

Mr. Denham: Levels of spending on health per head of the population for 1999–2000 in each health authority area are given in the table.

Figures for 2000–01 are not yet available.

England—expenditure by head of population (by health authority), 1999–2000

Health authority	£
Avon	698.15
Barking and Havering	799.37
Barnet	747.25
Barnsley	774.34
Bedfordshire	657.62
Berkshire	645.83
Bexley and Greenwich	815.06
Birmingham	830.78
Bradford	767.95
Brent and Harrow	857.03
Bromley	920.09
Buckinghamshire	609.95
Bury and Rochdale	737.38
Calderdale and Kirklees	700.40
Cambridgeshire	670.28
Camden and Islington	1,212.95
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	757.66
County Durham	760.30
Coventry	811.57
Croydon	704.70
Doncaster	885.35
Dorset	747.21
Dudley	750.26
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	860.41
East and North Hertfordshire	686.03
East Kent	754.82
East Lancashire	794.35
East London and The City	1,091.58
East Riding	724.75
East Surrey	791.72
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	848.70
Enfield and Haringey	754.13
Gateshead and South Tyneside	845.73
Gloucestershire	685.18
Herefordshire	824.83
Hillingdon	712.10
Isle of Wight	833.25
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	1,048.08
Kingston and Richmond	758.81
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	984.13

England—expenditure by head of population (by health authority), 1999–2000

Health authority	£
Leeds	843.77
Leicestershire	688.98
Lincolnshire	745.55
Liverpool	989.40
Manchester	1,003.16
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	913.11
Morecambe Bay	1,049.86
Newcastle and North Tyneside	894.89
Norfolk	712.36
North and East Devon	720.80
North and Mid Hampshire	602.92
North Cheshire	750.52
North Cumbria	762.81
North Derbyshire	685.27
North Essex	688.76
North Nottinghamshire	706.29
North Staffordshire	742.17
North West Lancashire	807.54
North Yorkshire	709.21
Northamptonshire	636.08
Northumberland	855.96
Nottingham	765.61
Oxfordshire	650.05
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	668.15
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	758.38
Rotherham	716.74
Salford and Trafford	849.16
Sandwell	827.70
Sefton	785.38
Sheffield	1,008.48
Shropshire	674.72
Solihull	662.84
Somerset	668.84
South and West Devon	748.98
South Cheshire	705.51
South Derbyshire	687.05
South Essex	698.92
South Humber	784.76
South Lancashire	693.89
South Staffordshire	639.74
Southampton and South West Hampshire	708.89
St. Helens and Knowsley	777.56
Stockport	706.02
Suffolk	668.15
Sunderland	770.91
Tees	823.22
Wakefield	781.28
Walsall	748.72
Warwickshire	681.17
West Hertfordshire	705.79
West Kent	713.34
West Pennine	705.55
West Surrey	707.74
West Sussex	722.04
Wigan and Bolton	707.32
Wiltshire	696.83
Wirral	780.50
Wolverhampton	763.63
Worcestershire	652.87
England—before national adjustment for drugs and GDS	761.14
England—after national adjustment for drugs and GDS	797.14

Notes:

1. An element of drugs expenditure has been accounted for by the Prescription Pricing Authority rather than individual health authorities. Also the majority of General Dental Service expenditure is not available by health authority. A total national position is shown including these two elements.

2. These figures are not comparable between years or between health authorities as a result of changes in accounting practice and other technical accounting differences.

3. The expenditure per head of the resident population does not provide the best comparison between health authorities. Recent Parliamentary Questions have been answered in terms of expenditure per weighted head of population where the crude population figures have been modified to take into consideration the health needs of the population. This agrees with the methodology used for the weighted capitation formula which is used to inform health authority allocations.

4. Figures for the expenditure per weighted head of population for 1999–2000 have been placed in the Library.

Source:

Health Authority summarisation forms for 1999–2000

Mid-year population estimates for 1999 (which are not comparable with weighted population figures)

Wexham Park Hospital

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many operations at Wexham Park hospital were cancelled on 16 January; for what reasons; and if he will make a statement. [147001]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 23 January 2001]:* Information on the number of operations cancelled at the last minute for non-medical reasons, and breaches of the standard to re-admit patients within one month following such cancellations, are collected on a quarterly basis at health authority level and placed in the Library. The latest figures cover the five quarters up to Quarter 2 (July-September 2000) of the 2000–01 financial year.

The specific information requested should be available from the Chair of the Heatherwood and Wexham Park Hospitals National Health Service Trust.

NHS Trusts

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many trusts are *(a)* acute, *(b)* community and *(c)* both community and acute; and how many amalgamations of acute and community trusts there have been in the last five years in England and Wales. [147230]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* In England, there are 144 acute trusts, 128 community trusts and 53 acute and community trusts. These figures exclude community trusts with no consultant-led services and primary care trusts. There have been six amalgamations of acute and community trusts in England in the last five years and eight other mergers forming acute and community trusts but involving combinations of acute, community, or acute and community trusts with existing acute and community trusts. Questions about health services in Wales are a matter for the devolved Assembly.

Mrs. Nicola Stevenson and Mr. Richard Sampson

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library the reports by the Community Healthcare Service (North Derbyshire) NHS Trust into the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Mrs. Nicola Stevenson and Mr. Richard Sampson. [148584]

Mr. Hutton: I am aware of the tragic deaths of Mrs. Stevenson and Mr. Sampson and offer my sincere condolences to their families.

The Community Healthcare Service (North Derbyshire) National Health Service Trust has undertaken a thorough investigation into the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Mrs. Stevenson and Mr. Sampson. The

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resulting reports contain clinical and personal details and it would not be appropriate for them to be made public. The investigations have highlighted a number of concerns and, as a result, the trust has asked the North Derbyshire health authority to commission an external review into its acute in-patient unit. I would expect the findings of that review to be made public.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Activity Holiday Operators

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received from operators of activity holidays regarding the impact on staffing levels of the national minimum wage and the Working Time Directive. [148523]

Mr. Chris Smith: I have received no representations from operators of activity holidays regarding the impact of the Working Time Directive. Late in 1998 we received a copy of the British Activity Holiday Association's comments on the then draft National Minimum Wage Regulations. These comments concerned the accommodation offset.

PRIME MINISTER

Coleraine

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Prime Minister what progress has been made towards fulfilling the commitments he made at Coleraine in 1998; and if he will make a statement. [145749]

The Prime Minister: Considerable progress has been made since 1998 with the restoration of devolution, the establishment of the principle of consent in statute and arrangements for cross border co-operation and the promotion of fairness and equality. I am committed to ensuring that progress continues on all fronts and to bring about lasting stability and prosperity for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Ilisu Dam

Mr. Austin: To ask the Prime Minister what representations he has received from the World Archaeological Congress regarding Hasankeyf and the Ilisu dam; and if he will make a statement. [146852]

The Prime Minister: None.

No decision will be made on ECGD support until we have fully considered the Environmental Impact Assessment Report, which will cover the archaeological and cultural impact of the project.

Ministerial Residences

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the official residences of Ministers and the cost in 2000 of providing and servicing each one. [146329]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 5 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 50–51W.

Crown Appointments

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Prime Minister (1) what steps he takes to ensure compliance with the principles of equal opportunities in the appointment of *(a)* Sheriffs, *(b)* Under-Sheriffs, *(c)* Lords-Lieutenant and *(d)* deputy Lords-Lieutenant; and if he will make a statement; [146727]

(2) what plans he has to review the appointment procedures for *(a)* Sheriffs, *(b)* Under-Sheriffs, *(c)* Lords-Lieutenant and *(d)* deputy Lords-Lieutenant; and if he will make a statement. [146728]

The Prime Minister: The prime duty of Lords Lieutenant is to be the Queen's representatives in their county or area. Other than in four Scottish cities (where each Lord Provost is Lord-Lieutenant by virtue of office), Lords-Lieutenant are appointed under current legislation by the Queen on the advice of the Prime Minister of the day, following consultations locally and, where appropriate, with the relevant Secretary of State or First Minister.

Those appointed as Lords-Lieutenant are people of standing in their local communities, most frequently on account of their record of voluntary activity for the good of the community. In considering these appointments, the principles of equal opportunities are always taken into account. Deputy Lieutenants are appointed by Lords-Lieutenant, subject to the Queen not disapproving of the granting of the commission. Lords-Lieutenant are specifically advised that within each county or area, Deputy Lieutenants should be widely representative of its life in social range, gender, ethnic mix and service to the community.

Serving High Sheriffs are responsible for nominating their successors and their Under-Sheriffs. The Government are working with the Shrievalty Association to ensure that nominations cover a wider range of ethnic and social groups and both sexes, and has recently endorsed a proposal to establish nomination committees in England and Wales to encourage a more systematic approach.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Prime Minister how many *(a)* Sheriffs, *(b)* Under-Sheriffs, *(c)* Lords Lieutenant and *(d)* Deputy Lords-Lieutenant there are; in each category (i) how many and (ii) what proportion are (A) women and (B) from ethnic minority backgrounds; and if he will make a statement. [146731]

The Prime Minister: In England there are currently 46 Lords-Lieutenant (one of whom serves as Lord-Lieutenant of the separate counties of Herefordshire and Worcestershire); in Wales, six, plus two vacancies; in Scotland 35 (of whom four are ex-officio as Lord Provosts of cities); and in Northern Ireland eight.

Of these, seven in England are women; four in Scotland; one in Wales; and one in Northern Ireland. None is currently from an ethnic minority.

I welcome the fact that the number of female Lords-Lieutenant is growing and I look forward to the appointment of the first Lords-Lieutenant from ethnic minorities in due course.

I will write to my hon. Friend with the information that is available on the numbers of Deputy Lieutenants; it will take a little time to assemble.

There are 54 High Sheriffs in England and Wales (of whom one serves as High Sheriff for both Herefordshire and Worcestershire). Of these, seven (almost 13 per cent.) are women, and none is from the ethnic minorities. Nominations already made mean, however, that the proportion of women High Sheriffs will reach 25 per cent. in 2003. Three members of ethnic minorities have been nominated for future years in Greater London, Greater Manchester and Leicestershire respectively. There are 61 Under-Sheriffs in England and Wales, of whom two (just over 3 per cent.) are women. I regret that information is not available on the number for ethnic minorities.

There are eight Sheriffs in Northern Ireland, three of whom are women (37.5 per cent.); none is from an ethnic minority. There are no Under-Sheriffs in Northern Ireland.

Sheriffs in Scotland, being salaried judicial appointments, are not comparable to High Sheriffs or Sheriffs in England, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Personal Envoys

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to send a personal envoy to Zimbabwe to help resolve the land dispute and help restore peace to the country; and if he will make a statement. [146867]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 23 January 2001]:* There are no such plans.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to send a personal envoy with a message from him to *(a)* Sri Lanka, *(b)* Myanmar and *(c)* Sierra Leone, to help move the peace process forward; and if he will make a statement. [146868]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 23 January 2001]:* There are no such plans.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to send a personal envoy with a message from him to Phillipines Ministers to help in the search for Eiman April Grant; and if he will make a statement. [146869]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 23 January 2001]:* There are no plans to send a personal envoy to the Philippines.

The British Ambassador in Manila has, however, been liaising closely with senior members of the Philippine Government about the case. The Embassy is providing consular assistance to Eiman's step-father Mr. Grant, and Eiman's half-sister.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Chope: To ask the Prime Minister if he will instruct Sir Anthony Hammond QC to ascertain whether a meeting took place in August 1998 between the right hon. Member for Hartlepool and Mr. S. P. Hinduja and Mr. G. P. Hinduja. [147997]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* As has been made clear, all relevant information will be made available to Sir Anthony Hammond QC.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Prime Minister if he will instruct Sir Anthony Hammond QC to investigate the accuracy of the parliamentary answers given on 3 December 1998 by the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), to the hon. Member for Christchurch about meetings between the right hon. Member for Hartlepool and Mr. S. P. Hinduja and Mr. G. P. Hinduja. [147998]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* I have nothing to add to the reply given by my right hon. Friend on 3 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 1040.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister on what date a recommendation for an honour for one of the Hinduja brothers was received from an hon. Member. [148277]

The Prime Minister: It is established practice under section 8(c) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information not to disclose information relating to information, opinions and assessments given in relation to recommendations for honours.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if the report produced by Sir Anthony Hammond will contain unedited records of all *(a)* telephone calls, *(b)* letters and *(c)* other communications involving ministers relating to (i) the application for nationality made by the Hinduja brothers and (ii) the sponsorship of the Faith Zone at the Millennium Dome. [148365]

The Prime Minister: The terms of reference of Sir Anthony Hammond's review are set out in my answer to the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) of 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 70W (UIN 147716 and 147717). It is for Sir Anthony Hammond to decide what is included in his report to me.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make it his policy to provide substantive answers to parliamentary questions concerning the Hinduja brothers in advance of the publication of Sir Anthony Hammond's report. [148366]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to hon. Members by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 168W.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if the inquiry being undertaken by Sir Anthony Hammond will establish the level of donations by the Hinduja brothers to political parties since 1990. [148369]

The Prime Minister: No. The terms of reference have been set out in my answer to the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) on 29 January, *Official Report*, column 70W (UIN 147716 and 147717).

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister what criteria he applied in deciding that Sir Anthony Hammond should undertake the recently established inquiry. [148368]

The Prime Minister: In establishing an inquiry, the individual or team appointed to conduct the inquiry must be impartial, be able to weigh evidence within the particular circumstances of the case, and have the experience and status to command respect. I had all these criteria in mind in appointing Sir Anthony Hammond QC.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister on what basis information held by the security services on the Hinduja brothers will be available to Sir Anthony Hammond. [148370]

The Prime Minister: Sir Anthony Hammond will be provided with access to information held by the security and intelligence agencies if this is relevant to his review.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the companies approached by his Official Spokesman, Mr. Alastair Campbell, regarding sponsorship of the Millennium Dome. [148508]

The Prime Minister: None.

Lobby Briefings

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make it his policy for all lobby briefings undertaken on his behalf to be open for audio and visual recording. [148364]

The Prime Minister: Since the publication of the Mountfield Report in November 1997, all 11.00 am and 4.00 pm Lobby briefings by my official spokesman and his deputy are on the record. An account of them is published on the No.10 website.

It is for Ministers to represent the views of Government in Parliament.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Mortgage Group

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will ask the Office of Fair Trading to investigate the activities of the Mortgage Group; and if he will make a statement. [148181]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* The Director General of Fair Trading monitors the continuing fitness of all consumer credit licence holders.

I am aware of the Panorama programme which was broadcast on 28 January and contained a number of allegations about the business practices of the Mortgage Group. I understand that the Director General has approached the programme makers for evidence of the allegations made. Meanwhile, anybody else who has evidence of any breaches of the Consumers Credit Act 1974, its Regulations or the Director General's guidelines on non-status lending by any particular licence holder should pass full details to his office.

Magnox Reactors

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to restart the magnox reactors at Wylfa, Anglesey. [147843]

Mr. Hain: I understand that BNFL has agreed with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) a programme of work aimed at enabling BNFL to return the reactors at Wylfa to service. This programme of work is now being implemented. BNFL hopes to complete it during the first half of this year. HSE will not allow BNFL to return the station to operation until fully satisfied about its safety.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on how many occasions and at what locations officials from his Department accompanied the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) when he was Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to meetings with *(a)* Mr. Srichand Hinduja and *(b)* Mr. Gopichand Hinduja. [148004]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* I refer the hon. Member to the replies given by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), when he was Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on 3 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 291W.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what meetings *(a)* he and *(b)* other Ministers in his Department have attended (i) with the Hinduja brothers and (ii) at which matters relating to business interests controlled by the Hinduja brothers were discussed; [148147]

(2) if he will list the meetings in India attended by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Affairs, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), at which matters relating to the business interests of the Hinduja brothers were discussed. [148140]

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which Ministers and officials in his Department have *(a)* been contacted by and *(b)* contacted (i) Mr. G. P. Hinduja and (ii) Mr. S. P. Hinduja since 2 May 1997; if he will list the occasions on which there was such contact; and if he will make a statement. [148079]

Mr. Byers *[holding answers 31 January 2001 and 1 February]:* Following press speculation, I authorised the Department to issue a statement on 26 January detailing contacts between Department of Trade and Industry Ministers and G. P. and S. P. Hinduja. A copy of this statement has been laid in the Library of the House.

I also refer the right hon. Members to the replies given by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) when he was Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on 3 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 291W.

Huntingdon Life Sciences

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had with organisations which have sold shares in Huntingdon Life Sciences; and if he will make a statement. [147408]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* None.

Droit de Suite

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the prospects for the common position reached in the Council of Ministers over the Droit de Suite directive being maintained; and if he will make a statement. [148071]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 31 January 2001]:* The Government believe that the agreement reached in Council reflects an acceptable balance between the rights of artists and the competitiveness of the art market and will therefore be urging the Council to stand by the common position.

Miners' Pension Schemes

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what the average pension paid to people in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* the UK from (i) the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme and (ii) the British Coal Staff Superannuation Scheme is; [148133]

(2) how many people in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* the UK receive a pension from (i) the Mineworkers' Pensions Scheme and (ii) the British Coal Staff Superannuation Scheme. [148132]

Mr. Hain: These are matters for the trustees of the coal pension schemes. I have asked them to write to the hon. Gentleman direct.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the trips he has undertaken on official business to foreign countries, with the total cost of travel and accommodation for him and his party. [146369]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* In relation to my overseas travel in 1999–2000, I refer the right hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) on 8 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 364W.

Details of my overseas visits for 2000–01 will be published in the annual list in the usual way in due course.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Sex Offenders

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were on the sex offenders register on 1 January. [148049]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In September 2000, 13,809 offenders were liable for registration, of which over 97 per cent. had registered as required. Figures are collated on a quarterly basis. It is not currently possible to produce a breakdown of aggregated data on a national basis about those who are registered—for example, the percentage who are female, although sentencing statistics indicate these are likely to form a very small percentage of the total. Such information can only be extracted locally by the police using manual means.

Work is in hand to develop the computerised recording systems as part of a wider programme of work to enhance the Police National Computer.

Animals (Scientific Procedures Inspector)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average annual cost is of an Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspector; and if he will make a statement. [148361]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: On the basis of the funding available for the current financial year and the allocation for central overheads, the average annual cost of each inspector is £113,500.

Pets (Free Medical Aid)

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements have been made on a voluntary basis by agencies to provide free emergency medical aid for pet animals. [148378]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There are agencies that currently provide free help to ill or injured pet animals. Central Government have no direct involvement with the aid that these agencies provide.

Asylum Seekers (Tibet)

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications have been received from Tibetan asylum seekers since 1 May 1997; how many of these have been successful; and if he will make a statement on the Government's policy in relation to asylum seekers from Tibet. [147869]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested is not available.

Asylum applicants from Tibet are classed as nationals of the People's Republic of China. Different regions or provinces are not differentiated in the asylum statistics for Chinese nationals.

Decisions on asylum applications are based on a full and careful consideration of the merits of individual cases, irrespective of the nationality of the applicant.

Drugs (Weston-super-Mare)

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations and from whom he has received in the past 12 months on solutions to the drugs problems in Weston-super-Mare. [148372]

Mr. Charles Clarke: So far as can be ascertained, my Department has within this period answered two letters from residents of Weston-super-Mare offering opposing views on the legalisation of cannabis.

Drug Action Teams (DATs) have been set up across the country to deliver the Government's Anti Drugs Strategy, "Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain" at the local level. It is the responsibility of these local teams to assess the extent of drug misuse in their area and to plan and implement action to tackle it. The Home Office Drugs Prevention Advisory Service has a copy of the North Somerset action plan. I understand that the DAT has proposed a research study by the University of Bath in response to local concerns about offenders and homelessness, which it is suggested are linked to the number of residential rehabilitation units based in Weston-super-Mare.

DAT 'clinics', advertised through local press, are an opportunity for local residents to make an appointment

with DAT members to discuss particular issues or to find out more about the work of the DAT. The first for the North Somerset DAT was held in November and these will continue on a bi-monthly basis. North Somerset DAT has also produced a media strategy, 'To proactively engage the media on substance use/misuse issues and DAT work', and so achieves wide local coverage of drugs issues.

Naturalisation Applications

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for naturalisation on grounds of residence were granted within *(a)* six months, *(b)* nine months and *(c)* 12 months of the date of application in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998, (iii) 1999 and (iv) 2000; and if he will make a statement. [147599]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* The information is given in the table. The data are not available for part of the years 1997 and 2000, due to intermittent problems with Information Technology and operator error, but nevertheless comparisons can be made. The table includes only applications made under Section 6(1) of the British Nationality Act 1981, based on five years' residence in the United Kingdom.

Applications decided within:	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*Total*
Six months	331	486	1,112	1,371	3,300
Nine months	758	722	1,345	1,819	4,644
12 months	1,946	1,935	1,819	4,733	10,433
Total	3,035	3,143	4,276	7,923	18,377

The Right hon. Member for Hartlepool

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) will change his chauffeur driven Jaguar for a different official car. [148382]

Mr. Straw: It is not our policy to comment on the protection arrangements for individuals, as to do so would compromise their security. Protective arrangements for public figures are regularly reviewed in the light of the threat from terrorism and other continuing risks.

Police Funding

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the funding formula for allocating resources to police forces in England and Wales; and what weighting is given to social deprivation factors in the existing funding formula. [146918]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I will be considering the funding formula in the context of the review of local government finance, in relation to the police service.

Various indicators are used in the calculation of the police funding formula. These indicators include population, unemployment levels and other socio-economic factors, and show the type of data that influence funding distribution through the formula.

All the indicators used in the police funding formula are as listed:

Police establishment
Resident population
Daytime population
Households renting
Residents in terraced accommodation
Residents in lone parent families
Residents in overcrowded households
One-adult households
Striving population
Unemployment-related benefit claims
Long term unemployment-related benefit claimants
Young male unemployment-related benefit claimants
Population density
Population sparsity
Built-up road lengths
Motorway lengths
Police pensions
Security expenditure

Details of the indicators and their relative value in determining the allocation for individual forces are set out in the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2001–02. A copy has been placed in the Library.

The predicted workload for each force, over a range of different service elements or components, is estimated each year on the basis of these indicators and forms the basis for distribution of funding.

Prison Service

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish the Prison Service's Corporate Plan for 2001–02 to 2003–04 and Business Plan and key performance indicators for 2001–02. [148884]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service Corporate Plan for 2001–02 to 2003–04 and Business Plan for 2001–02, which includes the key performance indicators, has been published today and copies have been placed in the Library.

TREASURY

Economic Activity Rate

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the economic activity rate was among *(a)* men aged 50 to 54, *(b)* men aged 55 to 59, *(c)* men aged 60 to 64, *(d)* men aged 65 to 69, *(e)* men aged 70 and over, *(f)* women aged 50 to 54, *(g)* women aged 55 to 59, *(h)* women aged 60 to 64, *(i)* women aged 65 to 69 and

(j) women aged 70 years and over in each of the four quarters for which he has the most recent data (i) in the UK and (ii) in each of the parliamentary constituencies in Wirral. [146892]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 23 January 2001]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Frank Field, dated 2 February 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the economic activity rate in the UK and the Wirral for men and women in various age groups (146892).

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the main source of labour market data on individuals used by National Statistics. Information from the LFS on economic activity rates can be derived on a quarterly basis for the UK and on an annual basis for parliamentary constituencies. The most recent data has been given for both. Economic activity rates in the Wirral are not available for the age groups requested. However, they are available for people aged 16 and over and these have been given.

The tables overleaf show the economic activity rates (i) in the UK for men and women in various age groups from winter (December-February) 1999/2000 to autumn (September-November) 2000 and (ii) in the Wirral from March 1999 to February 2000.

According to the LFS definition, the economically active are people aged 16 and over who are either in employment or International Labour Organisation unemployed. The activity rate is those economically active as a percentage of all persons 16 and over.

Activity rates by age and sex for people aged 50 and over; UK; winter 1999–2000 to autumn 2000; not seasonally adjusted—United Kingdom

Percentage

	All persons	*Men*	*Women*
Winter 1999–2000			
All aged 50 and over	36.0	44.4	28.9
50–54	79.2	86.0	72.4
55–59	65.6	74.5	56.9
60–64	37.4	49.2	26.1
65–69	11.4	13.9	9.1
70 and over	2.9	4.7	1.7
Spring 2000			
All aged 50 and over	36.3	44.8	29.0
50–54	79.5	86.2	72.7
55–59	66.1	74.8	57.6
60–64	37.8	50.3	25.9
65–69	11.6	14.9	8.5
70 and over	2.7	4.5	1.6
Summer 2000			
All aged 50 and over	36.4	44.7	29.2
50–54	79.2	86.0	72.5
55–59	66.3	74.6	58.2
60–64	38.4	51.1	26.2
65–69	11.4	14.4	8.7
70 and over	2.7	4.3	1.6
Autumn 2000			
All aged 50 and over	36.4	44.8	29.3
50–54	79.1	85.8	72.4
55–59	66.7	74.9	58.6
60–64	38.4	50.9	26.5
65–69	11.4	14.8	8.4
70 and over	2.6	4.1	1.5

Source:
ONS Labour Force Survey

Activity rates in the Wirral and each of its four parliamentary constituencies; for all aged 16+; March 1999-February 2000; not seasonally adjusted

Percentage

	All aged 16+
Wirral	54
Birkenhead	54.8
Wallasey	52.5
Wirral South	58.6
Wirral West	50.3

Source:
ONS Labour Force Survey

Earnings Statistics

Paddy Ashdown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what estimate he has made of (i) the number of people and (ii) the percentage of the workforce earning *(a)* less than £4 per hour, *(b)* £4 per hour and up to £4.50 per hour and *(c)* above £4.50 per hour and up to £5 per hour in (A) the UK, (B) the South West of England and (C) Yeovil constituency; [144614]

(2) how many people in *(a)* Somerset and *(b)* Yeovil constituency earn (i) £3.60 per hour, (ii) £3.61 to £3.80 per hour, (iii) £3.81 to £4.00 per hour and (iv) £4.01 to £4.50 per hour; what percentage of total employees this constitutes in each case; and if he will make a statement. [144611]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 18 January 2001]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Karen Dunnell to Paddy Ashdown, dated 2 February 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent questions on hourly earnings in the UK, South West and Yeovil Parliamentary Constituency (144611, 144614). I am replying in his absence.

The following table shows the number and percentage of jobs paid within specified hourly pay bands for the UK in spring 2000. The estimates are based on an improved methodology using data from both the New Earnings Survey (NES) and the Labour Force Survey (LFS). Estimates based on this methodology are not available for regions, counties or constituencies.

	Number of jobs in UK (thousands)	*Proportion of jobs in UK (percentage)*
Less than £4.00 per hour	2,030	8.3
£4.00-£4.50 per hour	2,220	9.1
£4.51-£5.00 per hour	1,900	7.8

The improved methodology has been developed to overcome the deficiencies inherent in the two surveys, the NES and the LFS, in measuring low pay. It is possible to produce estimates for the proportion of employee jobs earning within the specified hourly pay bands for smaller areas from the NES. However, the NES underestimates the number of low pay jobs since it does not provide a comprehensive picture of the lower end of the earnings distribution.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what percentage of full-time workers in *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* each of the unitary local authority areas in Scotland and *(c)* Great Britain earn gross pay less than (i) £279.21 per week, (ii) £257.73 per week, (iii) £193.30 per week

and (iv) £140 per week, broken down by (1) male manual, (2) male non-manual, (3) all male workers, (4) female manual, (5) female non-manual, (6) all female workers, (7) all manual, (8) all non-manual and (9) for all workers; [145075]

(2) if he will list the average weekly gross earnings for full-time workers in *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* each of the unitary local authority areas in Scotland and *(c)* Great Britain for (i) all manual, (ii) all non-manual and (iii) all workers in the last 12 months. [145074]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Karen Dunnell to Mr. Michael Moore, dated 2 February 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent questions on weekly earnings for workers in Scotland, the unitary authorities in Scotland and Great Britain (145075, 145074). I am replying in his absence.

The New Earnings Survey (NES) can provide earnings data for small geographical areas. However, the NES has incomplete coverage of those on low pay because the sample is largely limited to people earning above the income tax threshold. The release of NES data is restricted to figures that are derived from a sufficiently large sample of employees, and have an acceptable level of accuracy. I have provided the available data for Scotland, the unitary authorities in Scotland and Great Britain in the attached tables, only where the samples are large enough and have an acceptable level of accuracy. These are based on the 2000 NES, the latest survey for which data are available.

Percentage of employees

	Less than £279.21	*Less than £257.73*	*Less than £193.30*	*Less than £140*
Weekly earnings including overtime for full-time employees for Great Britain				
Male				
Non-manual	15.8	12.4	3.7	0.3
Manual	34.9	26.9	7.8	0.7
All	23.9	18.5	5.4	0.5
Female				
Non-manual	39.3	32.3	10.4	0.9
Manual	79.0	71.9	40.5	6.9
All	45.4	38.4	15.1	1.8
All employees				
Non-manual	26.7	21.6	6.8	0.6
Manual	42.6	34.8	13.5	1.8
All	31.8	25.9	9.0	1.0
Weekly earnings including overtime for full-time employees for Scotland				
Male				
Non-manual	17.9	14.9	4.5	0.3
Manual	37.1	28.7	8.9	1.0
All	26.7	21.2	6.5	0.6
Female				
Non-manual	43.9	37.3	11.3	0.7
Manual	82.8	75.0	46.6	8.3
All	50.2	43.5	17.0	2.0
All employees				
Non-manual	31.2	26.3	8.0	0.5
Manual	46.0	37.7	16.2	2.5
All	36.2	30.2	10.7	1.2
Weekly earnings including overtime for full-time employees for unitary authorities in Scotland				
Male				
Non-Manual				
Aberdeen City	12.2	10.1	3.8	0.0
Dundee City	13.3	9.7	0.9	0.0
Edinburgh, City of	18.0	15.8	4.4	0.0
Fife	15.6	12.2	4.8	0.0
Glasgow City	20.1	17.2	5.5	0.2
North Lanarkshire	19.9	14.7	3.1	1.0
Renfrewshire	16.9	13.7	8.1	1.6
Male				
Manual				
Aberdeen City	31.8	24.2	8.3	0.0
Aberdeenshire	35.9	29.3	9.8	1.1
Dumfries and Galloway	42.0	30.9	7.4	1.2
Dundee City	44.2	36.8	10.5	1.1
East Ayrshire	37.5	28.6	10.7	0.0
Edinburgh, City of	43.5	38.2	13.8	1.2
Falkirk	25.0	21.4	4.8	1.2
Fife	35.8	29.0	7.3	0.5
Glasgow City	38.6	28.5	10.1	2.0
Highland	40.3	26.9	6.7	0.8
Inverclyde	31.8	25.0	4.5	0.0
North Ayrshire	36.8	28.1	12.3	0.0
North Lanarkshire	36.9	27.4	7.1	0.6
Perth and Kinross	41.5	29.2	4.6	1.5
Renfrewshire	28.7	25.5	10.6	1.1
South Ayrshire	32.3	26.2	4.6	1.5
South Lanarkshire	30.3	21.2	3.8	0.8
Stirling	33.3	27.8	5.6	0.0
West Lothian	30.3	22.0	7.3	1.8
Male				
All				
Aberdeen City	19.2	15.1	5.4	0.0
Aberdeenshire	24.8	20.5	6.2	0.6
Argyll and Bute	27.9	19.8	5.8	0.0
Dumfries and Galloway	32.8	24.8	5.8	0.7
Dundee City	27.4	22.1	5.3	0.5
East Ayrshire	28.4	21.1	6.4	0.0
Edinburgh, City of	25.7	22.6	7.2	0.4
Falkirk	23.4	17.7	4.0	0.6
Fife	27.1	21.8	6.2	0.3
Glasgow City	27.1	21.5	7.3	0.9
Highland	20.9	21.3	5.3	0.5
Midlothian	22.4	17.9	6.0	1.5
North Ayrshire	26.4	20.8	8.5	0.9
North Lanarkshire	27.9	20.6	5.0	0.8
Perth and Kinross	33.9	25.4	5.1	0.8
Renfrewshire	22.0	18.8	9.2	1.4
South Ayrshire	25.2	19.8	4.6	0.8
South Lanarkshire	24.9	18.1	4.2	0.4
West Lothian	25.6	20.0	6.7	1.1
Female				
Non-manual				
Aberdeen City	34.7	25.2	5.9	0.5
Angus	51.6	46.9	12.5	0.0
Dundee City	45.6	38.4	11.2	0.0
Edinburgh, City of	36.5	29.8	6.9	0.4
Fife	50.6	44.4	13.0	0.0
Glasgow City	41.8	34.7	9.5	0.3
Highland	49.2	43.8	18.5	0.0
North Ayrshire	47.2	39.6	17.0	0.0
North Lanarkshire	47.3	42.0	8.3	1.2

	Percentage of employees			
	Less than £279.21	*Less than £257.73*	*Less than £193.30*	*Less than £140*
Perth and Kinross	46.7	41.3	15.2	0.0
South Lanarkshire	48.9	43.8	16.1	2.2
Female Manual				
Dundee City	82.1	71.4	32.1	3.6
Fife	90.0	81.7	45.0	8.3
Glasgow City	78.8	72.7	40.9	6.1
South Lanarkshire	82.5	75.0	40.0	0.0
Female All				
Aberdeen City	42.4	33.1	13.1	1.3
Angus	61.3	55.0	20.0	1.3
Scottish Borders, The	62.2	52.7	24.3	1.4
Dundee City	52.3	44.4	15.0	0.7
Edinburgh, City of	40.9	34.1	11.0	1.1
Fife	61.3	54.5	21.6	2.3
Glasgow City	45.3	38.2	12.4	0.8
Highland	53.1	48.3	20.7	0.7
Inverclyde	53.6	46.4	12.5	3.6
North Ayrshire	53.0	47.0	24.2	4.5
North Lanarkshire	52.0	47.0	13.6	2.5
Perth and Kinross	55.0	47.7	20.2	0.9
Renfrewshire	45.9	42.3	18.0	2.7
South Lanarkshire	56.5	50.8	21.5	1.7
All employees Non-manual				
Aberdeen City	22.5	17.0	4.8	0.2
Aberdeenshire	29.1	25.4	11.2	0.7
Angus	38.7	35.1	9.0	0.0
Dundee City	30.3	24.8	6.3	0.0
East Ayrshire	28.8	23.7	10.2	0.0
Edinburgh, City of	27.1	22.7	5.6	0.2
Falkirk	39.6	31.0	8.0	0.5
Fife	34.0	29.1	9.1	0.0
Glasgow City	31.6	26.4	7.6	0.2
Highland	36.7	31.7	12.4	0.0
Midlothian	21.4	17.9	1.8	1.8
North Ayrshire	31.4	26.5	10.8	1.0
North Lanarkshire	32.8	27.5	5.6	1.1
Perth and Kinross	38.6	33.8	11.7	0.0
Renfrewshire	28.1	24.4	11.5	2.3
South Ayrshire	29.1	25.2	7.1	0.8
South Lanarkshire	34.4	29.6	10.4	1.1
West Lothian	29.3	25.7	10.0	0.7
All employees Manual				
Aberdeen City	43.4	35.5	18.1	1.2
Aberdeenshire	52.0	43.3	22.8	5.5
Scottish Borders, The	68.3	58.7	27.0	1.6
Dumfries and Galloway	50.5	42.1	22.4	5.6
Dundee City	52.8	44.7	15.4	1.6
East Ayrshire	44.9	36.2	18.8	1.4
Edinburgh, City of	50.8	45.0	20.7	2.6
Falkirk	33.3	30.3	15.2	4.0
Fife	48.6	41.5	16.2	2.4
Glasgow City	44.9	35.4	15.0	2.6
Highland	45.5	33.6	10.4	1.5
Inverclyde	37.3	30.5	10.2	3.4
North Ayrshire	44.3	37.1	20.0	4.3
North Lanarkshire	43.1	34.5	12.7	2.0
Perth and Kinross	53.7	40.2	13.4	2.4
Renfrewshire	33.9	31.3	13.4	0.9
South Ayrshire	40.8	35.5	10.5	2.6
South Lanarkshire	42.4	33.7	12.2	0.6
Stirling	47.8	43.5	17.4	4.3
West Lothian	36.8	27.8	12.8	1.5
All employees All				
Aberdeen City	28.2	22.1	8.4	0.5
Aberdeenshire	40.2	34.1	16.9	3.1
Angus	46.2	40.4	14.0	1.2
Argyll and Bute	38.1	29.1	11.2	1.5
Scottish Borders, The	50.9	43.4	16.8	0.6
Dumfries and Galloway	44.5	38.6	16.8	3.2
Dundee City	38.0	31.6	9.4	0.6
East Ayrshire	34.8	28.3	13.4	0.5
East Lothian	29.3	25.3	9.3	2.7
Edinburgh, City of	32.2	27.6	8.9	0.7
Falkirk	37.4	30.8	10.5	1.7
Fife	40.6	34.7	12.3	1.1
Glasgow City	35.0	28.7	9.5	0.9
Highland	40.1	32.4	11.6	0.6
Inverclyde	37.7	32.6	9.4	1.4
Midlothian	28.9	24.7	7.2	2.1
North Ayrshire	36.6	30.8	14.5	2.3
North Lanarkshire	36.4	30.0	8.1	1.4
Perth and Kinross	44.1	36.1	12.3	0.9
Renfrewshire	30.1	26.7	12.2	1.8
South Ayrshire	33.5	29.1	8.4	1.5
South Lanarkshire	37.6	31.2	11.1	0.9
West Lothian	33.0	26.7	11.4	1.1

	Average Earnings (£)
Average weekly gross earnings for full-time employees for Great Britain	
All employees	
Non-Manual	452.39
Manual	323.61
All	410.62
Average weekly gross earnings for full-time employees for Scotland	
All employees	
Non-manual	414.22
Manual	312.37
All	379.83
Average weekly gross earnings for full-time employees for unitary authorities in Scotland	
All employees Non-manual	
Aberdeen City	481.88
Aberdeenshire	444.22
Angus	375.65

	Average Earnings (£)
Dundee City	398.62
East Ayrshire	407.73
Edinburgh, City of	433.22
Falkirk	391.83
Fife	383.05
Glasgow City	419.57
Highland	369.49
Midlothian	416.61
North Ayrshire	374.75
North Lanarkshire	403.11
Perth and Kinross	348.07
Renfrewshire	418.48
South Ayrshire	416.62
South Lanarkshire	415.73
West Lothian	436.34
Manual	
Aberdeen City	348.52
Aberdeenshire	294.10
Scottish Borders, The	260.52
Dumfries and Galloway	274.54
Dundee City	291.64
East Ayrshire	292.17
Edinburgh, City of	300.96
Falkirk	355.44
Fife	298.02
Glasgow City	311.47
Highland	322.82
Inverclyde	316.04
North Ayrshire	305.86
North Lanarkshire	318.23
Perth and Kinross	305.81
Renfrewshire	353.30
South Ayrshire	335.40
South Lanarkshire	337.68
Stirling	279.38
West Lothian	328.88
All	
Aberdeen City	445.35
Aberdeenshire	371.18
Angus	342.05
Argyll and Bute	378.81
Scottish Borders, The	326.33
Dumfries and Galloway	330.36
Dundee City	362.17
East Ayrshire	365.09
East Lothian	361.85
Edinburgh, City of	404.64
Falkirk	379.23
Fife	344.77
Glasgow City	391.84
Highland	351.72
Inverclyde	356.85
Midlothian	375.60
North Ayrshire	346.72
North Lanarkshire	373.09
Perth and Kinross	332.80
Renfrewshire	396.29
South Ayrshire	386.21
South Lanarkshire	385.36
West Lothian	383.99

Pensioners (Rural Areas)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate how many *(a)* pensioners and *(b)* other people are living in rural areas; and if he will provide corresponding estimates for (i) 10 and (ii) 20 years earlier. [144359]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Kidgell to Mr. Steve Webb, dated 2 February 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question on pensioners living in rural areas (144359). I am replying in his absence.

The following table shows the estimated number of people of pensionable age and of all other ages in 1981, 1991 and 1999, resident in those local authorities in England and Wales identified as rural areas in the Office for National Statistics (ONS) classification of local and health authorities of Great Britain.

Estimated number of (thousands) of people of (a) pensionable age[1] and (b) all other ages in local authorities identified as "rural areas"[2]: England and Wales 1981, 1991 and 1999

	1981	1991	1999
Pensionable age	978.3	1,117.5	1,191.2
All other ages	3,705.0	3,911.6	4,133.2
Total population	4,683.2	5,029.1	5,324.4
Percentage of population who were of pensionable age	20.9	22.2	22.4

[1] Men aged 65 years and over, women aged 60 years and over.
[2] See Office for National Statistics classification of local and health authorities of Great Britain (ONS: London 1999).

Census (Leeds)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of respondents to the pilot census survey undertaken on 25 April 1999 in Leeds identified themselves as Kashmiri. [145621]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Hilary Benn, dated 2 February 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question on what proportion of respondents to the pilot census survey undertaken on 25 April 1999 in Leeds identified themselves as 'Kashmiri' (145621). I am replying on his behalf.

A census rehearsal was carried out in a number of selected areas across the country, including parts of Leeds, in April 1999 for the prime purpose of ensuring that the methods and procedures for the full census in April this year will work efficiently. Response to the rehearsal was voluntary, and there were responses from 32,718 people in Leeds.

Although there has been no intention to publish the statistical results from the Rehearsal, an analysis of the answers to the ethnic group question in Leeds showed that there were some 81 write-in responses of 'Kashmiri' (0.25 per cent of all respondents in Leeds).

Minimum Wage

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many individuals in Crosby have benefited from the introduction of the national minimum wage. [148335]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas, dated 2 February 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question about the number of workers in Crosby who have benefited from the national minimum wage (NMW) (148335).

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has published estimates of the number of jobs paid at less than NMW rates for 1998, 1999 and 2000. These are based on an improved methodology using data from both the New Earnings Survey and Labour Force Survey. Estimates for the United Kingdom and Government Office Regions are available on the National Statistics website at: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/nsbase/themes/labour—market/nmw—lowpay—tables.asp

No estimates are available for Parliamentary Constituencies.

Tower Wagons

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the letter from the Minister for Transport of 11 January regarding the vehicle excise duty applicable to tower wagons, if he plans to harmonise the tax treatment of tower wagons and mobile cranes; and if he will make a statement. [148587]

Mr. Timms: Any changes to rates of vehicle excise duty will be announced by the Chancellor as part of his Budget statement.

Euro

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many auctions by the Bank of England of notes in foreign currencies there have been over the past five years; and if he will list the *(a)* currencies and *(b)* amounts involved; [145628]

(2) for what reason the euro notes being auctioned by the Bank of England on 16 January will not be offered to institutions in the United States of America; and if any other nations are subject to the same restrictions; [145630]

(3) if the European Central Bank was consulted on the proposed issue of euro notes by the Bank of England; and if he will make a statement. [145627]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* The UK Government have been running a euro Treasury note programme since 1992. This has involved quarterly auctions of euro-dominated Treasury notes, to reach a total outstanding of 6 billion euro.

In the past five years the Bank has also issued on behalf of HMG a total of $4 billion of dollar denominated debt.

The European Central Bank was not consulted on the proposed issue of euro notes by the Bank of England but was aware of the intention to issue. The UK Government and the Bank are free to determine independently the debt securities they wish to sell and the currencies in which those of denominated.

Under the US Securities Act of 1933, euro Treasury notes may not be offered, sold or delivered within the United States until 40 days after the auction, if they have not been registered.

Financial Services

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many cases have been undertaken, and how many successful prosecutions have resulted each year, using each sub-section of section 47 of the Financial Services Act 1986; and if the replacement section of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 is now fully operational. [143880]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* There have been a total of seven prosecutions under section 47 of the Financial Services Act 1986 since it came into force. Six resulted in convictions. The replacement provisions of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 will come into operation later this year.

Residential Mooring Fees

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will make a statement on the review of the levying of VAT on residential boat mooring fees; [148585]

(2) what consultations his Department has undertaken on the levying of VAT on residential boat mooring fees. [148586]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs have discussed the issue, and will continue to discuss it, with the Residential Boat Owners Association and representatives of mooring providers.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what was the total amount of income received from the levying of VAT on residential boat mooring fees in the last financial year; [148574]

(2) what average amount of VAT was collected on residential boat mooring fees in the years *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99, *(c)* 1999–2000 and *(d)* 2000–01; [148572]

(3) how many residential boats paid VAT on their mooring fees in the last financial year. [148573]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs and Excise do not have estimates of the number of residential boats that have paid VAT on their mooring fees, or the amount of VAT collected from these fees.

Tobacco (Taxes)

Mr. Barron: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much revenue was raised from each of the taxes payable on each category of tobacco products in the last year for which figures are available. [148498]

Dawn Primarolo: The information on revenue from tobacco products can be found in the HM Customs & Excise "Tobacco Factsheet", a copy of which is in the House of Commons Library.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the total amount of unclaimed working families tax credit to date in *(a)* the UK, *(b)* Scotland, *(c)* Glasgow and *(d)* Glasgow, Pollok constituency; and if he will make a statement. [148118]

Dawn Primarolo: No such estimates are available.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how the Government plan to implement the provisions of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages; and if he will make a statement. [147383]

Mr. Vaz: The Government will apply the provisions of Part II to all the languages which they regard as meeting the Charter's definition of a regional or minority language. The Government will promote the use in public life of Welsh, Scottish-Gaelic and Irish by applying a minimum of 35 provisions from Part III to each of those languages.

Within a year of the Charter's entry into force in the UK, the Government will submit a report on UK implementation of the Charter for examination by the Charter's Committee of Experts.

Divali Celebrations

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many invitations Ministers in his Department accepted and from whom in 2000, for Divali celebrations. [147292]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* The Foreign Secretary, Baroness Scotland, the then Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) and the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle) and I did not accept any invitations to Divali celebrations in 2000. The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) accepted invitations from the Leicester Hindu Festival Council, the Leicester Bratma Samaj, the Shree Prajapati Association, London First and the Swaminarayan Hindu Mission in Neasden for Divali celebrations in 2000.

UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the result of the visit of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education in October 1999; and what communications he has received concerning the recommendations of the special rapporteur. [148043]

Mr. Battle: Following the special rapporteur's visit to the UK on October 1999, and her visit report which was presented to the Commission on Human Rights in 2000, we have not received any external communications about her visit.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards will meet the special rapporteur again on 7 February to discuss the report of her visit. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State and Deputy Home Secretary will also meet the special rapporteur to discuss her concerns about the provision of education in prisons.

Mercenaries

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what factors underlay his decision to vote against resolution 2000/3 at the UN Human Rights Commission in March and April 2000 concerning the use of mercenaries; what position he will take in 2001; and what measures he has taken to regulate companies recruiting and offering the services of mercenaries. [148042]

Mr. Battle: The EU does not believe the Commission on Human Rights is the appropriate forum to deal with the problem of mercenary activity. We share the view that this subject should be dealt with directly in the UN General Assembly's Sixth Committee. We have not decided what position we will take if and when we are asked to vote again this year. As in previous years, the UK, along with other member states of the European Union, could not support the resolution entitled "The Use of Mercenaries as a means of Violating Human Rights and Impeding the Exercise of the Right of Peoples to Self-Determination" at the 56th Session of the Commission on Human Rights in March-April 2000.

Work is continuing on the preparation of a Green Paper outlining options for the regulation of mercenaries and private military companies.

Slavery

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the Government will sponsor with its European Union partners a resolution at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights this year condemning bonded labour and other forms of slavery. [148117]

Mr. Battle: The Government are firmly committed to the promotion of fundamental labour standards including those covering forced and bonded labour. Discussions with EU partners continue on which initiatives should be considered at the 57th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR). The Government, along with EU partners, have no plans to sponsor a resolution at UNCHR condemning bonded labour and other forms of slavery.

MI6

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the comments by Richard Tomlinson concerning the training of MI6 personnel in the Gosport and Portsmouth area, with particular reference to illegal entry into people's homes. [148177]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* In accordance with well established policy I am not prepared to comment on speculation about alleged intelligence operations. This applies equally to the allegations described in the book by Mr. Tomlinson, who has a history of spreading sensationalist and misleading material. I can confirm, however, that officials of the intelligence services in the UK, including those undertaking training, are required at all times to carry out their work in accordance with the law.

EU Agenda

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list *(a)* the forthcoming business in the Council of the European

Union for February and *(b)* the major European Union events for the period between 1 February and 31 July 2001. [149039]

Mr. Vaz: Forthcoming EU business in February is as follows:

8–9 February—Stockholm—Justice and Home Affairs Council
12 February—Brussels—ECOFIN Council
12 February—Brussels—Education/Youth Council
12 February—Brussels—Research Council
15–17 February—Lulea—Employment/Telecommunications (Informal)
19–20 February—Brussels—Agriculture Council
25 February—Brussels—Informal Trade Ministers Dinner
26 February—Brussels—General Affairs Council

No agendas for the above are available at present.

The following are the principal events in the EU between 1 March and July 2001 (certain relevant events are also included: the list is based on the information available at the date of issue.).

Date	*Venue*	*Event*
March		
6	Brussels	Employment and Social Affairs Council
8	Brussels	Environment Council
12	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
12	Brussels	Internal Market/Consumer Council
15	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
16	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
19	Brussels	Agriculture Council
19	Brussels	General Affairs Council
20	Brussels	General Affairs Council
20–21	Brussels	Fisheries Council (possible)
23–24	Stockholm	European Council
March-April		
31–1	Brussels	Informal Meeting of Ministers of the Environment
April		
5–6	Brussels	Transport/Telecommunications Council
8–10	Brussels	General Affairs Council
8–10	Brussels	Agriculture Council (Informal)
24–25	Brussels	Agriculture Council
May		
5–6	Brussels	Gymnich
7	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
7	Brussels	Employment and Social Council (possible)
14–15	Brussels	General Affairs Council
14–15	Brussels	Industry and Energy Council
22–23	Brussels	Agriculture Council
28–29	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
28	Brussels	Education and Youth Council
30	Brussels	Development Council
31	Brussels	Health Council
June		
5	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
5	Brussels	Internal Market/Consumer Council
7–8	Brussels	Environment Council
11–12	Brussels	General Affairs Council
11	Brussels	Employment/Social Affairs Council
15–16	Gothenburg	European Council
18	Brussels	Fisheries Council (possible)
19–20	Brussels	Agriculture Council
19	Brussels	ECOFIN Council (possible)
21	Brussels	Culture Council
25–26	Brussels	General Affairs Council
26	Brussels	Research Council
27–28	Brussels	Transport/Telecommunications Research Council
July		
6–7	Brussels	Informal Employment and Social Affairs Council
10	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
13–14	Brussels	Regional Territories Council (Informal)
16–17	Brussels	General Affairs Council
16–17	Brussels	General Affairs Council
20	Brussels	Budget Council
23–24	Brussels	Agriculture Council

Tibet

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make an assessment of the impact of his policy of constructive engagement with China in so far as it relates to the condition of the Tibetan people; and if he will make a statement. [147868]

Mr. Battle: The human rights situation in Tibet remains a matter of deep concern. It is a focus of our critical engagement with the Chinese authorities, at ministerial level and through the regular UK/China human rights dialogues.

We press the Chinese authorities to enter into a dialogue with the Dalai Lama on a long term future in Tibet; to remove restrictions on the freedom of religion, expression and association; and to cease the harsh treatment of dissidents and the erosion of Tibetan culture and traditional practices. We also raise a number of individual cases of concern including Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the Dalai Lama's choice as the 11th Panchen Lama.

During the last round of the dialogue, the Chinese side briefed us on resumed contacts with the Dalai Lama. We have welcomed the re-establishment of contacts with the Chinese authorities and urged both sides to take these further forward. The Chinese side also provided new information on Gedhun Choekyi Nyima and agreed to extend an invitation to the All Party Group on Tibet to visit Tibet.

Progress on these issues remains slow. However, critical engagement allows us to press for change at the highest levels. We will continue to do so, most immediately at the forthcoming sixth round of the UK/China human rights dialogue to be held in Beijing between 12–14 February.

Pakistan

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Pakistan concerning reports of arming warships and submarines with nuclear weapons; and if he will make a statement. [148427]

Mr. Wilson: We are aware of recent media reports which allege that Pakistan has plans to develop a sea-borne nuclear capability. We regularly underline to Pakistan, and also to India, our concerns about their nuclear weapon programmes and call on them to implement UNSCR 1172 of 1998.

Ministerial Visits

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the visits to India and Pakistan made by his Department's Ministers since 2 May 1997. [148428]

Mr. Wilson: FCO Ministers have made the following visits to India and Pakistan since 2 May 1997:

Date of visit	
India	
June 1997	Right hon. Derek Fatchett MP
September 1997	The Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean
October 1997	Right hon. Robin Cook MP
November 1998	Right hon. Derek Fatchett MP
November 1999	Peter Hain MP
February 2000	Keith Vaz MP
April 2000	Right hon. Robin Cook MP
November 2000	Peter Hain MP
Pakistan	
June 1997	Right hon. Derek Fatchett MP
October 1997	Right hon. Robin Cook MP
January 1998	The Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean
February 1999	Right hon. Derek Fatchett MP

India

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what telephone calls have been made by Ministers to representatives of foreign Governments concerning attempts by the Indian Government to obtain information in respect of corruption investigations currently being undertaken in that country; and if he will make a statement. [148360]

Mr. Vaz: None.

Entry Visa Applications

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the role of the Minister for Europe in reviewing individual entry visa applications from the Indian subcontinent, indicating the criteria used to allow previously declined applications. [148510]

Mr. Vaz: Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers have the power to intervene in cases that fall within the Immigration Rules. I will normally intervene in entry clearance applications only following representations from right hon. and hon. Members of this House where there are exceptional compelling or compassionate circumstances. I will overturn the decision of the entry clearance officer only where I have been persuaded that the applicant qualifies under the Immigration Rules. I am happy to see hon. Members at the monthly visa surgeries which I hold. Information on visas is available at the FCO website www.fco.gov.uk.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many applications for entry visas from the Islamabad High Commission the Minister for Europe has personally reviewed since October 1999; and if he will make a statement. [148513]

Mr. Vaz: I have personally reviewed 19 visa applications—following representations from hon. and right hon. Members either at a visa surgery or by correspondence—submitted to the British High Commission in Islamabad since October 1999. During that same period the High Commission in Islamabad has considered 76,029 visa applications.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many applications for entry visas from the Islamabad High Commission the Minister for Europe has approved since October 1999 after they were previously declined by the High Commission: and if he will make a statement. [148519]

Mr. Vaz: I have overturned the decision of an entry clearance officer at the British High Commission in Islamabad on 11 occasions since October 1999. I declined to intervene on eight occasions. During this period the High Commission in Islamabad considered 76,029 visa applications. As the hon. Lady knows, the queue lengths in Islamabad have declined considerably over the last 12 months. The Foreign Secretary announced on 11 December the establishment of a new office in Lahore.

Hinduja Brothers

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the Minister for Europe has received from the Hinduja brothers, their family and their representatives regarding his planned visit to India in February; and if he will make a statement. [148426]

Mr. Vaz: None.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans the Minister for Europe has to meet the Hinduja brothers, their family and their representatives during his visit to India in February; and if he will make a statement. [148425]

Mr. Vaz: I have no such plans.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 5 February 2001

CABINET OFFICE

Drugs (Weston-super-Mare)

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what representations he has received and from whom in the past 12 months on solutions to the drugs problems in Weston-super-Mare. [148371]

Marjorie Mowlam: I have received no correspondence in the past 12 months on solutions to the drugs problems in Weston-super-Mare. The UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator, Keith Hellawell, has recently replied to correspondence from the local drug action team Co-ordinator concerning funding for a research project, and will shortly be replying to correspondence from a practitioners group and local MPs about the structure of the local drug action team.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Crime Victims

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Solicitor-General, pursuant to the answer of 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 489W, on victims, how the Crown Prosecution Service will phase in the implementation of a system to ensure that victims are informed of decisions for which the CPS has responsibility; and if he will make a statement. [148581]

The Solicitor-General: Pilot sites in six CPS areas were established in November 1999 to assess the costs and operational implications for the CPS in implementing a system to ensure that victims are informed of decisions for which the CPS has responsibility.

From October 2000, the same pilot sites began to conduct a scoping/options study to identify the best practice for national rollout. The final evaluation report will be completed in March 2001.

The first phase of national rollout will commence in the six pilot areas in April 2001. A programme of phased national implementation will follow in the other CPS areas to be completed by October 2002. Details of the implementation plans will be finalised in the light of the final evaluation findings.

DEFENCE

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the responsibility of *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency in respect of research undertaken into the effects of depleted uranium use. [147387]

Mr. Spellar: The Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) undertakes whatever research is required of it by its customers, of which the Ministry of Defence is a main customer. The MOD draws on all available authoritative scientific knowledge on the effects of depleted uranium use, including information from DERA.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the armed forces first used depleted uranium ammunition; which units were involved; when such ammunition was used in action in the last 10 years; by which units; and if he will make a statement. [148113]

Mr. Spellar: Depleted uranium (DU) based ammunition was first brought into service by the Royal Navy in 1982 for use in its Phalanx close-in weapons system. The Royal Navy (RN) has 36 Phalanx systems, which are in service on all Type 42 destroyers, HMS Ocean, one aircraft carrier, HMS Fearless and the Royal Fleet Auxiliaries Fort Victoria and Fort George. The RN has not fired Phalanx in combat. It is regularly fired for maintenance and system checks, however, including small quantities in the Gulf conflict in 1990–91, and in the Adriatic. All these firings are into the sea.

The first operational use of DU munitions by UK armed forces took place in 1991, during the Gulf conflict. Limited amounts of 120 mm DU munitions were issued to the three Challenger-equipped UK armoured units in the Gulf: the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards, the Queen's Royal Irish Hussars and the 14/20 Hussars. Additional rounds were fired by UK forces during earlier work-up training to establish the round's mean point of impact.

The army has not fired DU munitions on operations or in training since the Gulf conflict.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what evidence his Department has collated about the effects of *(a)* the use, handling and firing and *(b)* the clearing up of cartridges from depleted uranium ammunition; and if he will make a statement. [148116]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

S and T Class Submarines

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the state of readiness and expected date of return to full serviceability of each of the Royal Navy's S and T class submarines. [147570]

Mr. Spellar: HMS Triumph, a Trafalgar class submarine, is ready for operations (although currently undergoing short-term maintenance) and the remaining S and T class submarines are at 90 days' or more notice for operations undergoing either defect repair or long-term maintenance. We anticipate that eight submarines (Superb, Sceptre, Splendid, Trafalgar, Tireless, Torbay, Turbulent and Talent) will be available for operations by the end of this year, at which time the current operational boat, HMS Triumph, will be undergoing maintenance. The remaining three submarines (Sovereign, Spartan and Trenchant) will be in longer-term maintenance or refit. The exact state of readiness of individual submarines is withheld under exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Satellite Communications Systems

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the cost of the five Satellite Communications Systems is; what the total number of units to be purchased is; when they all will be in service; and if he will make a statement. [148102]

Dr. Moonie: It is assumed that the question relates to the proposed SKYNET 5 military satellite communications system. SKYNET 5 is envisaged as a service provision contract under PFI arrangements. The contractor will provide and own the satellites and associated ground infrastructure. The nature of the assets and the number of satellites that will be used is a matter for the selected contractor.

Bids for the SKYNET 5 service implementation contract were submitted by two competing consortia on 10 January 2001 and are currently being evaluated. It would be inappropriate to comment on the likely cost of the service provision while the competition is taking place. On current plans we expect the service to start in the middle of the decade.

Equipment Disposal

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what aircraft the Royal Air Force has sold to Poland in the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [148115]

Dr. Moonie: Aircraft and helicopters no longer required for service by the Royal Air Force are disposed of on their behalf by the MOD's Disposal Services Agency (DSA). Disposal can be achieved in a number of ways, including sales to legitimate overseas Governments, although no such sales to Poland have been made by the DSA in the last five years.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what quantity of surplus small arms has been destroyed in each of the last two years to conform to the UN resolution covering weapons; if surplus weapons have been sold to other countries to avoid being destroyed; and if he will make a statement. [148104]

Dr. Moonie: In conformity with UN resolution 54/54R the United Kingdom has reported that the total number of surplus small arms it destroyed in 1999 was 31,939. The majority of these were armed forces weapons (some 28,000) with the balance from the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Metropolitan police. Comparable statistics for 2000 are not yet available. Our current policy on the disposal of small arms declared surplus by the Ministry of Defence is to restrict transfers to those which meet the legitimate defence and security needs of overseas Governments. I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence to the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) on 22 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 242W. In the absence of approved transfers in line with this policy, surplus small arms are routinely destroyed. It is not, nor has it ever been, our policy or practice to arrange sales of surplus weapons on the ground that this would avoid their destruction.

Javelin Missile

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what the cost of the purchase of the Javelin missiles is; how many have been ordered; and if he will make a statement; [148101]

(2) what the estimated cost is of the US test for the Javelin missile; when it will take place; and if he will make a statement. [148114]

Dr. Moonie: I assume the hon. Member's questions refer to the Javelin anti-tank guided weapon system. The Ministry of Defence is conducting a competitive assessment of the US Javelin and Israeli Gill/Spike systems, to establish whether they are capable of meeting the UK's light forces anti-tank guided weapon requirement. The extra-mural cost of the assessment phase, which is due to complete in 2002, is currently estimated to be around £3 million for each of the competing systems.

A small number of each system will be procured for assessment. Orders for operational quantities would be placed following a successful outcome to the assessment phase. The cost would be dependent upon the final system selected and the total number of systems ordered.

Arctic Campaign Star

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the awarding of an Arctic Campaign Star, in official recognition of the contribution made by servicemen taking part in the Russian convoys. [148506]

Dr. Moonie: Service on the Arctic convoys to Russia during the second world war has already been recognised by the award of the Atlantic Star. There are no plans to institute a new Arctic Campaign Star, or any other medals for second world war service. This is in accordance with the long-standing policy of the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals that it will not consider the retrospective institution of medals for service given many years ago.

Defence Bills Agency

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much was paid out in total by the Defence Bills Agency to contractors in the UK in 1999–2000. [148212]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* The amount paid out in total by the Defence Bills Agency to contractors in the UK in 1999–2000 was £12,353,730,369.11.

Privatisation

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what studies are under way which are examining privatisation of his Department's tasks and agencies. [148346]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 2 February 2001]:* The Ministry of Defence public service agreement commits the Department to review all services and activities regularly and systematically over a five-year period. This five-year review cycle will include the quinquennial review of agencies, as well as services currently carried out within the MOD headquarters and by top level

budgets. The reviews will look at all aspects of improving performance through in-house and private sector solutions, which include outsourcing, private finance and privatisation. Government policy on the review of services has been set out most recently in the Cabinet Office handbook on better quality services, published in 1998.

British Servicemen (Sierra Leone)

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what illnesses have been reported by British servicemen who are serving or who have served in Sierra Leone. [148350]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 2 February 2001]:* There are 112 confirmed and three suspected cases of malaria among service personnel who deployed to Sierra Leone. There was also one person suspected of having lassa fever, which was subsequently found not to be the case. These are cases of notifiable communicable diseases, reported by the Ministry of Defence in accordance with UK legislation. As of 31 January, available central records of illnesses among service personnel who deployed in Sierra Leone showed 36 reported cases of additional types of illnesses, among some 7,500 personnel deployed to Sierra Leone. These illnesses were: nausea and vomiting, diarrhoea, headaches, fever and chills, dizziness, photophobia, viral meningitis, herpes zoster, severe stress, acute pharyngitis, chronic sinusitis, noninfective gastroenteritis and colitis, enteritis, right sided pleuritic chest pain, pyrexia, nasopharyngitis, viral illness, possible parasite infestation, possible appendicitis, chest infection, infection in finger, acute tonsillitis.

US National Missile Defense

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 100W, on US National Missile Defense, what concerns his Department voiced to the previous US Administration with regard to US National Missile Defense; and what discussions took place with regard to the use of *(a)* RAF Fylingdales and *(b)* other military bases in the United Kingdom. [148874]

Mr. Hoon: We made it clear to the previous US Administration that we understood why the US is concerned about the threat from weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery and why they were considering deployment of a national missile defense system as one aspect of their response to the threat. We received no formal request from the previous US Administration for the use of facilities in the UK as part of their proposed system.

Army Training Estate (Otterburn)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the proposals for improvements to the Army Training Estate at Otterburn requiring approval from a public inquiry remain of urgent national importance; and if he will make a statement. [148433]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer my hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Armed Forces gave him on 7 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 338W. The decision remains with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

TV Licensing

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the compatibility of TV licensing's inquiry and enforcement methods with the European convention on human rights. [147610]

Janet Anderson: Statutory responsibility for the administration and enforcement of the television licensing system rests with the BBC. TV Licensing carries out the day-to-day administration, including inquiry and enforcement activities, as agent for the BBC. The Government and the BBC are on the whole satisfied that TV Licensing's inquiry and enforcement methods are compatible with the European convention on human rights, but in order to put one matter beyond doubt the Government intend to bring forward an order under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 to regulate the use by TV Licensing of apparatus designed or adapted for detecting the installation or use of television receivers.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) on what date the then Minister of State, Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) was informed that the Hinduja brothers might provide funding for the Millennium Dome, and by whom; and if he will make a statement; [147477]

(2) on what date the Hinduja brothers first gave an indication that they would consider providing funding for the Faith Zone of the Millennium Dome. [147478]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 31 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 223W.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the net amount of sponsorship received from the Hinduja brothers was in respect of the Faith Zone in the Millennium Dome. [148019]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* The New Millennium Experience Company announced on 3 June 1999 that the Faith Zone would receive £4 million in sponsorship—£2 million from the Laing Family Trusts (Christian charitable foundations); £1 million from the Hinduja Foundation; and £1 million from other Christian trusts including the Jerusalem Trust.

Sports Stadiums

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much his Department is making available to new major sporting stadiums; what events this funding will permit; and for how long each stadium is expected to be operational. [147022]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* My Department does not fund stadium development. However, Sport England has provided grant in aid for three major stadium projects through the Lottery Sport Fund.

A grant of £120 million was awarded in November 1998 for purchase of the land for the English national stadium project at Wembley. Wembley National Stadium Ltd. has agreed to return £20 million of this amount following the decision to remove athletics from the stadium.

A grant of £77 million was awarded to the City of Manchester stadium. The stadium is due to hold the athletics and rugby sevens events for the 2002 Commonwealth games. Thereafter, the stadium will be used for football, and for community use with Manchester City football club as anchor tenant.

Grants of £1.57 million have been awarded to the Lee Valley national athletics centre for feasibility studies, which are to be completed by 31 May 2001. A budget allocation of up to a total of £60 million has been allocated for this project, subject to the receipt of a satisfactory grant application which will be assessed against Sport England's usual criteria. The stadium has been selected by UK Athletics to host the 2005 world athletics championships, which has been awarded to London by the International Amateur Athletics Federation.

Under the funding agreements for Wembley and Manchester, the project applicants are obliged to operate the projects for 50 years from opening. It is envisaged that the Lee Valley stadium will have the same operational life.

Millennium Dome (Sponsorship)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what the role of the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) was in procuring and negotiating sponsorship deals for the Millennium Dome; and if he will make a statement; [147996]

(2) when the first discussions were held with the Hinduja brothers about sponsorship of the Millennium Dome Faith Zone by the Hinduja Foundation; and if he will make a statement. [148029]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* It was the responsibility of the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC), as the operator of the Dome, to negotiate and secure sponsorship for the Dome.

I understand from NMEC that the Hinduja Foundation first approached NMEC in February 1997 about the possibility of incorporating the "Concordia Project" into the Dome. This was to be an interactive visitor education centre focusing on the world's different cultures.

The then Minister without Portfolio was the shareholder of NMEC. In that role it was perfectly proper and reasonable that, as shareholder, he should meet sponsors and be kept fully informed of progress. However, the detailed negotiation of sponsorship arrangements was the responsibility of NMEC and individual sponsors.

Free Television Licences (Jarrow)

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many households in the Jarrow constituency have a free television licence under the scheme for pensioners aged over 75 years. [148613]

Janet Anderson: TV Licensing, which administers this concession for the BBC as Licensing Authority, is not able to provide geographical breakdowns of the number of free licences issued. However, estimates based on the 1991 Census indicate that there were approximately 4,700 people aged 75 or over in the Jarrow constituency.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Cheney Pension Scheme

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will conduct an inquiry into the handling of the case of the Cheney pension scheme by the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority. [149272]

Mr. Darling: With the agreement of the board of the occupational pensions regulatory authority, I have asked Sir Gerald Hosker QC to conduct an independent inquiry into the handling within Opra of the Cheney case and also to consider and report on whether changes in procedures are necessary to assist in the detection of misuse of pension funds.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in Morecambe and Lunesdale benefit from the minimum income guarantee; and what estimate he has made of the number of pensioners in the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency who fail to claim the minimum income guarantee. [149132]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows:

There are around 2,800 recipients of the minimum income guarantee in the parliamentary constituency of Morecambe and Lunesdale.

Notes:

1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
2. Pensioners are defined as where the claimant, and/or partner are aged 60 or over.
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.
4. Cases are allocated to each parliamentary constituency by matching the postcode against the 2000 version 1 ONS Postcode Directory.
5. It is not possible to produce reliable estimates of numbers not claiming their entitlement at constituency level.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, August 2000.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people living in Crosby have benefited from the minimum income guarantee. [148333]

Mr. Rooker: There are around 2,600 recipients of the minimum income guarantee in the parliamentary constituency of Crosby.

Notes:

1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
2. Pensioners are defined as where the claimant, and/or partner are aged 60 or over.
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.

4. Cases are allocated to each parliamentary constituency by matching the postcode against the 2000 version 1 ONS Postcode Directory.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, August 2000.

Annuities

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the study of annuities carried out by the Retirement Income Working Party; and if he will make a statement. [148337]

Mr. Rooker: The Retirement Income Working Party report is one of a number of proposals that have been put forward as alternatives to the annuity purchase requirement for pension schemes. An announcement will be made in due course if it is decided that any changes to the current rules are needed.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make an assessment of the extent to which those who have deferred purchasing an annuity and have opted for income drawdown have found themselves subsequently dependent on means-tested benefits. [148742]

Mr. Rooker: No. The information is not available to make such an assessment.

Pensions

Mr. Martin Bell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the proposed increase to be paid to existing state pensioners were to be applied to men aged 60 to 65 years, how much that pension would be for *(a)* 2001–02 and *(b)* 2002–03. [147845]

Mr. Rooker: Men currently do not receive a basic State Retirement Pension before the age of 65 years and entitlement is dependent upon the individual's National Insurance record. It would not be dependent upon the numbers of pensioners.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the basic State Pension in 2040 as a percentage of *(a)* full-time average earnings in 2040, *(b)* male full-time average earnings in 2040 and *(c)* female full-time average earnings in 2040, (i) before the changes announced in the pre-Budget statement and (ii) following the changes in the pre-Budget statement assumptions on price and wage inflation. [148375]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 2 February 2001]:* The information is in the table.

The assumed value of the basic State Pension as a proportion of average full time earnings, before and after the changes announced in the pre-Budget report (PBR)—2040–41

Percentage

	Before PBR	*After PBR*
Average earnings	9	10
Average male earnings	8	9
Average female earnings	11	12

Notes:

1. Projected average earnings figures are based on the New Earnings Survey 2000.
2. The future value of the basic State Pension is based on pre-Budget report assumptions.
3. Long-term real earnings growth is assumed to be 1.5 per cent.

Income Limit (Benefits)

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what assessment he has made of the cost of increasing the savings limit for *(a)* Severe Disability Allowance and *(b)* Income Support to (i) £5,000, (ii) £6,000, (iii) £10,000 and (iv) £15,000; [146734]

(2) what recent assessment he has made of the savings limit on Severe Disability Allowance and Income Support claimants in relation to *(a)* the Government's social inclusion priorities and *(b)* the efficient deployment of public resources. [146735]

Mr. Bayley: Severe Disablement Allowance does not have capital limits. The capital limits in the income-related benefits are kept under review.

The current rules have an upper and a lower limit. We have not made estimates of the cost of moving to single capital limits of the kind envisaged by the hon. Member.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) of 18 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 384W, on benefit fraud, if he will calculate on the same basis the data for *(a)* England, *(b)* Wales, *(c)* Northern Ireland and *(d)* the United Kingdom. [148332]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Percentage of children living in workless households

Year	*England*	*Wales*	*Northern Ireland*	*United Kingdom*
1996	19.4	20.4	22.7	19.4
1997	17.8	21.1	19.5	17.9
1998	17.9	19.9	19.0	17.9
1999	17.4	20.4	18.6	17.3
2000	15.6	19.5	20.1	15.8

Notes:

1. Children refers to all children aged under 16.
2. A workless household is a household that includes at least one person of working age where no one is in employment.
3. The percentages given in the reply for England, Wales and Northern Ireland have not been adjusted for the small proportion of households where the household economic activity is not known. An adjustment has been made to the UK figures, so the methodology for calculating these figures is slightly different.

Source:

Labour Force Survey, Spring Quarters (covering March to May). The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is a quarterly sample survey of over 60,000 households in the United Kingdom.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Police (Appointments)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the Chief Constable of the RUC will appoint district commanders for each of the reorganised policing districts in Northern Ireland; what the job specification is for the posts; what criteria and selection procedures are to be used in making the appointments; if independent assessors will take part in the appointment process; and if the posts are to be advertised outside the RUC. [144380]

Mr. Ingram: It is the Chief Constable's intention to appoint commanders for the new district command units with effect from 1 April 2001. The criteria for appointment, post criteria and person specification are detailed in the list and have been applied following consultation with the Superintendents' Association for Northern Ireland and the Police Authority for Northern Ireland. Both have been involved throughout the selection process. Because of the very tight time scales imposed, advertising for these positions outside the Royal Ulster Constabulary was not practicable on this occasion; however, it will be considered for future appointments.

District Command Units

Criteria for appointment

Career profile

Leadership/management skills

Knowledge/experience/strategic vision of role sought

Match against post criteria

Match against person specification

Eligibility for appointment to Chief Superintendent/ Superintendent where post holds that rank

Individual needs (including expressed preference and domestic circumstances)

Organisational needs (while considering individuals' needs)

Post Criteria—District Commander

Job description

Job title:

District Command Unit (DCU) Commander

Responsible to:

Regional Assistant Chief Constable

Staff reporting to jobholder:

Functional heads within DCU

Main purpose:

To be responsible for the delivery of a quality policing service to a District within the framework of force policy and in a way that reflects local needs.

Duties:

Develop strategies and policies for the policing of the District.

Foster and maintain consultative relationships with the public and external agencies.

Be responsible for the financial resources of the DCU.

Be responsible for the welfare, development, performance and discipline of all District personnel.

Plan and command significant operations where appropriate.

Ensure the effective and efficient deployment of personnel.

Serious incident cover.

PACE and RIPA cover.

Contact with outside agencies:

Local councils and community representatives.

Statutory agencies.

Local non-government organisations.

Military personnel.

Other police forces.

Hours of work:

Normally Monday to Friday, 09:00–17:00 with Saturday and Sunday rest days.

24 hour cover required on a rota basis in relation to serious incidents and PACE.

Physical make-up:

The postholder should present a professional image of the force.

Specialised aptitudes:

Capable of taking a realistic and logical approach to problem solving.

Understand human resource management issues.

Understand financial management matters.

Ability to balance competing demands and prioritise solutions.

Disposition:

Possess good interpersonal skills and be able to work as part of a team.

Possess good oral and written communications skills.

Demonstrate commitment along with the ability to motivate and influence others.

Able to balance competing demands.

Able to make impartial decisions in accordance with law, policies and available information.

Capable of remaining focused in the face of opposition.

Capable of assimilating new information, concepts and ideas and converting these to workable practice.

Circumstances:

The postholder will be based at district headquarters and may be required to use his/her private motor vehicle as part of his/her duties.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps he is taking to ensure a wide range of candidates apply for the posts of district commander in the Police Service of Northern Ireland. [144381]

Mr. Ingram: Given the time scale imposed and in order to apply a fair and equitable selection process, all eligible superintendents and those on the select list for promotion to superintendent were assessed against specific criteria. The process necessitates taking into account officers at these ranks whose current posts are to be suppressed following restructuring of the organisation in accordance with the implementation plan.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will instruct the present Police Authority not to make more than one appointment to the rank of Assistant Chief Constable; and if he will permit the incoming police board to advertise the post of Assistant Chief Constable and officers without obligation to consult the list of candidates prepared by the current Police Authority. [144382]

Mr. Ingram: The Police Authority for Northern Ireland is presently running a competition for a position of Assistant Chief Constable in the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The process was initiated because of the retirement of an ACC and following advice from the Chief Constable, who indicated that there was an urgent operational need for the post to be filled.

Since the competition was initiated, a second post has been identified as becoming vacant in the near future. It will be for the Police Authority, with the advice of the Chief Constable, to decide on the operational need if the second post should be filled at this time.

Police Ombudsman

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the establishment and seniority structure of investigative officers in the office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland; how many officers have been appointed;

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how many appointees came from *(a)* RUC (i) serving and seconded and (ii) former officers and *(b)* other United Kingdom police forces (A) serving and seconded, (B) former officers and (C) Garda Siochana (1) serving and seconded and (2) former officers; and if he will list the nationality, background and previous experience of other appointees. [144383]

Mr. Ingram: The composition of the investigating officers of the Office of the Police Ombudsman is fairly typical of the usual team and ranking structures established to undertake the investigation of complaints and other matters made against the police. The investigation group is headed by a chief investigating officer assisted by senior investigating officers, each of whom are responsible for investigation teams comprising a number of investigating and assistant investigating officers.

Currently the ombudsman has appointed 32 investigating officers across all ranks. Of those appointed, none are serving, seconded or former officers of the RUC or the Garda Siochana; one is a former officer of a United Kingdom police force; one is a former officer of HM Forces Military Police; and eight are serving officers seconded from other United Kingdom police forces.

The majority of investigating officer appointees are United Kingdom citizens with the remainder being made up of nationals from America, Australia and South Africa. Although not all of the investigating officers are from a police background, all have investigative experience in other areas of employment.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland has drafted and agreed operating protocols for investigative officers. [144384]

Mr. Ingram: For the Office of the Police Ombudsman to fulfil its investigative function it is necessary to establish protocols with a number of agencies, some of which have already been established, e.g. with the Forensic Science Agency, and a number of other protocols are currently in negotiation. A series of internal protocols have also been established.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many complaints have been received by the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland; and how many investigations have been initiated. [144385]

Mr. Ingram: Since the Office of the Ombudsman became operational on 6 November 2000 the total number of complaints received by 2 January 2001 was 602, and in the same time 234 investigations have been initiated.

Organised Crime

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if, in relation to the Patten report Implementation Plan, he has sought to quantify the extent and the growth during the past five years of volume crime and of Mafia-style organised crime; and if he will publish a report. [144687]

Mr. Ingram: In recent years, Northern Ireland, in common with England and Wales, has experienced an increase in volume crime, that is offences against the person and property damage (burglary, theft and criminal damage). Comparing 1998–99 and 1999–2000, the number of these offences recorded increased by 9 per cent. In both years such offences represented 89 per cent. of all offences recorded by the police. The Royal Ulster Constabulary is developing a professional crime and incident analysis capability across the organisation in recognition of the extent and growth of volume crime and reflecting the requirements of the Patten report.

The police, with the assistance of other agencies, are presently researching the level of scale and scope of the organised crime problem, in both the public and private sectors, in Northern Ireland. In addition, the Government have established a multi-agency task force to tackle organised crime in Northern Ireland, which I chair.

The Patten report took account of the types of crime to which the hon. Member is referring, and so, indirectly therefore, does the plan. For example, the size, structure, training and co-operation sections of the Patten report all take account of the need to deal with community concerns about rising crime and drug abuse. Indeed, paragraph 13.6 of the report states that

> "... we take (the concerns) seriously enough not to base our calculations of future policing commitments on an assumption that Northern Ireland's level of crime will remain as low as it is now".

RUC

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what has been the recognised senior command course for RUC officers; what alternatives have been accepted; and what exceptions have been made among the officers who comprise the RUC senior command. [144683]

Mr. Ingram: The recognised senior command course required for the appointment of Assistant Chief Constable in the Royal Ulster Constabulary is the strategic command course provided by the national police training organisation at Bramshill. The strategic leadership development programme and the senior command course were forerunners to this.

In the present competition, candidates for appointment of Assistant Chief Constable who can offer successful completion of an equivalent course will also be considered. In deciding what is an equivalent course, the Police Authority for Northern Ireland will be guided by advice from Her Majesty's inspector of constabulary.

All chief officers presently serving in the Royal Ulster Constabulary have successfully completed either the senior command course or the strategic leadership development programme.

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if alternatives to the recognised senior command course are to be accepted for officers from other police forces who apply for senior command appointments with the RUC; and if he will make a statement. [144684]

Mr. Ingram: In order to open competition to a wider field, the Police Authority for Northern Ireland has decided to allow candidates applying for posts of Assistant Chief Constable in the Royal Ulster Constabulary to offer successful completion of an equivalent course to that of the strategic command course provided by the national police training organisation at Bramshill.

In deciding what is an equivalent course, the Police Authority will be guided by advice from HM inspector of constabulary.

Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what rules he has made under section 56 of the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 1996. [148051]

Mr. Ingram: The Secretary of State has not found it necessary to make any rules under article 56 of the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 1996.

Police Board

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many applications he has received for independent members of the Police Board; what is the breakdown of the applicants by *(a)* gender, *(b)* perceived community affiliation, *(c)* age under (i) 30, (ii) 31 to 40, (iii) 41 to 50, (iv) 51 to 65 and (v) 66 and over and *(d)* sexual orientation. [142274]

Mr. Ingram: The total applications received was 347. Nine applicants failed to complete the monitoring form and as a result are not included in the statistics.

	Number
Gender	
Male	254
Female	84
Religion	
Protestant	191
Catholic	98
Other	49

The information is available in the following format:

Age	*Number*
Less than 25	3
25–35	21
36–45	70
46–55	104
Over 55	140

Sexual orientation
Data are not available on the sexual orientation of applicants.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many applicants for independent membership of the Police Board have disclosed criminal convictions. [142275]

Mr. Ingram: Seven applicants for independent membership of the Northern Ireland Policing Board submitted sealed envelopes that contained details of criminal convictions.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Cane Sugar

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the European Commission's decision taken on 18 January in respect of a new timetable for duty and tariff imports of cane sugar starting from 2006. [148374]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 2 February 2001]:* The European Commission has said that it is considering amendments to its proposal to grant duty free access to goods from least-developed countries. However, no formal new proposal has yet been tabled.

Alkaline Hydrolysis

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will ask the United States Department of Agriculture for the evidence on which the USDA approved alkaline hydrolysis at elevated temperature as an effective technology for dealing with BSE-infected animals; and if he will make a statement. [147863]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* I understand that the company that produces the technology has requested this evidence from the USDA and intends to give it to my officials. Officials are discussing with the company the possibility of permitting the use of this technology to dispose of animal waste. The Department is also funding a research project to investigate the efficacy of the system in inactivating the BSE agent.

Antibiotics

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his policy is on legislation at EU level on prevention of use of antibiotics in animal food. [147454]

Ms Quin: The Government are aware of concerns about the development of antimicrobial resistance in bacteria affecting humans as a result of antibiotic use in farm-animal production. We supported an EU ban on the use of four antimicrobial growth promoters which were authorised as feed additives, which came into effect on 1 July 1999. We will continue to be guided by the principles established in the report of the Joint Committee on the use of antibiotics in animal husbandry and veterinary medicines (the Swann report) 1969. This report proposed that antibiotics authorised for growth promotion should be restricted to those which have little or no application as therapeutic agents in man or animals, and which will not impair the efficacy of prescribed therapeutic drugs through the development of resistant strains of organisms.

Inspectors

Mr. Kilfoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many inspectors were employed within his Department and its agencies in each year from 1992 to 2000. [145247]

Ms Quin: The number of staff with powers to enter or inspect property at 1 April in each of the years in question are set out in the table.

Inspectors in MAFF 1992–2000 as at 1 April

Department/agency	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
Core MAFF[1]	1,019	1,083	1,101	1,066	927	1,021	1,029	1,018	1,080
Farming and Rural Conservation Agency[2]	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	49	54	55	55
Pesticides Safety Directorate	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Veterinary Medicine Directorate	7	7	7	5	7	6	4	4	3
Veterinary Laboratories Agency	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Central Science Laboratory[3]	n/a	n/a	33	34	46	43	42	46	47
Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science[4]	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	19	18	13	15
Meat Hygiene Service[5]	n/a	n/a	n/a	811	775	940	1,098	1,089	n/a
Total	1,026	1,090	1,141	1,916	1,755	2,078	2,245	2,225	1,200

[1] The figures for core-MAFF include staff, in the following functions, who have statutory powers to enter or inspect property: Plant Health and Seed Inspectorate; Horticultural Marketing Inspectorate; Egg Marketing Inspectorate; Sea Fisheries Inspectorate; Fisheries Officers; Field Officers; Veterinary Officers, advisers and managers; Animal Health Officers; Scientific Officers (Nuclear specialists)—with FSA from 1 April 2000.
[2] FRCA was formed as a MAFF agency on 1 April 1997
[3] CSL was formed from MAFF as an agency on 1 April 1994
[4] CEFAS was formed from MAFF as an agency on 1 April 1997
[5] MHS was a MAFF agency from 1 April 1995 to 31 March 2000

Flooding

Mrs. Fiona Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to compensate farmers for the losses caused by recent flooding. [147473]

Ms Quin: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 137W.

Departmental Projects

Mr. Brady: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the projects undertaken for his Department by *(a)* outside consultants, *(b)* academic researchers and *(c)* university departments since 1 May 1997, giving the total expenditure incurred in each category. [144072]

Ms Quin: From information held centrally, outside consultants have undertaken projects to the value of £41,894,360 in the Department since 1 May 1997. A list of these projects is shown.

In respect of *(b)* and *(c)*, I regret that a full reply is not possible without incurring disproportionate cost. As far as research projects are concerned, the Department funds over 1,000 of these each year, many of which are placed with academic researchers/universities. A list of all current research projects can be found on the Department's website at http://www.maff.gov.uk.

Project

"Managed set back" research

360 degree feedback training

Accountancy projects

ADAS study on losses to farmers following TB

ADAS consultancy work arising from the privatisation

Advice from experts on Flood Defence research

Advice on countryside stewardship project

Advice on the selection of a new member of Food from Britain Council

Agricultural Wages Board

Animal Health Service Papers Filing Exercise

Animal Health Service Heads of Divisions Business Plan Workshop

Arable Area Payments Scheme

Annual Staff Reports markings

Assessment of Radioactive Waste Dumpings at Sea

Audit of analytical services

Audit of catering services

Barrister (including Pupil and Expenses) in connection with GM Hearing on variety Charndon LL

Benchmarking against the European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence Model

Benchmarking workshops

Better Quality services

British Potato Council

British survey of fertiliser practice

BSE Consultants for Chief Veterinary Officer Group

British Cattle Movement Service Building

Building survey

Selection of deputy chairman for Home Grown Cereals authority

Catering

Cattle tracing service

British Cattle Movement Service Charging

Charter and Service Standards

Chief Veterinary Officer Group Filing

Cattle Herd Registration (AIT)

Consultancy on GIS data capture

Consultancy work on the overgrazing MoU

Consultant's contract as Chairman of the UNECE ammonia panel

Consultants for new research vessel

Contract with ATB-Landbase

CSL Strategy

Customer satisfaction surveys

British Cattle Movement Service Data Capture

Design and Supply software for the Agricultural Minimum Wage Helpline

Development of a module on the food chain for a CD-ROM for schools

Direct Selling Seminar

Disposal of Waste at Sea
Diversity audit
Document management
End of Year accounts
Ensuring Millennium Bug preparedness in the food chain
Enteleca (Research into tourist attitudes towards regional and local foods)
Environmentally Sensitive Areas contract for bird surveys
EROS (Non Delta)
Estates Review
Evaluation of Processing and Marketing Grant scheme
Evaluation of the LEADER+ programme for England
Export promotion advice
File store study
Financial advice on tender applicants for new research vessel
Financial consultancy to set up Capital database
Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme
Flood Defence Management services
Forensic accountancy advice prior to defence of Factortame claims
FPS and AFQ Link Programmes
Free Advice Programmes
General Financial Ledger set-up consultancy
Global Benchmarking study
Global Competitiveness study
Government Secure Internet Implementation Project
Habitat Scheme monitoring
Health and Safety initiative
British Cattle Movement Service Call Logging
Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowances
Horticultural Development Council
British Cattle Movement Service Image Retrieval
Independent assessor for the appointment of Board Members to the Wine Standards Board
Information Age Government Support
AESIS Review (IT)
Investors in People assessment (PSD)
British Cattle Movement Service ISO
Ispra Wine Sampling Exercise
British Cattle Movement Service IT
IT Consultancy
IT Consultancy for Fishing Vessel Register problem with Cardiff RSS lin
IT Management
IT Security Reviews
IT Strategy Development
ITAS Strategy
JEGS 2000 (Job Evaluation and Grading System)
Liaison (VAT advice)
MAFF's Energy Efficiency Policy
Maiden 2000 (MAFF Intranet)
Management Structures consultancy
Millennium Bug survey
British Cattle Movement Service Millennium Cover
Monitoring of environmentally sensitive areas
British Cattle Movement Service New Building
New Regional CAP Systems
Nitrate Sensitive Areas
British Cattle Movement Service Numeric Tagging
Operation Gangmaster
Organisation of a two-month study visit for Bosnian students
Pay and Grading consultancy
Pay review project
Pensions Consultant
Pesticide Register launch
Pilot training workshops for primary producers
Plant Health
British Cattle Movement Service Post Go Live Review
Post Implementation Review of Doc Management
Preparation of reports for Agricultural Dwelling House Advisory Committees
Preparation of Risk and Approval Guidance for Flood Defence projects
Process Mapping
Produce Studies (Poll Consultants)
Provision of legal advice to Agricultural Wages Board
Provision of meteorological data
Provision of scientific advice during Branch Head's secondment to the EA
Public Relations
QA Audit
Recruitment
Relocation
Report on aquifer response times
Risk assessment and analysis of ash from small animal incinerators licensed to burn SRM
Sea Fish Management Development
Security
Development and technical support for R&D database and work on e-Science projects
Softward development
Staff Attitude surveys (PSD)
Stage II and III ESAs
Stage IV ESAs
British Cattle Movement Service Start-up and Testing
Statistical training
Stress study
Study into fishing vessel engine power ratings
Surveys of UK foodstocks and Food Vulnerability database
Systems Review and upgrade
Technical advice on methods of sampling and analysis for fertilisers
Technical support to Quality Wine and Vine Variety Classification Committees
Training (Personnel Division)
Triad Group (software development)
Unido Project
Unix-Lan Operation Continuity
Website design.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Housing Investment

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the investment in *(a)* council housing and *(b)* housing

owned by registered social landlords in each year since 1990; and what investment is planned in future years. [146835]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The capital resources made available by central Government to support housing investment by local authorities and registered social landlords in the years since 1990–91 are as follows:

£ million

	Housing capital allocations to local authorities[1]	*Housing capital allocations to registered social landlords*[2]
1990–91	1,706	986
1991–92	1,682	1,521
1992–93	1,579	2,284
1993–94	1,391	1,761
1994–95	1,181	1,441
1995–96	1,147	1,112
1996–97	1,059	1,007
1997–98	926	667
1998–99	1,211	603
1999–2000	1,252	634
2000–01	1,891	678
2001–02	2,552	787
2002–03	2,853	958
2003–04	2,934	1,274

[1] Covers credit approvals, capital grants, PFI schemes for council housing and the resources to be made available under the arms length management initiative but exclude Estate Action allocations (which are now part of Regeneration Budgets). Local authorities housing capital programmes provide resources to improve poor condition private sector housing or develop new affordable housing as well as renovating or improving the council housing stock.
[2] Public funded investment in RSL housing through the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme (ADP) and, from 2001–02, the Safer Communities Supported Housing Fund.

Overseas Visits

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the overseas visits he has undertaken on official business over the last year, with the cost of travel and accommodation in each case for him and his party. [146370]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* This Government have given a commitment to publish an annual list of visits overseas by Cabinet Ministers costing more than £500 as well as an annual figure on spend by all Ministers on overseas visits. The list for 1999–2000 was published on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 969W. The list for 2000–01 which will include my Department's details will be published in due course.

Environmental Appraisal

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of the *(a)* Bills and *(b)* draft Bills in the Queen's Speech have had an environmental appraisal undertaken of them. [147317]

Mr. Meacher: The Government's policy is that significant environmental costs and benefits should be identified alongside economic and social considerations, during policy development or review. All Departments have procedures for screening their policies for environmental impacts and the systems in place are detailed in Chapter 4 of "Greening Government", the Second Annual Report of the Green Ministers Committee 2000, published in November last year.

On DETR measures mentioned in the Queen's Speech there has, as yet, been no environmental appraisal for the Homes Bill. It is proposed that seller's packs, introduced as a result of the Bill, will include information on the energy efficiency of homes and this should lead to improvements by buyers that benefit the environment. An environmental appraisal will be carried out when the contents of seller's packs have been determined, following consultation with interested parties.

Our initial assessment of the proposals for the draft Safety Bill suggests there is no need for an environmental appraisal. If, as the proposals develop, it becomes apparent that there is an effect on the environment, we will review the position.

DETR also has the lead interest in the leasehold elements of the Lord Chancellor's Commonhold and Leasehold Bill. These relate to the respective rights and obligations of residential long leaseholders and their freeholders, which carry no environmental implications.

M4 Eastbound Bus Lane

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish figures indicating the average usage, on an hour-by-hour basis, of the M4 eastbound bus lane between Heathrow and the elevated section, for the most recent period for which figures are available. [147388]

Mr. Hill: As the hon. Member may be aware, the Transport Research Laboratory (TRL) has been monitoring the usage of the M4 bus lane for the Highways Agency. The most recent period for which TRL has provided figures of average usage on an hour-by-hour basis is the week beginning 5 June 2000. Those figures are as follows:

Time of day	*Taxi*	*Minibus*	*Bus/coach*	*Total*
00:00	7	0	0	7
01:00	2	0	0	2
02:00	1	0	0	1
03:00	1	0	1	2
04:00	2	0	3	5
05:00	42	2	8	52
06:00	193	10	21	224
07:00	286	17	43	346
08:00	238	11	30	279
09:00	253	9	39	301
10:00	259	9	45	313
11:00	188	7	33	228
12:00	200	10	32	242
13:00	190	7	29	226
14:00	181	8	28	217
15:00	175	5	23	203
16:00	211	9	48	268
17:00	205	8	46	259
18:00	242	6	28	276
19:00	242	4	17	263
20:00	231	4	13	248
21:00	238	3	10	251
22:00	178	2	8	188
23:00	64	0	3	67
Total	3,829	131	508	4,468

On average, 3,700 vehicles per day used the bus lane during the first year of operation. It is worth noting that, while this represents an average of 7 per cent. of the traffic on the M4 in to London, the vehicles carried 21 per cent. of the people using the road. During peak periods, each bus has saved on average 3.5 minutes and each car has saved on average 1 minute. Journey times for all vehicles have become more reliable following the introduction of the bus lane.

A copy of a report entitled, "Monitoring of the M4 Bus Lane: The First Year" prepared by TRL for the Highways Agency covering the first year of operation from June 1999 to May 2000 is available in the House of Commons Library. A synopsis of the report with the same title is also in the Library and it is available on the Highways Agency's website.

Housing Safety

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to consult on the responsibilities of local authorities for enforcing the housing, health and safety rating system, as set out in the statement on the Housing Green Paper in December 2000. [148056]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: We plan to publish in March a consultation paper setting out our proposals for the framework of legislation and guidance within which local authorities would use the housing, health and safety rating system as the basis for action against unacceptable housing conditions.

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that primary legislation to implement a national licensing scheme for houses in multiple occupation can be introduced at the earliest opportunity. [148053]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: I refer my hon. Friend to the remarks of my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning on Second Reading of the Homes Bill on 8 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 708.

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to strengthen the Housing (Management of Houses in Multiple Occupation) Regulations 1990, announced by the then Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), on 8 November 2000. [148055]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Proposals are being developed and will be discussed informally with local authorities and other interest groups during the next few months.

Aircraft Movements

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the *(a)* shortest elapsed recorded, *(b)* longest and *(c)* average times recorded between captains of aircraft being given clearance at (i) London Heathrow and (ii) Gatwick airports, and the actual time of touchdown, in the last 12 months. [148137]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The information requested is not available. The time differences between aircraft pilots being give clearance to land and the actual time of touch down are not recorded, or stored, at either Gatwick or Heathrow airports.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate of sustainable hourly runway movements is being used in the new aviation policy. [148166]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: In the studies we are undertaking in preparation for the new aviation policy, we are not using a single standard assessment of hourly runway movements. The hourly capacity depends on a range of factors, including the separations and staggers between runways, the provision of parallel taxiways and the extent of taxiing movements across runways. We are therefore assessing the capacity of each option individually.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what incidents of go-arounds and late clearances to land at Gatwick airport have been recorded *(a)* in the last 12 months and *(b)* in the previous 12 months. [148165]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The number of go-arounds recorded at Gatwick airport were *(a)* 501 in the year 2000, and *(b)* 383 in 1999. Clearances to land are not categorised as to their timing and, therefore, the information sought on "late clearances" is not available.

The go-around figures for 2000 are currently being analysed by National Air Traffic Services Ltd. and the airport authority (BAA plc) but there are no indications that weakness/failure in the safety system is to blame for the increase.

Road Safety

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the statutory duties of local authorities in respect of road safety; [148198]

(2) what guidance is given to local authorities for the appointment of *(a)* road safety officers and *(b)* environmental health officers; [148199]

(3) what guidance he has issued to road safety officers in the past 12 months. [148197]

Mr. Hill: Local authorities have a duty under section 39 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 both to promote road safety, and to study road traffic accidents in their areas and take appropriate remedial measures.

It is for local authorities to decide how to discharge these duties, including decisions on staffing levels and recruitment. However, the Road Safety Strategy, "Tomorrow's Road—Safer for Everyone", recorded the value we place on the contribution that can be made by Road Safety Officers (RSOs), and encouraged National Vocational Qualifications for these officers. We require local authorities to describe, in their Road Safety Strategies, the Education, Training and Publicity programmes being undertaken by their RSOs.

There are twice yearly Departmental meetings with the local authority Road Safety Officers Association and the Association of London Borough Road Safety Officers.

which provide RSOs with guidance on Government policy. The last meeting was in December last year. We also liaise with RSOs over publicity campaigns, so they can carry out complementary activity. Literature of relevance to RSOs is distributed to them as and when it becomes available.

The role of Environmental Health Officers would not be expected to have a focus on road safety.

London Underground

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to announce the future financial and operational arrangements for the London Underground; and if he will make a statement. [148560]

Mr. Prescott: I was pleased to announce last Friday that I have agreed with Bob Kiley, Commissioner of Transport for London, that we will work together and with London Underground on modifications to the Public Private Partnership (PPP). If we can agree mutually acceptable changes then the PPP bidders will be asked to submit revised proposals. The Government, London Underground and Transport for London will jointly evaluate any revised proposals to decide whether they are acceptable to both parties.

The Commissioner and I have confirmed our determination to reach the best deal for Londoners and secure the long-term increased investment the Tube needs without delay.

Flight Paths (Walthamstow)

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what change has occurred in the last three years in the number of aircraft on flight paths above Walthamstow. [148500]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The number of aircraft that overfly Walthamstow and adjoining areas depends on the direction of operations at Heathrow which itself is dependent on wind direction and strength and so can vary from day to day. Due to the prevailing westerly winds, on average Heathrow operates in a westerly direction about 77 per cent. of the time, but this can vary considerably from year to year. The proportion of westerly operations at Heathrow in each of the last three years for which data are available was 1997—74 per cent., 1998—89 per cent. and 1999—66 per cent. As during any period of westerly operations approximately 50 per cent. of arriving aircraft approach Heathrow by overflying north London, it is possible (after adjusting for the proportion of westerly operations in each of the last three years) to give a rough estimate of the numbers of aircraft (including traffic using London City airport) that overflew Walthamstow or adjoining areas: the estimates are 1997—89,000, 1999—107,000 and 1999—84,000.

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what changes in flight paths into Heathrow have taken place within the last three years which have affected flight paths above Walthamstow. [148499]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: None. Walthamstow along with adjoining parts of north London is situated beneath the radar manoeuvring area used during westerly operations for the tactical integration of arriving traffic descending from holding positions (stacks) located in the vicinity of Lambourne (Essex) and Bovingdon (Bucks). There are no fixed routes for arriving aircraft during this phase of their approach to Heathrow Airport, but they tend to follow a regular pattern that has not changed in any significant respect for many years. Departures from Heathrow during easterly operations may overfly the area once above an altitude of 4,000 ft. Traffic using London City Airport also overflies the area.

National Air Traffic Services

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if Mr. Douglas Andrew will participate in advising his Department on the choice of the strategic partner for the National Air Traffic Services; [148557]

(2) if he will place the advice provided to his Department on the future of National Air Traffic Services by Mr. Douglas Andrew of the Civil Aviation Authority in the Library; [148549]

(3 what meetings *(a)* he and *(b)* his officials have held with Mr. Douglas Andrew of the Civil Aviation Authority to discuss the future of the National Air Traffic Services; [148552]

(4) what assessment he has made of recent statements made in the media by Mr. Douglas Andrew, adviser to his Department, on the sale of air traffic control; [148553]

(5) what references were taken up by his Department prior to the engagement of Mr. Douglas Andrew of the Civil Aviation Authority as an adviser on the future of National Air Traffic Services; [148551]

(6) what role Mr. Douglas Andrew of the Civil Aviation Authority has played in advising the Government on the future of the National Air Traffic Services. [148550]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Mr. Douglas Andrew is the head of the Economic Regulation Group of the Civil Aviation Authority and he was appointed in that capacity initially by the previous Administration in 1997. He was re-appointed as head of the Economic Regulation Group in 2000.

Mr. Andrew's role in advising the Government on the future of National Air Traffic Services has been limited to matters regarding the economic regulatory and licensing regime for the NATS public/private partnership. In this context, Mr. Andrew has participated in working groups run by my Department at official level. The Economic Regulation Group was also asked to advise the Government on a detailed economic regulatory regime and price cap for NATS PPP. There have been no meetings between Mr. Andrew and Ministers on these matters.

I shall be happy to place copies of the CAA's advice on the charge control for the PPP in the Library of this House. The CAA has already placed the advice on its own website, but I am aware of no other statements made by Mr. Andrew in the media relating to the PPP.

Mr. Andrew will not participate in advising on the choice of the strategic partner for the PPP. He and other senior CAA personnel have had meetings with all three potential strategic partners during the bidding process.

I understand that the previous Administration took proper steps to satisfy itself that Mr. Andrew was the most appropriate person for the post of Director of Economic Regulation. Details of his references are personal and confidential.

Offshore Contracts

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he has taken to protect those in the shipping industry who are employed on offshore contracts. [148501]

Mr. Hill: The Government have issued guidelines on the use of offshore contracts for employing seafarers. DETR is examining with its industry partners whether any amendment to employment rights legislation is needed.

Public Transport

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much has been allocated in local transport plans for each year from 2001–02 to 2005–06 for *(a)* individual public transport schemes costing over £5 million that have received approval, *(b)* individual public transport schemes costing less than £5 million that have received approval and *(c)* integrated transport measures that have received approval. [148589]

Mr. Hill *(holding answer 2 February 2001]:* My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced on 14 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 202W, details of the local transport capital settlement for 2001–02.

The settlement provided firm allocations to authorities in England outside London for 2001–02 and for highway maintenance also for 2002–03. Allocations for the period 2002–03 to 2005–06 are indicative, and will be reconsidered each year in the light of actual scheme costs and annual progress reports submitted by authorities.

The allocation for 2001–02 made to major public transport and integrated transport schemes costing over £5 million which have received full approval was £85.5 million.

We earmarked an additional £6.3 million for 2001–02 for provisionally accepted major public transport and integrated transport schemes which will be made available on satisfactory completion of the outstanding issues such as statutory procedures.

We have indicated to authorities the total Government contribution for each major transport scheme; future annual allocations will be made each year subject to reported progress on the scheme and its costs.

Transport schemes costing less than £5 million are not subject to individual approval by central Government. Authorities are provided with a single block allocation for smaller scale measures and highway maintenance which they have discretion to spend in line with the objectives and priorities set out in the local transport plans. The total block allocation for 2001–02, including reserves, was £1,103 million.

In order to provide greater certainty over future allocations authorities were provided with an indication of the likely levels of funding they could expect to receive for smaller scale measures for 2002–03 to 2005–06, and for highway maintenance for 2003–04 to 2005–06. The announcement envisaged that the annual totals to be allocated for these measures would be as follows:

	£ million
2002–03[1]	1,120
2003–04	1,118
2004–05	1,248
2005–06	1,275

[1] Includes firm allocations for highway maintenance

As with major schemes, the future block allocations to individual authorities are subject to confirmation or revision each year in light of progress reported by the authorities.

Housing Revenue Account (Birmingham)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much of Birmingham's HRA notional rent surplus has been spent on rent rebates in each of the past five years; how much he estimates will be spent in this way in the *(a)* current and *(b)* forthcoming financial year; and for each year what his estimates are of the (i) number and (ii) proportion of tenants not in receipt of rent rebates. [148641]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The table shows the surpluses on the Housing Element of Birmingham's Housing Revenue Account which have been or will be deducted from the authority's entitlement to rent rebate subsidy.

To give a fuller picture of housing support provided by the Government to Birmingham, the table also shows the Housing Investment Programme allocation made to the authority in each year.

We do not have figures for the number of tenants who are not in receipt of rent rebates but the table shows the estimated proportion of rental income which is not rebated.

Figures for 2001–02 are not available but, following the introduction of the Major Repairs Allowance, it is very likely that Birmingham will have a positive housing element in 2001–02 and, therefore, no surplus to apply to its rent rebates.

Financial year	National Housing Element Surplus deducted from rent rebate subsidy £ million	Housing Investment Programme and Capital Receipts Initiative allocations £ million	Estimated percentage of rental income not rebated Percentage
1995–96	—	38.9	28
1996–97	3.63	38.6	29
1997–98	5.88	34.1	30
1998–99	9.54	44.5	31
1999–2000	9.40	45.1	31
2000–01[1]	8.83	80.9	30

[1] Provisional

Note:

Percentage of income not rebated estimated by comparing rent rebate spending with income from rents and service charges as recorded on Housing Revenue Account subsidy claim forms.

Abandoned Vehicles

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received on amending legislation dealing with abandoned vehicles on the public highway. [147109]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: We have received a number of suggestions recently from Members, the police, local authorities and members of the public for improving the way in which abandoned vehicles are dealt with. We are considering these as part of a review of the current legislation covering abandoned vehicles.

Beacon Councils

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the new Beacon councils; and if he will make a statement. [149181]

Ms Armstrong: We intend to announce the Beacon Councils for 2001–02 on Tuesday 6 February. At the same time we will publish the Report of the Advisory Panel on Beacon Councils giving details of the Panel's recommendations on Beacon Councils, together with a brochure "The Beacon Council Scheme: Where to Go and What to See 2001–2002", setting out the best practice the Beacons have to offer. Copies of the two publications will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Local Public Service Agreements

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress is being made in concluding local Public Service Agreements. [149182]

Ms Armstrong: We have today concluded the first local Public Service Agreements. The agreements are with the following authorities: Blackburn with Darwen borough council, Kent county council, Middlesbrough borough council, Stockton-on-Tees borough council, Tameside Metropolitan borough council, and Warwickshire county council. Copies of these agreements will be placed in the Library.

Negotiations are continuing with the 14 other authorities taking part in the pilot scheme of local Public Service Agreements. We expect to conclude further agreements soon.

GLA Transport Grant

Mr. Geraint Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he intends to vary the GLA transport grant for 2000–01. [148756]

Mr. Hill: GLA transport grant is paid to the Greater London Authority under section 101 of the GLA Act 1999 for the purposes of Transport for London. I have today, with the consent of HM Treasury, decided to vary the level of grant for 2000–01 after consultation with the Mayor of London. The grant is £396,161,000, an increase of £3,421,000 over the original determination.

Mobile Phone Masts

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many mobile phone masts had been erected in *(a)* school grounds and *(b)* hospital grounds by (i) 1 January 2000 and (ii) 1 January 2001; [148528]

(2) what his estimate is of the number of mobile phone masts which will be erected on *(a)* school grounds and *(b)* hospital grounds in (i) 2001 and (ii) 2002; [148527]

(3) what estimate he has made of the number of new mobile phone masts which will be erected in *(a)* 2001, *(b)* 2002 and *(c)* 2003. [148529]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Department does not hold information about the number or locations of existing mobile phone masts.

The Stewart Group recommended that a national database be set up by Government giving details of all base stations and their emissions. The Government have accepted this recommendation and are in the process of bringing together information on base station sites into a single co-ordinated database. This information will be made available to the public and local planning authorities.

The number of new masts required is dependent upon a range of factors. The Department is not in a position to give an estimate of the numbers which may be involved. This is a matter for the individual telecommunications operators. However, they are fully aware of the importance we attach to keeping the number of masts to the practicable minimum and to ensuring that those which are needed are designed and sited with sensitivity and care.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what recent representations he has received from *(a)* schools and *(b)* hospitals about the safety of mobile phone masts; [148524]

(2) what recent representations he has received from local authorities about the safety of mobile phone masts; and if he will make a statement. [148525]

Ms Beverley Hughes: In response to the recent consultation exercise seeking views on possible changes to the planning laws relating to telecommunications masts and associated guidance one response was received from a school, none from hospitals and 231 from local authority officials and Councillors.

Otherwise, the Department has received centrally in the last year one letter from a school, no letters from hospitals and 114 letters from local authority officials and Councillors about amenity or health aspects of mobile phone masts.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of mobile phone mast sites are used by more than one operator. [148531]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government's policy is firmly to encourage mast and site sharing where that is the optimum solution in the individual circumstances. Indeed, conditions attached to individual operating licences granted by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry include a requirement to investigate mast sharing before seeking to put up any new mast.

DETR Circular 4/99, "Planning for Telecommunications", makes clear our expectation that developers should provide evidence to local planning authorities that they have carefully considered the use of existing masts, buildings and other structures before seeking to erect any new mast, regardless of size. The authority may be justified in refusing prior approval or planning permissions if it considers the evidence regarding the consideration of such alternative sites is not satisfactory.

The Department has no information on site sharing but understands that there are approximately 9,000 mobile phone masts, of which 1,700 carry equipment from more than one operator.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* the meetings between Ministers at his Department and representatives of the mobile phone industry, and *(b)* the Ministers present at each such meeting, between 1 January 2000 and 1 January 2001. [148530]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Ministers have extensive dealings with organisations in both the public and private sectors as part of their official duties.

It would be impractical to maintain a central record of such meetings.

Warning Lights

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the organisations, authorities and agencies which are entitled to *(a)* mount on their vehicles and *(b)* use on the public highway, blue flashing or revolving lights; and if he will make a statement. [148432]

Mr. Hill: Entitlement to mount and use blue warning beacons, special warning lamps and similar devices on road vehicles are contained in the Road Vehicles Lighting Regulations 1989.

These regulations restrict the fitting of blue warning beacons or special warning lamps to emergency vehicles. The meaning of an emergency vehicle in these regulations is defined as a motor vehicle of any of the following descriptions:

(a) a vehicle used for fire brigade, ambulance or police purposes;

(b) an ambulance, being a vehicle (other than an invalid carriage) which is constructed or adapted for the purposes of conveying sick, injured or disabled persons and which is used for such purposes;

(c) a vehicle owned by a body formed primarily for the purposes of fire salvage and used for those or similar purposes;

(d) a vehicle owned by the Forestry Commission or by a local authority and used from time to time for the purposes of fighting fires;

(e) a vehicle owned by the Secretary of State for Defence and used

(i) for the purposes of the disposal of bombs or explosives,

(ii) by the Naval Emergency Monitoring Organisation for the purposes of a nuclear accident or an incident involving radioactivity,

(iii) by the Royal Air Force Mountain Rescue Service for the purposes of rescue operations or any other emergencies, or

(iv) by the royal Air Force Armament Support Unit;

(f) a vehicle primarily used for the purposes of the Blood Transfusion Service provided under the National Health Service Act 1977(a) or under the National Health Service (Scotland) Act 1978(b);

(g) a vehicle used by Her Majesty's Coastguard or Coastguard Auxiliary Service for the purposes or giving aid to persons in danger or vessels in distress on or near the coast;

(h) a vehicle owned by the British Coal Corporation and used for the purposes of rescue operations at mines;

(i) a vehicle owned by the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and used for the purposes of launching lifeboats; and

(j) a vehicle primarily used for the purposes of conveying any human tissue for transplanting or similar purposes.

The regulations prohibit the use of warning beacons emitting blue light and special warning lamps by emergency vehicles except (i) at the scene of an emergency (ii) or when it is necessary or desirable either to indicate to persons using the road the urgency of the purpose for which the vehicle is being used, or to warn persons of the presence of the vehicle or hazard on the road.

Army Training Estate (Otterburn)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reason he has not issued a decision letter in respect of the public inquiries into proposed development at Otterburn Army training estate. [148431]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The hon. Member may be aware that the Courts have given leave for judicial review in relation to development proposed by the Home Office at Aldington in Kent, which involves a challenge to DOE Circular 18–84 procedures for the development of Crown land. These are the same procedures as have been used by the Ministry of Defence to seek approval for the proposed development at Otterburn in Northumberland. The grounds of challenge are that the procedures are non-compliant with Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights. It is unlikely that I shall be in a position to reach a final decision on Otterburn before the Aldington case comes to Court this month. I shall then need to consider how to proceed in the light of the Aldington judgment.

In the meantime, I am arranging for various exchanges of correspondence on this issue to be copied to the parties to the Otterburn inquiry for their information.

Central Railway Project

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will institute the Transport and Works Act 1992 procedure for consideration of the Central Railway project. [148754]

Mr. Hill: We cannot institute the Transport and Works Act procedure unless the scheme's promoters, Central Railway, formally apply to the Secretary of State for an Order under that Act. That is for them to decide.

PRIME MINISTER

Lord Levy

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the dates in the last 12 months on which Lord Levy has met the Prime Minister; what the duration was of each meeting; and where the meetings have been held. [145325]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* Lord Levy liaises regularly with me, the Foreign Secretary, and other Ministers in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 20 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 236W, on Lord Levy, if he will place the texts of the personal messages delivered by Lord Levy on his behalf to *(a)* President Zedillo, *(b)* President-Elect Fox, *(c)* President Chavez, *(d)* President Batte, *(e)* President Banizer and *(f)* President Noboa. [145324]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* No. The messages were personal.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister what plans there are for *(a)* the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and *(b)* other ministers to accompany Lord Levy on future trips while acting as his personal envoy. [145261]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* None.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister if Lord Levy has *(a)* security protection and *(b)* a personal bodyguard provided by Her Majesty's Government while travelling as his personal envoy in (i) Israel and (ii) Latin America. [145267]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* When travelling as my personal envoy, Lord Levy receives the level of security protection considered necessary in the country he is visiting.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 20 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 238W, concerning messages carried by Lord Levy, for what reason such messages could not be carried by Ministers and diplomats. [145274]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* The purpose of asking Lord Levy to convey such messages as my personal envoy was to signal my personal interest in our relations with the countries. He was accompanied throughout by our ambassadors to the countries concerned and by a Foreign and Commonwealth Office official.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister what definition he uses of personal envoy, in relation to the work of Lord Levy. [145266]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to her right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) on 30 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 246W.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 20 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 236W, (1) what his policy is on the payment of travel expenses by Lord Levy while travelling as his personal envoy; [145273]

(2) for what reason Lord Levy did not claim travel expenses in respect of his visit to South America. [145271]

The Prime Minister *[holding answers 15 January 2001]:* Lord Levy has always paid his own travel expenses when travelling as my personal envoy.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 20 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 236W, if Lord Levy's visit to the middle east over the Christmas period was made in his capacity as his personal envoy. [145270]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* Lord Levy visited Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan from 5–9 January as my personal envoy.

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Prime Minister with whom Lord Levy had *(a)* scheduled and *(b)* unscheduled meetings in his role as personal envoy during his most recent visit to the middle east. [145859]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 16 January 2001]:* Lord Levy met a range of senior figures, including Prime Minister Barak in Israel, President Arafat in the Palestinian Authority, and Prime Minister Ali Abul Ragheb in Jordan. He had no unscheduled meetings.

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Prime Minister what statements were issued by each British embassy in *(a)* the South American countries and *(b)* middle eastern countries which Lord Levy visited, for each visit he has made there. [145860]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 16 January 2001]:* In general Embassies do not issue formal statements when Lord Levy visits, but provide factual information to inquiries.

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Prime Minister what the cost to public funds was of Lord Levy's most recent visit to the middle east; what contribution to the costs was made by Lord Levy; what the purpose was of his visit; what access Lord Levy has to non-confidential Government information; and from which officials Lord Levy has received briefings on the middle east. [145858]

The Prime Minister: *[holding answer 16 January 2001]:* Lord Levy's most recent visit as my personal envoy was to Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan from 5–9 January. The FCO and Embassies provided practical support, the cost of which is not separately itemised. This included accommodation, briefing, assistance in arranging programmes, and accompanied transport by road. Lord Levy paid his own travel costs to and from the region. The purpose of the visit was to exchange views on regional issues, in particular the middle east peace process. Lord Levy received briefings from appropriate Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials. A Foreign and Commonwealth Office official accompanied Lord Levy.

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Prime Minister on which occasions during Lord Levy's most recent visit to the middle east he *(a)* made public statements and *(b)* talked to foreign media, as a representative of (i) the Prime Minister and (ii) the United Kingdom. [145857]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 16 January 2001]:* None.

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Prime Minister what engagements Lord Levy has undertaken on his behalf in the middle east in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99, *(c)* 1999–2000 and *(d)* 2000–01. [145856]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 16 January 2001]:* I refer to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 510W.

Since then, Lord Levy has made one trip to the middle east as my personal envoy, visiting Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan from 5 to 9 January 2001.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister what *(a)* scheduled and *(b)* unscheduled meetings Lord Levy had with the media during his visit to South America. [146620]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* Lord Levy answered questions from the local media on a number of occasions.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister what steps he has taken to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest between Lord Levy's business interests and his mission as an envoy for his Department in the middle east. [146496]

The Prime Minister: I am satisfied that there is no such conflict of interest. Lord Levy has no business interests in the middle east.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister what *(a)* scheduled and *(b)* unscheduled meetings Lord Levy had with the media during his visit to the middle east in (i) December 2000 and (ii) January of this year. [146495]

The Prime Minister: Lord Levy did not visit the middle east in December 2000. He had no meetings with the media during his visit from 5–9 January.

Personal Envoys

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to appoint further personal envoys. [145265]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* I have no such plans.

Hammond Inquiry

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if the inquiry under Sir Anthony Hammond will consider issues relating to sponsorship of the Millennium Dome. [148367]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 2 February 2001]:* All relevant information will be made available to Sir Anthony Hammond in so far as it relates to the terms of reference of his review.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Soames: To ask the Prime Minister when Lord Levy met the Hinduja brothers at the House of Lords on behalf of the Government to confirm their sponsorship of the dome; what instructions he was given; what report he made of the meeting; and to whom. [148624]

The Prime Minister: At the request of the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC), Lord Levy attended a meeting on 29 October 1998 with the then Chief Executive of NMEC and representatives of the Hinduja Foundation to discuss their potential support of the Faith zone in the Millennium Dome.

HEALTH

Waiting Lists

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS patients have been waiting more than one year for an *(a)* out-patient and *(b)* in-patient (i) surgical intervention and (ii) other secondary medical treatment; and what the comparable figures were for (A) 1995, (B) 1990, (C) 1985 and (D) 1980. [143541]

Mr. Denham: Information on people waiting over a year for an out-patient appointment is not collected centrally. The in-patient information is given in the table.

Patients waiting for elective admission

Trust-based figures

Months/waiting	*Surgical acute specialties*	*Other specialties*
Position at 31 March 1980[1]		
Total waiting	[2]—	[2]—
12 months plus	[2]—	[2]—
18 months plus	[2]—	[2]—
Position at 31 March 1985[1]		
Total waiting	[2]—	[2]—
12 months plus	[2]—	[2]—
18 months plus	[2]—	[2]—
Position at 31 March 1990		
Total waiting	922,953	36,023
12 months plus	203,517	4,343
18 months plus	[2]—	[2]—
Position at 31 March 1995		
Total waiting	979,622	64,429
12 months plus	31,541	653
18 months plus	279	1
Position at 30 September 2000[3]		
Total waiting	960,241	71,583
12 months plus	50,118	997
18 months plus	2	0

[1] Ordinary admissions only
[2] Not collected separately
[3] Latest figures available by specialty

Source:
Department of Health form KH07 completed by NHS Trusts

Correspondence

Mrs. Roe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letters from the hon. Member for Broxbourne, of 31 October, 22 November, 22 December 2000 and 18 January 2001, relating to Mr. Derek Frank Finch of Cheshunt. [146895]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 23 January 2001]:* A reply to the hon. Member's letter was sent on the 31 January.

MMR

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what protection he plans to offer to women who have not received the rubella vaccination since MMR was introduced in 1988; and how many women of child-bearing age his Department estimates are not innoculated against rubella. [147485]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* All women are tested for rubella susceptibiltiy in their first pregnancy. Any found to be sero-negative are recommended to be immunised after the pregnancy. This programme, along with the surveillance of rubella susceptibility of the antenatal population, has been maintained since the introduction of measles, mumps and rubella. Since there has never been a programme to immunise women of child-bearing age, except those sero-negative, it is not possible to know how many women of child-bearing age are not immunised.

It is not possible to estimate the number of women who have not been innoculated against rubella. In 1995, the joint committee on vaccination and immunisation recommended that rubella immunisation for schoolgirls could cease due to the high level of immunisation through either the MMR campaign started in 1988 or the MR campaign in 1994.

Acquired Brain Injury

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what support his Department offers to people with acquired brain injury; [147954]

(2) what percentage and number of those with acquired brain injury are provided with rehabilitation services; [147966]

(3) what plans he has to help individuals with acquired brain injury back into work; [147955]

(4) what percentage of people with brain injury are provided with rehabilitation services. [147972]

Mr. Denham: Support and treatment depends on the extent of the injury and can, where appropriate, include specialised rehabilitation. The aim of treatment is, wherever possible, to restore the person to the state of health they enjoyed before the injury happened. Our policy is that all patients who need rehabilitation services should have access to them.

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he gives to local health, employment and social services in Greater Manchester on funding for vocational rehabilitation for individuals with acquired brain injury. [147956]

Mr. Denham: We do not give individual guidance to local health, employment and social services on what services to provide for their populations. Health authorities in partnership with primary care groups/trusts and other local stakeholders are responsible for assessing the health needs of their populations and commissioning services to meet those needs.

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of people with acquired brain injury do not walk again. [147967]

Mr. Denham: Around 1 million people a year receive a head injury in the United Kingdom and some 100,000 of those attend hospital. Each year at least 2,000 adults suffer permanent serious impairments. We do not keep statistics, however, on whether patients are left unable to walk as a result of their injury.

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what is the average age of a person diagnosed with acquired brain injury; [147965]

(2) what the average age is of a person diagnosed with a brain injury. [147969]

Mr. Denham: We do not analyse the incidence of brain injury by age. However, a 1999 report from the Royal College of Surgeons, on the management of head injury, found that around half of the people who attend hospital with a head injury are under 16 years of age.

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what financial support his Department offers to people with acquired brain injury in Greater Manchester; and if he will make a statement. [147970]

Mr. Denham: We do not provide funding for individual patients. It is for health authorities, in partnership with primary care groups/trusts and other local stakeholders, to determine how best to use their funds to meet national and local priorities for improving health, tackling health inequalities and modernising services.

Social Services Inspectorate

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the social services inspectorate follow up the findings and recommendations of the local government ombudsman in respect of maladministration by social services departments. [147321]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* The Department expects local authorities to take all reports, and especially those in which there are adverse findings, of the local government ombudsman very seriously and to take appropriate action locally in the light of the ombudsman's recommendations. The ombudsman does not publish all of his judgments or routinely notify details of individual cases to the social services inspectorate. Thus, the inspectorate does not have a formal role in following up such recommendations. Should the inspectorate be notified of a decision, it may decide to take up the matter with the local authority to establish what action is being taken, but this will depend on the nature of the case and the ombudsman's recommendation.

Epsom and St. Helier NHS Trust

Sir Archie Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) for what reason the consultation being carried out by the Epsom and St. Helier NHS Trust recommends a significant transfer of facilities away from Epsom to St. Helier; [148329]

(2) for what reasons the Chief Executive of the Epsom and St. Helier NHS Trust has not held discussions with the management of hospitals in Surrey about the impact on them of the location of services away from St. Helier. [148328]

Mr. Denham: The discussion document published by Epsom and St. Helier national health service trust considers ways in which patient services could best be provided for local people. It takes into account Royal College guidelines on the required critical mass of services for these to be provided and also the need to use the accommodation at Epsom hospital to the best advantage of patients.

This is an informal discussion document. Should concrete proposals be developed, there would be a full and formal consultation with all affected parties, including local people and other NHS organisations.

Paediatric Facilities

Sir Archie Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy that only accident and emergency departments that are on the same hospital site as in-patient paediatric facilities should accept children. [148331]

Ms Stuart: No. It remains appropriate for accident and emergency departments to offer initial assessment of health status and the options available to achieve best outcome including, if appropriate, transfer to a specialist unit on another site.

Negligence Claims

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what were the total amounts paid out by *(a)* NHS trusts and *(b)* health authorities in response to negligence claims in each of the last 10 years; if he will break down the amounts by region; and if he will make a statement. [148081]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* We do not collect centrally information on clinical negligence payments by national health service trusts or health authorities. The National Audit Office report on the NHS summarised accounts shows that health authorities and NHS trusts charged the following amounts to their income and expenditure accounts for each year:

Year	*£ million*
1992–93	80.4
1993–94	117.9
1994–95	160
1995–96	173
1996–97	235
1997–98	144
1998–99	221

Note:
Figures for 1999–2000 are not yet available.

Complaints Evaluation

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to publish the findings of the independent United Kingdom-wide evaluation of complaints; and what action he will take on the results of the evaluation. [148615]

Ms Stuart: The evaluation team's report is expected to be submitted by the end of this month. It will be published as soon as possible once we have given proper consideration to the findings. The NHS plan made it clear that we will act on the results of the evaluation and without prejudicing the evaluation we would expect the reform of the complaints procedure to result in a more independent and responsive system.

NHS Staff (Expenses)

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the conclusions of his Department's working group reviewing the reimbursement arrangements for the expenses incurred by NHS staff on NHS business. [148285]

Mr. Denham: We are continuing to work with representatives of staff and employers on options for revised arrangements for reimbursing staff travelling on national health service business. The issues are complex, and we will bring the review to a conclusion as soon as possible.

Patient Care Budget

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the value of 1/20th of the patient care budget will be for each health authority in each of the next three years. [148567]

Mr. Denham: Health authority allocations for 2001–02 are shown in the table. Final decisions have not yet been made for 2002–03 and 2003–04 but all health authorities will receive a minimum increase of 6 per cent.

£000

Health authority	*Total allocation 2001–02*	*1/20th of total allocation*
Avon	697,776	34,889
Barking and Havering	303,878	15,194
Barnet	247,485	12,374
Barnsley	185,567	9,278
Bedfordshire	369,282	18,464
Berkshire	525,665	26,283
Bexley and Greenwich	344,220	17,211
Birmingham	808,438	40,422
Bradford	371,589	18,579
Brent and Harrow	370,079	18,504
Bromley	217,850	10,893
Buckinghamshire	441,601	22,080
Bury and Rochdale	297,767	14,888
Calderdale and Kirklees	436,633	21,832
Cambridgeshire	470,718	23,536
Camden and Islington	394,935	19,747
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	372,185	18,609
County Durham	491,142	24,557
Coventry	241,259	12,063
Croydon	241,504	12,075
Doncaster	234,088	11,704
Dorset	524,463	26,223
Dudley	217,943	10,897
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	579,510	28,976
East and North Hertfordshire	347,662	17,383
East Kent	467,900	23,395
East Lancashire	415,174	20,759
East London and The City	596,445	29,822
East Riding	425,755	21,288
East Surrey	288,231	14,412
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	594,506	29,725
Enfield and Haringey	386,293	19,315
Gateshead and South Tyneside	299,716	14,986
Gloucestershire	392,240	19,612
Herefordshire	117,787	5,889
Hillingdon	183,403	9,170
Isle of Wight	108,298	5,415
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	359,721	17,986
Kingston and Richmond	255,761	12,788
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	692,785	34,639
Leeds	557,161	27,858
Leicestershire	613,532	30,677
Lincolnshire	467,631	23,382
Liverpool	408,740	20,437
Manchester	410,816	20,541
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	496,841	24,842
Morecambe Bay	242,079	12,104
Newcastle and North Tyneside	394,414	19,721
Norfolk	549,539	27,477
North and East Devon	353,859	17,693
North and Mid Hampshire	345,415	17,271
North Cheshire	235,657	11,783
North Cumbria	234,652	11,733

£000

Health authority	Total allocation 2001–02	1/20th of total allocation
North Derbyshire	269,960	13,498
North Essex	595,359	29,768
North Nottinghamshire	282,380	14,119
North Staffordshire	362,284	18,114
North West Lancashire	381,457	19,073
North Yorkshire	510,732	25,537
Northamptonshire	385,430	19,272
Northumberland	232,652	11,633
Nottingham	463,720	23,186
Oxfordshire	394,886	19,744
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	396,100	19,805
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	350,051	17,503
Rotherham	188,467	9,423
Salford and Trafford	366,383	18,319
Sandwell	242,664	12,133
Sefton	229,179	11,459
Sheffield	431,355	21,568
Shropshire	294,125	14,706
Solihull	143,879	7,194
Somerset	343,500	17,175
South and West Devon	451,040	22,552
South Cheshire	478,715	23,936
South Derbyshire	404,994	20,250
South Essex	500,386	25,019
South Humber	233,841	11,692
South Lancashire	222,508	11,125
South Staffordshire	379,655	18,983
Southampton and South West Hampshire	388,537	19,427
St. Helen's and Knowsley	278,798	13,940
Stockport	208,234	10,412
Suffolk	468,523	23,426
Sunderland	237,254	11,863
Tees	439,203	21,960
Wakefield	250,132	12,507
Walsall	193,863	9,693
Warwickshire	344,918	17,246
West Hertfordshire	373,495	18,675
West Kent	665,312	33,266
West Pennine	352,242	17,612
West Surrey	432,530	21,627
West Sussex	555,588	27,779
Wigan and Bolton	444,786	22,239
Wiltshire	408,462	20,423
Wirral	267,707	13,385
Wolverhampton	190,097	9,505
Worcestershire	354,408	17,720

Charging Policy

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what change in charging policy will be brought about by the transfer of local authority health related functions to the care trusts proposed in the Health and Social Care Bill. [148880]

Mr. Hutton: There will be no change in the arrangements for any charging policy which affects services which are delegated to a care trust as proposed in the Health and Social Care Bill. The policy decisions on charging that a local authority can make will continue to be taken by the local authority, and will relate to their delegated functions only.

Waiting Lists (Worcestershire)

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients were on the *(a)* waiting list for operations and *(b)* waiting list for an out-patient's appointment at the Worcestershire NHS Acute Trust in each month from January 2000 to January 2001. [148752]

Mr. Denham: Worcester acute hospital is a newly merged trust. As a result, data are not available before April 2000. Latest data available are shown.

The trust had planned for and achieved a decrease in both its in-patient and out-patient waiting lists for end of October. It is inevitable that waiting lists would rise due to the evacuation of patients from the Castle street site of Worcester Royal infirmary due to the heavy flooding.

In-patient data

Month	Total inpatient waiting list
April 2000	8,294
May 2000	8,470
June 2000	8,665
July 2000	8,878
August 2000	8,370
September 2000	8,958
October 2000	8,911
November 2000	9,192

Out-patient over 13 week waiters

Quarter	Number
June 2000	1,920
September 2000	2,650

Overseas Visits

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many visits abroad have been made by Health Department officials on departmental business *(a)* since 1 May 1997 and *(b)* in the last 12 months. [149155]

Ms Stuart: Information is not held in the form requested. However, total expenditure (travel and subsistence) for visits abroad by departmental officials is as follows.

Financial year	£
1997–98	858,710.00
1998–99	927,372.92
1999–00	874,262.10
2000–01 (up to 31 January 2001)	658,870.19

For the period 1 February 2000–31 January 2001 the figure is £860,848.40.

Cane Hill Site, Coulsdon

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for the redevelopment of the Cane Hill site, Coulsdon. [148153]

Mr. Hutton: Croydon council have rejected a planning application by South London and Maudsley national health service trust to extend the medium secure unit provided at the site by 98 beds.

The trust, in conjunction with other mental health providing trusts in south London, is undertaking feasibility studies to identify whether an alternative site or sites can be identified.

The future of the Cane Hill site will not be determined until a clear plan for the provision of these services has been agreed.

NHS Expenditure

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the *(a)* planned expenditure and *(b)* actual expenditure was for the NHS in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99 and (iii) 1999–2000. [148816]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is set out in the table.

£ million

	Planned net NHS expenditure[1]	*Outturn net NHS expenditure*
1997–98	34,368	34,664
1998–99	36,509	36,612
1999–2000	39,703	[2]40,066

[1] This shows planned expenditure at the start of each financial year
[2] Estimated outturn

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Post Office Closures

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many post offices have closed in Scotland in each of the last 10 years. [148161]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that they do not hold historical data on post office closures by country for the last 10 years. Their records are held on a financial year basis. Net post office closures in Scotland for the years for which figures are available are as follows:

Year to end March 1999—25

Year to end March 2000—29.

EU Postal Monopolies

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answers of 17 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 238–39W concerning the postal monopoly limit, what Her Majesty's Government's policy is on Directive Com (2000) 319; when the Directive will be published; what the income of the Royal Mail was in the last year from items weighing (i) less than 50 grammes and (ii) between 50 and 350 grammes; and if primary legislation is needed to amend the public monopoly powers of the Royal Mail. [148558]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The proposal from the European Commission for a draft directive was published on 19 July 2000. The directive will be published in final form if and when the Council and European Parliament agree a final text. The Government support co-ordinated European liberalisation—this will ensure a level playing field for postal operators—including the Post Office and the future Post Office company. The Government believe it is important for such liberalisation to be gradual and controlled and to be consistent with our domestic processes to ensure that the full benefits of liberalisation can be achieved. That is why before taking a detailed decisions in Europe it would be preferable to take account of the work of our postal regulator—to ensure that liberalisation proceeds in a way that is consistent with maintaining the universal service at a uniform tariff.

At the Telecommunications Council in December, I said that although I believed that the limits could be reduced from 350 grams to 150 grams in 2003 without adversely impacting on the universal service, I would need the advice of our regulator before going further. In the event, member states were unable to agree on a package and further discussions are expected during the Swedish Presidency.

The income of the Royal Mail in these weight categories is a matter for the Post Office and would be commercially confidential within the meaning of Exemption 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information (third party's commercial confidences). A broad indication of the income of Royal Mail by weight category is as follows:

	Percentage
Revenue from items below 50 grams	65
Revenue from items between 50 grams and 350 grams	30
Revenue from items over 350 grams	5

The Postal Services Act 2000 replaces the exclusive privilege of the Post Office to deliver letters under certain weights and postage prices with a licensing regime covering such letters. The Postal Services Commission is responsible for issuing licences to do this and is proposing to grant Consignia plc (the future operating company of the Post Office company (Consignia Holdings plc)) with a licence to do so.

Under the Act, the extent of the letters market subject to licensed access may be modified by an order made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, but only on the recommendation of the Postal Services Commission and after it has been laid in draft before, and approved by, both Houses of Parliament. The relevant provisions of the Postal Services Act 2000 are due to come into force on 26 March 2001.

If changes to the Postal Services Act 2000 are needed to implement obligations under the draft directive when it is adopted, these could be made using the powers contained in section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972.

Departmental Policies (Slough)

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Slough constituency, the effects on Slough of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [146932]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Slough has benefited from a broad range of initiatives that have been implemented since May 1997.

The Thames Valley Business Link

The Thames Valley Business Link receives funding from the Department to assist businesses at all stages of development. The Business Link also has an independent income stream. The Business Link covers both Berkshire and Buckinghamshire. Initiatives are aimed to reach groups of businesses that have

shown a need for a more direct approach. It would not be possible to disaggregate the benefit for Slough and the figures shown are for the whole region covered by the Business Link.

The Business Links services are widely marketed and include the following initiatives.

DTI Funding for Business Link

Financial Year	*£000*
1997–98	2,288
1998–99	2,108
1999–2000	2,938
2000–01	n/a

Diagnostic Consultancy Service

This scheme is aimed at businesses to help them find and rectify problems within the company.

Business Advisory Service

The Business Advisory Service gives: easy access to a wide range of quality business services; initial business diagnosis at no extra cost; impartial expert advice on business issues; and practical value for money support tailored to make the most of an individuals potential.

Export Counselling Services

This was a scheme initiated in 1997 to aid local businesses to develop an export market. (Funds were in addition to the above)

Financial Year	*£*
1997–98	52,500
1998–99	50,000
1999–2000	25,000

Other initiatives include:

British Trade International

A separately funded unit dealing with expanding the export and raising the profile of British goods abroad.

SMART Awards

Three Slough businesses have been awarded money to develop innovative technological ideas to improve their business.

The Berkshire Small Business Service

The Small Business Service will take over from the current Business Link in April 2001 and will deliver a sharper and more focused service by acting as a gateway to the wide range services available to local businesses.

EU Directive on Consultation and Information

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the proposed timetable is for *(a)* discussions between the TUC, the CBI and the Government on the incorporation into UK law of the EU directive on Consultation and Information and *(b)* for bringing necessary legislation before the House; and if he will make a statement. [148125]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The proposed EU directive establishing a general framework for informing and consulting employees in the European Community has not been adopted by the Council of Ministers. Therefore there is no timetable for its implementation in the UK.

Cash Points (Post Offices)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has made to the Post Office on the prospects of cash points in sub-post offices which are not owned by banks and building societies making charges for access to cash. [148178]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* None; this is a commercial matter for the Post Office. However, the Government have made it clear that they do not welcome the imposition of charges for access to cash. They would impact disproportionately on the socially excluded and those in rural areas.

Coal Consumption

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the UK *(a)* consumption of coal and *(b)* extra tonnes of carbon dioxide burned between August and October was in (i) 1999 and (ii) 2000. [147815]

Mr. Hain *[pursuant to his reply, 30 January 2001, c. 121W]:* I should like to point out that there was an increase of 1 million tonnes (and not 3 million tonnes) in the amount of coal consumed in this period in the UK in 2000 compared with 1999.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

European Directives

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the institutions of the European Union are required to abide by European directives [148054]

Mr. Vaz: Directives are addressed to the member states, but may contain express provisions that bind the institution, for example a requirement that the Commission set up a programme or report back to the Council on a particular matter.

Embassies and High Commissions

Mr. Kilfoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the 10 British embassies and high commissions with the *(a)* highest and *(b)* lowest running costs, indicating the number of staff employed in each case. [145310]

Mr. Wilson: The 10 UK embassies and high commissions with the *(a)* highest and *(b)* lowest operating costs in FY 1999–2000, and the numbers of UK-based staff resident at these missions, are as follows:

Operating costs[1]

	Number of UK-based staff[2]	*Numbers of locally engaged staff*
Highest		
Tokyo (highest operating cost)	48	133
Paris	70	140
Washington	77	155
Moscow	76	151
Brussels[3]	144	113
Berlin/Bonn	53	97
New Delhi	64	234
Rome	35	95
Peking	69	138
Singapore	22	57

Operating costs[1]

	Number of UK-based staff[2]	*Numbers of locally engaged staff*
Lowest		
Minsk	4	12
Reykjavik	3	6
Vila	2	8
Santo Domingo	2	10
Managua	2	13
Windhoek	4	7
Tegucigalpa	2	11
Honiara	2	8
Nuku'Alofa	1	8
Castries (lowest operating cost)	1	4

[1] Operating costs include costs of small subordinate posts, that cannot easily be separated/extracted.
[2] Numbers of home-based staff is the total staff complement of the FCO and other Government Departments, ie MOD and DFID.
[3] Costs and staff figures cover all the FCO Missions in Brussels, (Embassy, UKREP, NATO).
[4] Costs and staff figures cover the offices in Berlin and Bonn together as they cannot be calculated separately.

Lord Levy

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met Lord Levy to discuss his recent visit to South America. [145259]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary meets Lord Levy on a regular basis, most recently on 15 and 21 January.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library the *(a)* agenda and *(b)* minutes of Lord Levy's meetings with officials during his visit to South America. [145258]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* Our ambassadors in the countries concerned sent accounts of Lord Levy's meetings by telegram to the FCO. Under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, exemption 2, internal telegrams are not made public. This is in line with previous Government practice.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the outcome of Lord Levy's visit to South America, with particular reference to UK-South American relations. [145260]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* Lord Levy's visit was very successful and made a major contribution to our relations with the countries concerned.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what private business Lord Levy is conducting while travelling in the middle east. [146489]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* Lord Levy conducts no private business while travelling as the Prime Minister's personal envoy, and has no business interests in the middle east.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what *(a)* practical and *(b)* financial support his Department and embassies have provided to Lord Levy during his visit to the middle east; and if he will separately itemise the cost of this support. [146494]

Mr. Wilson: I refer to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to question 145858 from the hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) answered today, *Official Report*, column 390W.

Saudi Arabia

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in gaining access to British citizens held in Saudi Arabian prisons. [147625]

Mr. Wilson: Following our representations to the Saudi authorities, our embassy has now been given access to all those British nationals to whom we had previously been denied access.

Our embassy is now arranging for follow-up visits to the men.

Public Interest Immunity Certificates

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many public interest immunity certificates *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers of State, *(c)* junior Ministers and *(d)* civil servants in his Department have signed in each calendar year from 30 May 1997. [147731]

Mr. Wilson: Eight public interest immunity certificates have been signed by Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers since 30 May 1997, as shown in the table.

	Secretary of State	*Ministers of State*	*Junior Ministers*	*Civil Servants*
1997	0	0	1	0
1998	1	0	0	0
1999	2	1	0	0
2000	3	0	0	0
2001	0	0	0	0

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what meetings the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) has had with representatives of the Indian Government and its agencies at which matters relating to the Hinduja family were discussed. [148072]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 31 January 2001]:* Since becoming Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in October 1999, I have met a number of Indian Ministers and officials. I have not discussed matters relating to the Hinduja family during any of these meetings.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what occasions, and for what purpose, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), has met a member of the Hinduja family while serving as a Minister in his Department. [148306]

Mr. Vaz: I have met members of the Hinduja family at various Asian community events. As prominent members of the British Asian community, the Hindujas are involved in many community issues.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), has discussed extradition arrangements between the UK and India with *(a)* Mr. G. Hinduja and *(b)* Mr. S. Hinduja while serving as a Minister in his Department. [148307]

Mr. Vaz: No.

Bear Baiting (Pakistan)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations about bear baiting in Pakistan to the Government of Pakistan. [148561]

Mr. Battle: The British high commission in Islamabad has raised the issue of bear baiting with the Pakistani authorities on several occasions. It will continue to convey the strength of public opinion in the UK over the exploitation and ill-treatment of these animals, and will encourage the Government of Pakistan to find ways to enforce the law against bear baiting more effectively.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will urge the Government of Pakistan to co-operate with the World Society for the Protection of Animals in its campaign to eradicate bear baiting in Pakistan. [148562]

Mr. Battle: We noted that the Government of Pakistan, through their high commission in London, have expressed their appreciation to the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) for its commitment in developing the Kund Park bear sanctuary to house bears confiscated from their owners. The British high commission in Islamabad will continue to raise our concerns over bear baiting with the Pakistani authorities.

Sir David Hannay

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) of 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 58W, on Sir David Hannay, what work has been undertaken by Sir David for his Department. [148875]

Mr. Vaz: Sir David Hannay was appointed as the UK's special representative for Cyprus in May 1996 to give full support and new impetus to the UN's long-running efforts to achieve a settlement of the Cyprus problem. As such he is in regular contact with all those involved in the search for such a settlement, including with high level interlocutors in Cyprus. His work involves travel to Cyprus, Turkey and Greece in particular, and to the two UN headquarters (in New York and Geneva) where negotiations have been taking place since November 1999. His work also requires him to maintain close links with the EU (Presidency and Commission) and other Governments who are working to strengthen the UN efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement. He advises the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on all matters relating to a Cyprus settlement.

Lockerbie

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on those responsible for the Lockerbie bombing other than Abdelbaset al-Megrahi. [148881]

Mr. Battle: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in the House on 31 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 307–17.

Entry Visas

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many applications for entry visas from the Islamabad high commission the Minister with responsibility for entry clearance accepted after previously being declined by the High Commission in *(a)* 1992–93, *(b)* 1993–94, *(c)* 1994–95, *(d)* 1995–96, *(e)* 1996–97, *(f)* 1997–98 and *(g)* 1998–99; and if he will make a statement. [148827]

Mr. Vaz: I regret that the information requested could be obtained only at a disproportionate cost.

The only way we could obtain this information would be for the high commission to review every refusal case file. Moreover, visa case files at posts are routinely destroyed after two years for issued visit visas, five years for refused visit applications, 10 years for other refused applications and 10 years for settlement applications.

Common Fisheries Policy

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if discussions took place concerning the fishing fleets of Poland and Estonia and the review of the Common Fisheries Policy when he last met his colleagues from other member states of the European Union to discuss enlargement; and if he will make a statement. [147897]

Mr. Vaz: I last discussed enlargement with my EU colleagues at the General Affairs Council on 22 January. We did not discuss the fisheries chapter of the negotiations. This has been provisionally closed with Cyprus, Hungary, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Slovakia. The indicative timetable for negotiations set out in the Commission's strategy for enlargement of November 2000 envisages conclusion of negotiations on this chapter with other candidates in the second half of this year. All candidates will be expected to apply the common fisheries policy in full upon accession and access to fisheries resources within EU waters will be based on the principle of relative stability, which allocates national quotas according to historic catch levels.

Immigration

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what definitions of temporary and permanent employment are used in considering applications for entry clearance to the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [148163]

Mrs. Roche: I have been asked to reply.

There are no definitions of temporary or permanent employment in the Immigration Rules. There are a number of categories for entry to the United Kingdom that enable an individual to take employment. The type of employment varies between the categories and ranges from work incidental to their main purpose of entry to full employment by a United Kingdom company.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Abortion and Sterilisation

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to review her policy on the provision of public funding to overseas aid organisations involved in compulsory abortion and sterilisation in the third world and China; and if she will make a statement. [147697]

Clare Short: My Department does not fund organisations involved in compulsory abortion and sterilisation. DFID makes annual contributions towards the work of the United Nations Population Fund and the International Planned Parenthood Federation in over 150 countries. These organisations have programmes in China aimed at promoting international standards of freedom of choice reproductive health. We strongly support these efforts.

Education for All

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the steps taken by UNESCO to implement the education for all programme following the Dakar Summit. [148164]

Clare Short: UNESCO was given a mandate at the World Education Forum to monitor and co-ordinate implementation of the Dakar framework for action. Its Director-General was asked to convene annually an education for all (EFA) high level group to review progress. This has not yet met, but a working group (for informal technical consultation among EFA partners) has been established. UNESCO is implementing major organisational changes to mainstream EFA throughout its programmes.

We will continue to encourage UNESCO to provide leadership and technical guidance on how to achieve the international development targets for education and the goals of the Dakar framework, within a clearly defined poverty framework. I will be discussing progress to date with the Director-General in London on 5 February.

Long-term Conflicts

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her policy is with respect to providing development assistance to countries involved in long-term conflict. [147020]

Clare Short: It is usually impossible to provide long-term development assistance to countries involved in violent conflict. We provide humanitarian relief and support for conflict resolution and development where possible. But 20 of the 38 poorest countries are involved in conflict or recently emerged from conflict. Such conflict leads to growing impoverishment and is a barrier to development. We are therefore working to try to focus greater international effort on the resolution of such conflicts.

Indian Earthquake

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a field hospital immediately available to the Indian authorities for victims of the recent earthquake. [148263]

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what provision her Department is making to assist in the relief operations for the Indian earthquake. [148091]

Clare Short: DFID's emergency response centre has been working round the clock since the earthquake struck. With the assistance of the Ministry of Defence, we despatched on 27 January a UK search and rescue team of 69 personnel, available under our contingency arrangements, made up of 25 UK fire service volunteers from Lancashire, Lincolnshire, Greater Manchester, Chester and Leicestershire and specialist rescue organisations. Officials from my Department led the team. They have been working in close co-operation with the Indian authorities and have so far managed to rescue six people alive.

In a joint operation with my Department, 75 search and rescue personnel from the Russian Ministry of Emergencies (EMERCOM), funded by DFID, arrived in Bhachau on 28 January and have rescued nine persons to date. They also have with them an airmobile hospital. A second Russian aircraft, part-funded by my Department, is awaiting clearance from the Indian authorities to bring in 3,000 blankets and 45 family tents.

In the last 48 hours, we have despatched three aircraft carrying 1,200 tents and other shelter items from the DFID's emergency stockpile in Staffordshire. A fourth aircraft has also flown from Brindisi carrying medical supplies, trauma equipment and plastic sheeting. These supplies are already beginning to arrive in Ahmadabad and Bhuj. Further relief efforts will be co-ordinated by the UN.

We have allocated a total of £10 million to support this emergency relief effort without reducing our spending in other parts of India. Nearly £3 million of this has already been spent. We are in close contact with operational agencies, including the Red Cross, UNICEF, WHO, and a number of operational NGOs (Care, Save the Children, Christian Aid) to determine the provision of immediate relief items and medical assistance. The Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), the UK umbrella organisation for a number of humanitarian NGOs, is launching a public appeal on Thursday 1 February.

The Indian Government did not immediately request assistance but, as the scale of the disaster became apparent, did so. Medical and para-medical personnel continue to assist local civilian and military personnel already engaged in the rescue effort. The Indian authorities are well organised and are providing food, army personnel, heavy lifting equipment, mobile operating theatres and medical supplies, but the scale of the emergency is such that some of the resources cannot be supplies, but the scale of the emergency is such that some of the resources cannot be supplied in the region. We are working closely with the Indian Government and operational agencies to support their efforts and to ensure that all those who survived the earthquake are provided with health care and other basic essentials until they can rebuild their homes and livelihoods. Copies of our regular situation reports are available in the Library.

India

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment she has made of the level of corruption in India. [147213]

Clare Short: Corruption is widespread in India at every level of public life, as in most developing countries, reflecting weak financial and administration systems. Rent seeking and other forms of corruption hit poor people particularly hard and have a significant impact on their economy.

The Union and State Governments of India are beginning to take anti-corruption measures beyond those that already exist in the form of statutory audit bodies and Vigilance Commissions. State Governments such as those of Andhra Pradesh and Medhya Pradesh, with both of whom DFID is working in partnership, are placing an increasing focus on good governance initiatives, including anti-corruption. Anti-corruption strategies are also being developed in a number of national public institutions.

DFID is supporting a number of strategic initiatives in all four of our partner states which will directly help reduce corruption. These initiatives include the introduction of VAT and revenue enhancement measures; increasing political accountability through decentralisation and local decision-making; the redesign of public expenditure management systems including procurement and audit functions; and improved service delivery including the introduction of electronic governance bringing services directly to the poor. Our support for public enterprise reform will help reduce corrupt practices in public utilities through the introduction of sound, commercial practices and the creation of an effective regulatory framework. At the national level, in supporting health and education programmes, DFID has helped give priority to the introduction and strengthening of transparent transaction processes. We are also discussing support for broader governance initiatives that will help reduce corruption.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Hinduja Brothers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department which Ministers and officials in his Department have *(a)* been contacted by and *(b)* contacted (i) Mr. G. P. Hinduja and (ii) Mr. S. P. Hinduja since 2 May 1997; if he will list the occasions on which there was such contact; and if he will make a statement. [148196]

Jane Kennedy: It is not the normal practice of the Government to release details of meetings or discussions with private individuals or companies. All relevant papers will be made available to the inquiry being conducted by Sir Anthony Hammond QC.

Lay Magistrates

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to encourage future recruitment and retention of lay magistrates. [147692]

Jane Kennedy: Through his advisory committees, my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor already undertakes a range of initiatives to attract people from all sections of the community, including advertising in the local press, talks on local radio, and contacting local organisations.

Court open days also stimulate the public's interest in applying to be a magistrate. The Lord Chancellor and I encourage magistrates courts committees to consider holding these on a regular basis. My officials are also currently developing a national recruitment strategy with the Magistrates Association and others to optimise the effectiveness of future initiatives. Through these initiatives most advisory committees attract sufficient new magistrates to replace those who retire or resign.

Following an equality audit of the policies and procedures surrounding the appointment of magistrates the Lord Chancellor has instructed officials to introduce exit questionnaires which will allow us to find out in more detail the reasons why people resign, so that we can identify common concerns and take action. The aim is to have these in place by April 2001.

SCOTLAND

New Deal

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many people obtained full employment as a result of the new deal scheme in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000. [145654]

Ms Jowell: I have been asked to reply.

Latest figures from the start of new deal for young people in 1998 to the end of October 2000 are summarised in the following table:

	Number obtaining employment
1998	59,150
1999	109,440
2000	93,850

We know that many young people leave the programme for employment without telling the Employment Service: these people are not included in the figures. Over 80 per cent of jobs obtained are unsubsidised.

TREASURY

Public Interest Immunity Certificates

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many public interest immunity certificates *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers of State, *(c)* junior Ministers and *(d)* civil servants in his Department have signed in each calendar year from 30 May 1997. [147732]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* Treasury Ministers and officials have not signed any public interest immunity certificates since 30 May 1997.

ECOFIN

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what conclusions were arrived at during the ECOFIN of 19 January 2001 regarding political agreement on excise duties on mineral oil. [148542]

Mr. Timms: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Economic Secretary on 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 42–43W.

National Debt

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the national debt was on *(a)* 2 May 1997 and *(b)* 31 January. [148972]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Public sector net debt has fallen from 43.4 per cent. of GDP on 30 April 1997 to 32.9 per cent of GDP on 31 December 2000, the latest period for which figures are available.

Capital Gains Tax

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the estimate of cost of capital gains tax exemption at death published in the Treasury's 'Tax Ready Reckoner' in November 2000 assumes all normal capital gains tax rules apply; and if he will make a statement. [148663]

Dawn Primarolo: The estimate reflects the main features of the capital gains tax regime which would apply assuming disposal of assets at date of death.

Public Bodies Reserves (Wales)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what guidelines he has issued to the National Assembly for Wales on the appropriate level of reserves which may be held by public bodies. [148851]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The funding arrangements for the devolved Administrations are set out in the Statement of Funding Policy published in July 2000. It is for the National Assembly for Wales to decide how to allocate its budget, including any reserve it may decide to hold within its Departmental Expenditure Limit.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families in Crosby are in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit. [148334]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) on 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 425W.

Children's Tax Credit

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps are being taken to maximize take-up of the Children's Tax Credit. [148120]

Dawn Primarolo: Most people who are eligible for the Children's Tax Credit have already claimed. However, the Inland Revenue has started a publicity campaign involving TV, Radio and the Press to remind people who pay tax through PAYE to send in a claim quickly if they have not done so already.

Tax Credits (Payroll Software)

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received about problems with the information on the Working Families Tax Credit and the Disabled Person's Tax Credit provided to payroll software suppliers by the Inland Revenue. [148485]

Dawn Primarolo: I am not aware of any representations on this matter.

Museums and Galleries

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the potential cost to public funds of extending section 33 of the Value Added Tax Act 1994 to cover national museums and galleries. [147431]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 26 January 2001]*: Discussions are ongoing on what is a complex issue. No decisions or accurate estimates have been made.

Indebted Countries

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the countries for which debt has been written off by Britain, together with the amounts written off in each case. [148121]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The UK has written off, and is writing off, debt through multilateral initiatives such as the HIPC initiative, and through additional bilateral initiatives. Under the HIPC initiative the UK stands ready to write off all £1.9 billion still owed to the UK by the 41 countries potentially eligible. This is in addition to the £400 million of ECGD debt already written off under previous initiatives, and the £350 million of aid debt already written off for HIPCs. This aid debt is shown in the table.

£ million

	Aid debt cancelled
Countries at Decision Point	
Bolivia	0.1
Guyana	58.9
Honduras	5.0
Nicaragua	0.6
Gambia	5.2
Malawi	30.7
Mozambique	21.8
Senegal	1.1
Tanzania	3.4
Uganda	22.1
Zambia	55.9
Countries not yet at Decision Point	
Ethiopia	2.5
Ghana	50.9
Cote D'Ivoire	3.5
Kenya	67.6
Sierra Leone	10.4
Sudan	9.9
Laos	0.03

The amount of the £1.9 billion written off at a given stage depends on progress through the HIPC initiative. When a country reaches the first stage, known as Decision Point, the UK provides 100 per cent. relief on all payments due. When a country then reaches Completion Point all debt is irrevocably written off.

On 2 December the Chancellor announced in addition that for all countries not yet at Decision Point, any payments made will be held in trust and returned when they can show that the savings from debt relief will lead to poverty reduction.

An irrevocable commitment to 100 per cent. reduction has been made in respect of Uganda, who reached Completion Point under the HIPC initiative in 2000, and who previously owed the UK £5.5 million. Uganda has also had around £5 million of former-CDC debt cancelled.

The UK is providing 100 per cent. interim relief on payments in respect of £700 million of debt, owed by HIPC countries that have reached Decision Point under the HIPC initiative on the basis of a commitment to poverty reduction, but which are yet to reach Completion Point. The debt owed to ECGD by these countries is as follows:

	£ million
Benin	2.7
Bolivia	17.4
Cameroon	74.5
Gambia	0
Guinea	5.3
Guinea-Bissau	0
Guyana	41.7
Honduras	0
Madagascar	25.5
Malawi	3.9
Mali	4.2
Mauritania	6.9
Mozambique	91.2
Nicaragua	1.0
Niger	10.9
Rwanda	0.1
Sao Tome et Principe	0
Senegal	1.5
Tanzania	115.0
Zambia	239.2

Interim relief is also being given to these countries on around £60 million of debt formerly held by CDC plc.

In respect of Burkina Faso, which owes the UK £1.0 million, interim relief has been suspended in light of the continuing role of the Government of Burkina Faso in undermining the peace process in Sierra Leone. Payments from Burkina Faso will be held in trust.

Nineteen countries have not so far qualified for debt reduction, in most cases because of conflict. In respect of a further £1.3 billion of debt owed by these countries, the Government have announced that no further benefit will accrue to the UK. Payments will be held in trust and earmarked for spending in support of poverty reduction strategies once those countries have reached DP. The debt owed to ECGD by these countries is as follows:

	£ million
Angola	118.6
Burundi	0
Central African Republic	0.5
Chad	0
Congo	143.1
DR Congo	165.5
Cote D'Ivoire	48.0
Ethiopia	15.4
Ghana	216.7
Kenya	52.9
Laos PDR	0
Liberia	18.4
Myanmar	23.1
Sierra Leone	3.6
Somalia	29.2
Sudan	374.9
Togo	15.7
Vietnam	54.4
Yemen	3.3

Standard Industrial Classification

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many jobs in each category of the Standard Industrial Classification there were in the North East *(a)* on 1 January 1997, *(b)* on 1 January 2000; and how many are estimated for 1 January 2001. [148879]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 5 February 2001:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the number of jobs in the North East (148879).

Available information on employee jobs by Standard Industrial Classification relates to December 1996 and December 1999. The data are published in Table B.16 of Labour Market Trends. The data are also available via the NOMIS database which may be accessed in the House of Commons Library. Data for December 2000 will be published in the May edition of Labour Market Trends.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the stock of businesses was in each category of the Standard Industrial Classification in the North East *(a)* on 1 January 1997, *(b)* on 1 January 2000 and *(c)* the estimate for 1 January 2001. [148878]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 5 February 2000:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your question on the stock of businesses in the North East. (148878)

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) operates the Inter Departmental Business Register (IDBR) that holds information on 2 million businesses operating in the UK, representing nearly 99% of economic activity. It combines information on VAT (Value Added Tax) traders and PAYE (Pay As You Earn) employers.

From the register, an annual publication is produced under the title 'Size Analysis of UK Businesses (PA1003): ISBN 0–11–536355–6/ ISSN 1363 - 9013'. This incorporates counts of businesses by size, classification and geographical location. Data relate to March of each year and include those businesses registered for VAT. Figures for the North East, split by 14 broad industrial groupings of the Standard Industrial Classification, are shown in table 10.

The data have been published annually up to 2000. Data for 2001 will be released in summer 2001 in electronic format on the National Statistics website. Additionally, IDBR data are incorporated in the Small Business Service (SBS) annual publication 'Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) Statistics for the United Kingdom 1999: URN 00/92'. This covers all businesses in the UK, including estimates for those operating neither a VAT nor PAYE scheme. Data on a geographical basis are available in table 9 but only for 1998 and 1999.

Both publications referred to above are available in the House of Commons Library.

WALES

Volunteers

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the cost of the proposed fee for security checks of volunteers to voluntary organisations in Wales. [147378]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have been asked to reply.

An announcement about the level of fees to be charged by the Criminal Records Bureau will be made as soon as possible, taking into account continuing work on the determination of the bureau's costs.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Job Creation (Greater London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many new jobs he estimates have been created in the Greater London area during the last 12 months. [143930]

Ms Jowell: There are no figures available for jobs created in the Greater London area, as there is no requirement for employers to notify any agency when they recruit staff for a new job. However, a set of figures called the "Civilian Workforce in Employment" published by the Office for National Statistics estimate that up to September 2000, there were 68,000 more people employed in Greater London than there were in September 1999.

Nursery Schools (Wandsworth)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what funding is paid by his Department in the current financial year to the London Borough of Wandsworth for the development of nursery school provision. [145428]

Ms Hodge: We are making £2.82 million available to Wandsworth in 2000–01, through specific nursery education grant, for the provision of free early education places for three-year-olds. In 2001–02, Wandsworth will be allocated £2,050,488 for the creation of 1,726 three-year-old places, as a result of which all three-year-olds in Wandsworth will be able to access a free place if their parents want one.

The Government have also made £67,945 nursery capital funding available to the local education authority from the New Deal for Schools to improve and expand early years services, together with £38,916 to maintained nursery schools to enable them to extend the services they offer.

There is £9.532 million in the under-5s Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) sub-block that is available to support spending by Wandsworth on nursery provision in 2000–01. Nationally, £122 million has been transferred to SSA for 2001–02 to cover payments for early education places for four-year-olds currently made to local education authorities through Nursery Education Grant. In 2001–02, £10.709 million will be available to Wandsworth in the under-5s sub-block to support spending on nursery provision, including provision of early education places for four-year-olds.

The funding we are making available to Wandsworth is part of our overall commitment to the early years which includes, for the first time, provision of free early education places for three-year-olds across all sectors. All three-year-olds in England will be able to access a free early education place by September 2004.

Departmental Surveys

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for *(a)* 1992–93, *(b)* 1993–94, *(c)* 1994–95, *(d)* 1995–96, *(e)* 1996–97, *(f)* 1997–98, *(g)* 1998–99, *(h)* 1999–2000 and *(i)* 2000–01, (I) his Department's total spending on quantitative and qualitative surveys of policy issues by focus groups, opinion polling, task forces or other means and (II) the cost of each individual project. [146588]

Mr. Blunkett: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Lifelong Learning on 5 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 142W, and the reply I gave on 27 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 853W.

The Government want to hear what people affected by them have to say about proposed new policies. This is an important aspect of the Modernising Government initiative. Public opinion research is, though, subject to the usual strict rules that spending must represent good value for money for the taxpayer and must not be used for party political purposes.

Information on the costs of surveys undertaken by the Department for Education and Employment could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Playgroups

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what funding is available for playgroups from *(a)* the early years initiative and *(b)* other sources; and if he will make a statement. [146609]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 23 January 2001]:* Since 1997–98, overall early education funding made available by the Government through the Standard Spending Assessment and Nursery Education Grant, has increased by almost £400 million. This has enabled some 120,000 new, free early education places for three and four-year-olds to be created. These places are available in a range of settings, including private or voluntary pre-schools and playgroups as well as local education authority-maintained nurseries, nursery classes and reception classes.

Since September 1998, all four-year-olds have been able to access a free, part-time, early education place. By September 2004, all three-year-olds will also be able to access a free place. We are making £986 million available over the years 2001–02 to 2003–04 for the provision of free places for three-year-olds, and other early years initiatives. By March 2001, some 50 per cent. of three-year-olds nationally will have access to a free early

education place. We are making a further 80,000 new places available in 2001–02 which will increase to 66 per cent. the number of three-year-olds accessing a free place by March 2002. Playgroups, along with other early education providers, will benefit from this expansion. No authority will have less than about 40 per cent. of free early education places for three-year-olds in its area in 2001–02.

Total expenditure on nursery education will have increased by £1 billion, to £2 billion, over the period from 1996–97 to 2003–04.

The Neighbourhood Childcare Initiative will create child care places in 900 Neighbourhood Nursery centres. £203 million is available over the period 2001–04 to enable all sectors to develop new, or extend current, provision and the Government also intend to make up to £100 million available in lottery money from the New Opportunities Fund to help meet capital costs. This will enable existing playgroups to extend their provision to full day care.

Support is also given to the pre-school playgroups sector in various other ways. In the current year, we are giving grants totalling £2 million to the Pre-school Learning Alliance (PLA), to which the majority of pre-schools are affiliated. This funding supports the PLA's training infrastructure and other activities undertaken by their national headquarters and regional bases.

£500,000 is being made available this year for grants to voluntary pre-schools and playgroups facing financial difficulties. Grant applications are currently being assessed. A total of £1.75 million has been made available for such grants over the three years 1998–2000. In the first two years of the scheme, grants were made to 1,500 pre-schools and playgroups.

£250,000 has also been made available this year for projects to enhance the sustainability of voluntary pre-schools and playgroups. Eighteen projects were successful under the scheme.

Computers for Teachers

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the definition of a Key Stage 3 maths teacher is for the purpose of determining qualification for the second phase of the £500 subsidy for the purchase of computer equipment; and if it is a requirement that the recipient be a maths graduate. [147553]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* The definition of Key Stage 3 mathematics teacher for the purposes of determining qualification for the second phase of the Computers for Teachers scheme is that their current responsibilities include teaching mathematics at Key Stage 3 in the maintained secondary sector (including non-maintained special schools and middle schools) in England. (They must teach at least one mathematics Key Stage 3 lesson per week). Those that qualify need not be mathematics graduates.

School Playing Fields

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer to the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) of 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 439–40W, on school playing fields, what the basis is for his estimate of the number of school playing fields sold in England in every month between 1979 and 1997. [147774]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* Public concern about the loss of school playing fields led directly to the introduction in October 1998 of section 77 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. Before section 77 was introduced, only grant-maintained schools were required to seek consent from the Secretary of State before selling land, including areas of their playing fields. Local authorities and other schools that owned their own playing fields were free to sell without restriction. It is estimated that an average of 40 playing fields a month were sold in this way before October 1998. This estimate is based on the number of playing field disposals at grant-maintained schools between April 1996, when the previous Government further encouraged the disposal of playing fields by relaxing the Local Authority Capital Finance Regulations which governed the use of sale proceeds, and 1 October 1998, when section 77 took effect. During this 30-month period, some 64 grant-maintained schools were given approval to dispose of areas of playing field, which is an average of over two a month. Using the proportion of grant-maintained schools at that time compared with the number of other schools, we estimate the total number of playing field disposals each month to have been around 40. These estimates are in line with answers given previously by the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), when he was Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at this Department.

Travel Industry Students

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what financial assistance his Department provides to students studying for qualifications relating to the travel industry. [147950]

Mr. Wicks: We make no specific provision for students on courses related to tourism. Financial support is therefore available to those students who are eligible on the same basis as students in further and higher education generally.

We have, in 2000–01, contributed £103,000 through the Travel, Tourism, and Events National Training Organisation towards a variety of projects to assist employers in the development of a lifelong learning framework to address the current and future skill needs in the industry.

Education Rights (UN)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what communications he has received regarding the October 1999 visit of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education; and what measures he is taking to take account of UN concerns, with particular respect to provision for traveller children. [148044]

Jacqui Smith: Following the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education's visit to the UK in October 1999, and her visit report which was presented to the Commission on Human Rights in 2000, I have not received any external communications about her earlier visit in October 1999.

I am nevertheless meeting the Special Rapporteur again on 7 February to discuss the report of her visit. I will use the opportunity to explain the provision we are making to promote access to, and achievement of, traveller children in school.

The Special Rapporteur will also be meeting my right hon. Friend the Minister of State and Deputy Home Secretary on 7 February, to discuss her concerns about the provision of education in prisons.

New Deal for Schools

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools in the Harrow, West constituency which have received funding under the New Deal for Schools since May 1997, with the amount of funding in each case. [148266]

Jacqui Smith: The table shows the schools in the Harrow, West constituency which have benefited from investment through the New Deal for Schools programme, which commenced in 1997–98. These allocations formed part of the £4.554 million investment made so far in schools in the London borough of Harrow local education authority, and of the £6.415 million made so far in schools in the London borough of Brent local education authority, under the New Deal for Schools. The New Deal for Schools was introduced as a new additional programme targeted specifically at addressing the backlog of urgent repairs in school buildings that had built up after 18 years of underfunding under the previous Administration. It is in addition to other capital funds made available to the London borough of Harrow and the London borough of Brent local education authorities.

Nationally, investment in school buildings has tripled from £683 million a year in 1996–97 to over £2 billion in 2000–01. It will be £3.2 billion in 2003–04, including grant, credit approvals and Private Finance Initiative credits. There will be central Government investment of £7.8 billion in school buildings in total from 2001–02 to 2003–04.

New Deal for Schools: Allocations to schools in the Harrow, West constituency

Year/school	*Project details*	*Grant awarded (£)*
1997–98		
Included within LEA wide package:		
St. George's First and Middle RC (Voluntary Aided)	Internal alterations	[1]88,000
1998–99		
Included within 3 school package:		
Rooks Heath High	Provision of extended fire escapes	[1]138,800
Harrow Tuition Service PRU		
Hatch End High		
Pinner Park Middle	Replacement of aging boiler	46,000
Whitmore High	Rewire of technology block and upgrading of key equipment	38,750
Shaftesbury High	Repairs to roof structure, coverings and gutters	184,000
Grimsdyke First and Middle	Rewire of whole school	155,250
Included within 5 school package:		
West Lodge Middle	Renew boilers and/or pipework	[1]299,000
Roxbourne First and Middle	Rebuild deteriorating parapet wall	23,000
LEA wide package for 25 schools	Waterproof envelope works	[2]1,058,900
LEA wide package for 8 schools	Repair, renewal or demolition of dangerous structures	[2]263,000
1999–2000		
Included within 6 school package:		
Longfield First and Middle	Urgent health and safety repairs to unsafe structures	[1]374,000
Rooks Heath High		
2000–01		
Roxbourne Middle	Structural repairs and recladding to first floor link	29,568

[1] Denotes total allocations made to a package of several projects covering a number of schools in the London borough of Harrow local education authority, which will be able to advise the value of projects at individual schools in the Harrow, West constituency which benefited from these allocations.

[2] Denotes total allocations made to a package of several projects covering a number of schools in the London borough of Brent local education authority, which will be able to advise the value of projects at individual schools in the Harrow, West constituency which benefited from these allocations.

Atrocity Lessons

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he has issued to schools on the provision of education on the Holocaust and other brutalities that have taken place in recent years. [148309]

Jacqui Smith: Within the History National Curriculum all pupils are required to study the Holocaust during Key Stage 3. Within that section there is also an opportunity to examine post war issues including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) Education Working Group comprising experts from non-governmental organisations and DfEE officials produced an education pack for HMD, which was distributed to all schools by the Holocaust Educational Trust. Within the extensive cross-curricular resource pack there is reference to contemporary issues of brutality, and specific material on the recent genocides in the Balkans and Rwanda. The Education Working Group will be developing a strategy for sustainable resources on Holocaust education to support Holocaust Memorial Day in the future.

Royal Liverpool Children's Inquiry

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the Royal Liverpool Children's Inquiry. [148395]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment endorses the statement made by the Secretary of State for Health on 30 January about the Royal Liverpool Children's Inquiry. In particular, he adds his sympathy to the parents who are affected by the dreadful events described in the report.

University medical schools will co-operate fully with the NHS Trusts in cataloguing collections of tissue, and will help the NHS Trusts implement the recommendations of the Commission which has been established to oversee the return of tissues and organs in the collections.

The Council of the University of Liverpool has been asked to take prompt and effective disciplinary action against their employees, where this is warranted. In addition, Ministers have asked Sir Brian Follett, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Warwick, to carry out a review of the adequacy of appraisal and disciplinary procedures for senior staff working in both university medical schools and the NHS.

Out-of-authority Education

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish, for each year from 1996–97 to 1999–2000 and for each local education authority, the number of *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary age children who were educated in a local authority area other than the one where they normally reside. [148622]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Secondary Schools (Bristol)

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many year six children attending Bristol local education authority primary or junior schools failed to gain places in Bristol local education authority secondary schools in each year from 1997–98 to 1999–2000. [148623]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department does not hold this information. It is for local education authorities to ensure that sufficient school places exist for the children in their area. Each authority is required to prepare and publish an annual School Organisation Plan which includes information about the capacity of its schools, the projected pupil numbers, and any conclusions about the need to add or remove places over a five-year period. The Department publishes annually figures showing the overall number of surplus places based on returns from LEAs. In each of the three years referred to the total capacity of the twenty-two local education authority secondary schools in Bristol exceeded the number of pupils on roll by more than 2,000.

Professional Footballers (EU Passports)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of non-EU nationals who are refused a work permit to play professional football in the UK but who subsequently obtain an EU passport for a country other than the UK. [148674]

Ms Hodge: The Department has made no estimate of the numbers of non-EU nationals who have been refused a work permit to play professional football in the UK, but who subsequently obtain an EU passport for a country other than the UK. The question raised falls outside of the responsibility of this Department.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the number of professional footballers playing for UK clubs who hold passports of EU countries other than the UK but for whom a country outside the EU is their country of origin. [148675]

Ms Hodge: The Department has made no assessment of the number of professional footballers playing for UK clubs who hold passports of EU countries other than the UK, but for whom a country outside the EU is their country of origin. The question raised falls outside of the responsibility of this Department.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of professional footballers contracted to UK clubs who hold an EU passport for a country other than the UK and hold joint nationality with a non-EU country. [148676]

Ms Hodge: The Department has made no estimate of the number of professional footballers contracted to UK clubs who hold an EU passport for a country other than the UK, and hold joint nationality with a non-EU country. The question raised falls outside of the responsibility of this Department.

Professional Headship Qualification

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to make the NPQH mandatory for new headteachers of primary, secondary and special schools. [148682]

Ms Estelle Morris: We remain committed to requiring all first-time headteachers to hold a professional headship qualification as a benchmark of quality. Provision for that

is on the Statute Book. The first recruitment to the new strengthened and streamlined NPQH in autumn 2000 attracted a record number of candidates. The new programme is now rolling out to candidates. We will consult on the necessary Regulations to bring the mandatory requirement into force in due course.

Funding Allocation

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if, following his letter of 29 January to local authority leaders, he will publish the methodology by which his allocation of the additional money was distributed between local authorities. [148684]

Ms Estelle Morris: I refer to the answer given to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 7 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 578W.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Traffic Wardens

13. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will suspend further transfers of traffic wardens from police authorities to local councils pending an investigation into the effect on police operations where such transfers have taken place. [147099]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No. This is a matter between the police force concerned and its local authority.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

16. **Mr. Allan:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many anti-social behaviour orders have been served in south Yorkshire, by local authority area. [147103]

Mr. Boateng: Three anti-social behaviour orders were issued in the south Yorkshire area between 1 April 1999 (the date on which the relevant provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 came into force), and 30 September 2000 (the latest date for which figures are currently available). We are not able to break this figure down by local authority area.

35. **Mr. Michael:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his assessment is of the effectiveness of the use being made by the police and local authorities of anti-social behaviour orders. [147124]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The purpose of the anti-social behaviour order is to provide local communities with better protection against loutish and anti-social behaviour. So far, at least 150 orders have been taken out in a variety of cases and with considerable success.

As Minister of State, my right hon. Friend announced that there would be a review of the operation and effectiveness of this provision within two years, depending on priorities and experience in several areas—*Official Report, Standing Committee B*, 5 May 1998. We have just embarked on that review, and will publish the results later this year.

Police (Early Retirement)

17. **Mr. Paul Clark:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he has taken to reduce the proportion of police officers who retire early. [147104]

Mrs. Roche: The Government recognise the need for more efficient management of early retirements caused by ill-health. We have been working with forces for some time to improve management of the process and, nationally, good progress has been made in this area. Whereas in 1993–94, 53 per cent. of all police retirements in England and Wales were on the grounds of ill-health, this had declined to 31 per cent by 1999–2000.

We are currently considering what incentives could be offered so that more of those officers who currently retire on completion of 30 years' service—but before reaching compulsory retirement age—continue to serve.

Crime (Devon and Cornwall)

18. **Mr. Bradshaw:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the level of crime in Devon and Cornwall. [147106]

Mr. Straw: In the 12 months to September 2000, recorded crime in Devon and Cornwall fell by five per cent. compared with the previous 12 months. Burglary was down by six per cent. and vehicle crime was down by two per cent. Violent crime also fell one per cent. Recorded crime in this force area has fallen by 16.5 per cent. since the 12 months to March 1997.

Special Constables

19. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the role of special police constables. [147107]

Mr. Straw: The special constabulary has a long tradition of giving valuable public service, but numbers have declined in recent years.

Specials are now being deployed on a wider variety of duties than before, including more front-line duties, where they are exposed to the same risks as regular officers.

Under the Police (Health and Safety) Act 1997, police officers, including specials, were brought within the scope of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. Police forces must therefore take the necessary measures to safeguard the health and safety of all their officers, and the training and equipment provided to specials is of the same standard as that for regular officers. The recruiting criteria for specials are now very similar to those for regular officers, and a number of applicants who would previously have been accepted into the special constabulary are now being rejected.

The Association of Chief Police Officers and the Home Office are reviewing the criteria for becoming a special to see whether they have become unnecessarily restrictive.

Rural Policing

21. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on rural policing. [147110]

Mr. Charles Clarke: All areas of the country, urban and rural alike, are equally entitled to benefit from a modern, effective and responsive police service. This is why we are providing for a real and significant increase in police funding across the board. We are also providing extra funding for rural police forces: £15 million this year, rising to £30 million in 2001–02, to help forces meet the additional costs involved in policing rural communities.

Hilda Murrell

22. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Linlithgow of 11 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 427W, on Hilda Murrell, when he will provide a reply to the hon. Member, as indicated in his letter of 30 November 2000, on the continuing forensic investigation by the West Mercia police; and if he will make a statement. [147111]

Mr. Charles Clarke: As promised in my answer of 30 November 2000, I have written to my hon. Friend about this case. A copy of my letter of 30 January has been placed in the Library of the House.

Police Administration

24. **Mr. Fraser:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to reduce the time spent by police officers on administration. [147113]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We are implementing proposals from the recent report "Making a Difference: Reducing Police Paperwork", and last November we issued police forces in England and Wales with a revised "Manual of Guidance for the Preparation, Processing and Submission of Files". This will reduce considerably the number of forms officers have to complete when they pass cases to the Crown Prosecution Service.

We are also investing in a range of new communications technology to minimise the paperwork that officers are required to process.

Young Offender Institutions

25. **Mr. Boswell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what changes he plans in the regime for young offender institutions. [147114]

Mr. Boateng: We have transformed the facilities and regimes for those under 18-years-old. Over £51 million has been invested to achieve this.

The creation of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales sees for the first time a single organisation with oversight and responsibility for the care and well-being of this age group. The board's purpose is to monitor the operation of the youth justice system and to ensure the delivery of the appropriate level of care and standards.

The new regime is based upon providing a

"full, purposeful and active day";

rigorous assessment of each individual's health, social, educational and vocational needs; formal and specific planning provision of education and the training to meet these needs; regular reviews of each individual's plans; and inter-agency co-operation and support.

In relation to those aged 18–20 years, we are considering carefully how this group should be treated in custody as part of our proposals to reform sentencing for this age group. The Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000, which contains provision to abolish the sentence of detention in a young offender institution (DYOI), provides an opportunity to look at the regime needs of a wider range of young offenders. We recognise that they do have different needs, and our work on regime provision for young offenders, not only the 18–20s, will concentrate on moving them more effectively from custody to work. We have given a commitment that we will not implement the abolition of the sentence of DYOI until we have prepared a Prison Service order to governors covering adult offenders, and we have consulted interested bodies as part of that work.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the effect on prisoners and staff in young offender institutions of the no overtime policy. [148174]

Mr. Boateng: Since 1987, the conditions of service for all prison officers have been to work a fixed number of hours per week, averaged over a shift cycle. These flexible shift schemes give the best possible match of staff time available for work to be completed. In circumstances when additional hours are required to meet unplanned and unexpected demands, officers can work extra hours for which they receive time off in lieu. Officers can take their time off at a time that does not affect the running of the regimes in the establishment. In exceptional circumstances, when time off in lieu cannot be granted, ex-gratia payments can be authorised. This system has proved to offer the best possible regimes within the resources available in young offender institutes and other types of establishment.

Hunting Ban (Enforcement)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prison officers at *(a)* Feltham Young Offenders Institution and *(b)* other YOIs in the south-east of England were on long-term sickness leave in each of the last three years in (i) actual and (ii) percentage terms. [148172]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is provided for 1999 and 2000 in the table. Reliable sickness absence data are not available prior to 1 January 1999. Of the figures above, 15 officer grades from Feltham and 25 officer grades from the other young offender institutions quoted have sickness absence spread across both years and for the purpose of this reply these have been counted in both years. Long-term sickness absence is defined as greater than one month.

	1 January to 31 December 1999	*1 January to 31 December 2000*
Number of prison officer grades on long-term sickness leave		
Feltham	51	37
Other young offender institutions in south-east of England	80	92
Percentage of prison officer grades on long-term sickness leave		
Feltham	15.0	9.6
Other young offender institutions in south-east of England	14.1	16.0

26. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received from the Association of Chief Police Officers about the enforcement of a ban on hunting with dogs; and if he will make a statement. [147115]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The views of the Association of Chief Police Officers were sought during the process of drafting the Hunting Bill. The association was concerned primarily about the need for the police to be given an explicit power of arrest to enforce a ban and for the option which introduced a scheme of licensing.

The association has informed the Home Office that it considers that it is too early to provide a final view on the resource implications of any ban on hunting, or of the other options that were in the Bill. However, if hunting were to be banned it does not anticipate a significant additional burden on the service over its current commitment.

Closed Circuit Television

27. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he is taking to extend CCTV schemes. [147116]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under the crime reduction programme closed circuit television (CCTV) initiative, we are investing £153 million over three years in new or extended CCTV systems in England and Wales.

Over £60 million of capital funding has already been allocated to crime and disorder reduction partnerships to support more than 350 schemes. Over 750 outline proposals are currently under consideration for funding under round 2 of the initiative.

Police Recruitment

28. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to increase the level of police recruitment; and if he will make a statement. [147117]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government want to see police numbers rising.

Our spending plans therefore make generous provision, intended to meet major pay, pensions and other pressures on forces as well as providing ring-fenced funding to increase recruitment through the crime fighting fund (CFF). We anticipate that these measures will enable forces to increase police service numbers to record levels by March 2003.

The CFF will enable police forces to recruit 9,000 officers over and above the number previously planned in the three years 2000–01 to 2002–03.

To help forces to meet their recruitment targets, the first ever national recruitment campaign was launched on 30 August 2000 and the second phase of the campaign commenced on 27 December. By 14 January 2001, there had been 78,000 responses to the campaign and 17,070 expressions of interest had been forwarded to police forces.

The Metropolitan police service and the City of London police have been experiencing particular problems in attracting new recruits. To address these problems we agreed to an increase of £3,327 per annum in the London allowance paid to those officers in each force who were recruited on or after 1 September 1994 and who are not in receipt of housing allowance.

In addition, agreement has been reached between the Metropolitan police service (MPS) and the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC) to provide free rail travel within a 70-mile radius of London for serving MPS police officers. The arrangements will come into effect from Wednesday 14 February. The Home Office will meet the annual cost of £2.45 million.

The police negotiating board is currently looking at whether there should be an allowance for officers in any other forces. We await any recommendations it may make on this or any other issues in relation to police pay and allowances.

Asylum Seekers

29. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many failed asylum seekers have disappeared; and if he will make a statement. [147118]

Mrs. Roche: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) on 8 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 700.

33. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he has taken to promote good community relations in areas where there is a significant number of asylum seekers. [147122]

Mrs. Roche: The national asylum support service recognises the importance of good community relations and encourages partnership working between interested parties through a multi-agency approach, which includes voluntary and community groups.

Anthony Gerald Dickinson

30. **Mr. Hilary Benn:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the case of Mr. Anthony Gerald Dickinson and his application to the Criminal Cases Review Commission. [147119]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Criminal Cases Review Commission is operationally independent of the Home Office, and I am unable to intervene in its determination of individual cases or to comment on their merits. I understand that the commission considered an application from Mr. Dickinson, but concluded in March 1998 that the case did not meet the criteria laid down in the Criminal Appeal Act 1995 for the commission to make a reference to the Court of Appeal. His legal representatives made a further application on Mr. Dickinson's behalf in May 2000, and I am confident that the commission will consider these representations carefully and impartially.

Private Security Industry

31. **Mr. Jenkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in what ways the regulation of doormen in pubs and clubs will be improved by the Private Security Industry Bill. [147120]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Private Security Industry Bill provides for the establishment of a security industry authority, which will have responsibility for licensing individuals employed in designated sectors of the security industry, including door supervisors.

The authority will be responsible for establishing, for the first time, a consistent licensing regime for all door supervisors. This will involve setting nationally applicable criteria, in consultation with the police, industry and local authorities. These will be used in deciding whether to issue a personal licence allowing the applicant to undertake door supervision activities. Initially, the criteria will involve a criminal record check, but over time additional criteria relating to training will be imposed. This aim is to ensure that only fit and proper people receive licences. The main benefits of the new regime will be:

Anyone intending to operate as a door supervisor will require a licence. This will replace the existing arrangements whereby registration of door staff is left to the discretion of local authorities. All London boroughs operate licensing schemes, but only around 60 per cent. of local authorities outside London have such schemes.

One national standard will be applied which will ensure a more consistent approach towards issuing licences. Current standards and criteria used for issuing licences vary between local authorities.

The new licence issued will be valid nationally. The validity of existing licences is limited to particular areas.

Burglaries

32. **Dr. Ladyman:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the trend in the number of burglaries in England and Wales. [147121]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The recorded crime statistics for England and Wales published on 16 January show a fall in the total number of burglaries of 8 per cent. in the 12 months to September 2000. Domestic burglary fell by 10 per cent. and non-domestic burglary by 5.5 per cent. in the same period.

The British crime survey published in October last year, shows that the total number of domestic burglaries, including those that are not reported to, or recorded by, the police, has fallen from just over 1.6 million in 1997 to under 1.3 million in 1999—a 21 per cent. reduction.

Police Emergency Calls

34. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the time taken for police to respond to emergency calls. [147123]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Most police authorities set targets for responding to 999 calls and their performance against these targets has been published annually by the Audit Commission.

The data for performance in 1999–2000 were published on 10 January in the "Local Authority Performance Indicators, Police and Fire Compendium". This recorded that on average, police authorities in England and Wales, which had set a target, had met it 87.6 per cent. of the time. The targets set ranged from 10 minutes to 20 minutes, depending on whether the police were responding to a call from an urban or rural area.

In future years, police performance in responding to emergency calls will be published in police authorities "Annual Policing/Best Value Performance Plans".

Elderly People (Attacks and Abuse)

36. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many old people were victims of *(a)* attacks and *(b)* abuse in (i) England and Wales and (ii) West Yorkshire in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [147125]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on the age of victims is available from the British crime survey (BCS). The 2000 sweep of the survey estimates that in 1999 there were 130,000 violent incidents against persons aged 60 and over in England and Wales and that there were also 158,000 incidents where persons aged 60 and over were threatened[1]. It is not possible to derive from the BCS reliable figures for West Yorkshire.

These estimates are based on incidents reported to BCS interviewers and respondents may be reluctant to reveal all forms of abuse or attack. It should also be noted that the BCS only interviews respondents who live in private households.

[1] This includes any threat made to a BCS respondent or a threat against the respondent that was not necessarily made directly to the respondent.

Police/School Liaison (Anti-racist Guidance)

37. **Mr. Pond:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on liaison between the police and schools on schemes to provide anti-racist guidance in the classroom. [147126]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Association of Chief Police Officers guidance to forces on identifying and combating hate crime and hate incidents highlights the importance of including racist and other hate issues in police/school liaison strategies. The anti-bullying pack, recently reissued to all schools by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, provides advice on the range of strategies which are available to deal with all forms of bullying, including bullying by race. These include multi-agency partnerships with the police and other key agencies.

Wheel Clamping and Private Security Firms

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received in relation to his proposals for the licensing of wheel clamping and private security firms. [147096]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We received a number of representations about our proposals to regulate the private security industry, including wheel clamping, in England and Wales.

Around 180 comments were received in response to our White Paper "The Government's proposals for regulation of the private security industry in England and Wales", which was published in March 1999. We also received representations following the publication of the Private Security Industry Bill, which was introduced into the House of Lords on 7 December 2000.

A wide variety of organisations submitted representations. These included industry inspectorates, local authorities, the police, trade unions and representative bodies in the leisure industry. Trade and professional associations also submitted comments, including the British Parking Association, on the subject of our proposals relating to wheel clampers.

Alcohol Consumption (Public Places)

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to prohibit the consumption of alcohol in designated public places. [147108]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Measures to prohibit the consumption of alcohol in designated public places are included in the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, which is now before the House.

Police Numbers (Humberside)

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on police numbers in Humberside. [147112]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand from the chief constable that the Humberside police has 1,915 police officers and that this will increase to around 1,930 officers by the end of the current financial year.

At this stage, the force expects to recruit its full allocation of 47 officers under the crime fighting fund this year.

Young Offenders (Cell Hours)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will ask the Prison Service to collect separately the number of out of cell hours for *(a)* sentenced and *(b)* remand prisoners in young offender units. [148176]

Mr. Boateng: Time spent out of cell is one of a range of national key performance targets for prison establishments. Data on time spent out of cell are held in various forms at local level and discussed with area managers as part of the performance monitoring process. However, there are no plans to collect or collate such data centrally.

Feltham Young Offenders Institution

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the waiting time was for psychiatrically disturbed adolescents in Feltham young offenders institution to obtain placements in NHS beds or secure psychiatric places in *(a)* each quarter for the last two years and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available [148173]

Mr. Boateng: Historic information on waiting times for mental health transfers from Feltham young offenders institution (YOI) is not available. As of 31 January 2001, seven prisoners from Feltham YOI had been accepted for and were awaiting transfer to national health service mental health units. Of these, six had been waiting for under one month following acceptance and one had been waiting for two months. The individuals concerned are all over the age of 18.

Prison Staff (Retention and Recruitment)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prison staff of principal officer grade and above have *(a)* resigned and *(b)* transferred out of prisons in the Greater London area in each of the last three years. [148175]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is provided in the table:

Year	*Resigned*	*Transferred*
1998	1	25
1999	2	16
2000	2	41
2001	6	82

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many vacancies for prison officers were *(a)* advertised and *(b)* filled in each institution in the north-west of England between July 2000 and the latest date for which information is available. [148135]

Mr. Boateng: None of the establishments in the north-west of England has had advertised vacancies between July 2000 and 31 January 2001.

Criminal Records Bureau

Mrs. Betty Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the cost to public funds of funding the Criminal Records Bureau *(a)* centrally and *(b)* by charges for certificates issued. [148041]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Work on determining the bureau's costs is continuing. An announcement about charges will be made as soon as possible.

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance he gives to voluntary associations which operate in England and Scotland on paying a contribution to the Criminal Records Bureau. [148694]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No such guidance has been issued, although detailed information and guidance on the operation of the Criminal Records Bureau will be made available before it begins to issue certificates. An announcement on the level of charge will be made shortly. Separate arrangements will apply in Scotland, where checks will be made by the Scottish Criminal Records Office.

Citizenship Applications

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what criteria he uses to decide when an application for naturalisation should be processed and determined *(a)* urgently and *(b)* otherwise than in date order of application. [147601]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* There are various criteria for giving priority, such as where a person needs British citizenship for a particular job, but these criteria are not intended to cover all the circumstances which may arise. Discretion may therefore be exercised in the particular circumstances of an individual case.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for naturalisation on grounds of residence were granted within *(a)* six months, *(b)* nine months and *(c)* 12 months of the date of application in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998, (iii) 1999 and (iv) 2000; and if he will make a statement. [147599]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* The information is given in the table. The data are not available for part of the years 1997 and 2000, due to intermittent problems with information technology and operator error, but nevertheless enables comparisons to be made. The table includes only applications made under section 6(1) of the British Nationality Act 1981, based on five years' residence in the United Kingdom.

Applications decided within	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*Total*
Six months	331	486	1,112	1,371	3,300
Nine months	758	722	1,345	1,819	4,644
12 months	1,946	1,935	1,819	4,733	10,433
Total	3,035	3,143	4,276	7,923	18,377

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy that applications for naturalisation should be processed and determined in date order of application; and if he will make a statement. [147603]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* Applications for naturalisation as British citizens are normally given initial consideration in date of receipt order. It has long been the case that, in appropriate circumstances, initial consideration may be given out of turn. Some measure of priority may also be afforded to subsequent stages of the process.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what changes he has made to policy on naturalisation since 1 May 1997; when such changes took effect; and if he will make a statement; [147631]

(2) what action he has taken to alter the residence requirements for citizenship in line with paragraph 10.7 of the White Paper "Fairer, Faster and Firmer-A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum". [147632]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced on 22 December 1997 that henceforth reasons would be given in all cases where applications for British citizenship were being refused. In June 1998, it was decided that the benefit of the doubt should normally be given to applicants where there was a conflict of professional opinion over their ability to meet the full capacity requirement. In the same month, it was decided that where breaches of the immigration laws were due to invalidly completed applications for leave to remain they should normally be disregarded for naturalisation purposes. We have yet to give more detailed consideration to effecting the changes in the residence requirements outlined in paragraph 10.7 of the White Paper.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to require individuals seeking British citizenship to attend instruction on the rights and responsibilities that come with the grant of citizenship. [147102]

Mrs. Roche: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has no plans to introduce such a requirement.

Rugby League

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the investigation by the Charity Commission into Rugby League. [148564]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 2 February 2001]:* This is a matter for the Charity Commission, which will write to my hon. Friend. A copy of the Commission's reply will be placed in the Library.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how long it took to process Mr. S. Hinduja's application for citizenship; and how long the average case takes. [147795]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* On the time taken to process Mr. S. P. Hinduja's application for naturalisation, I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) on 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 75W.

For a breakdown of the number of applications processed within certain time periods, I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Aylesbury on 2 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 339W.

As at the end of December 2000, the average waiting time for all nationality applications was 13.1 months. In March 1999 it was 19.9 months.

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which of his Department's Ministers were involved in considering the nationality application of Mr. G. P. Hinduja in 1997; which other Ministers made representations to his Department's Ministers about Mr. G. P. Hinduja in 1997; to which Minister these were made; and if he will make a statement and place the transcripts of all telephone conversations and officials' minutes of such representations, conversations and meetings in the Library. [148750]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and the hon. Members for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) and for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 166W.

Criminal Justice and Police Bill

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his oral statement of 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 37–38, when he plans to bring clause 33 of the Criminal Justice and Police Bill into force. [148188]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We plan to bring clause 33 into force as soon as possible after enactment of the Bill.

Emergency Services (Hoax Calls)

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many hoax 999 calls were

received by the Metropolitan police in the last five years for which figures are available; and what percentage of total 999 calls were received by the police. [148214]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has informed me that 999 calls received by the Metropolitan police are graded to the degree of the response required.

The category that contains hoax calls and calls to which a police response is not deemed appropriate is shown in the table.

Year	*Total number of calls received*	*Total number of hoax calls and calls to which a police response not deemed necessary*
1996	2,265,785	862,741
1997	2,335,653	961,500
1998	2,388,084	1,075,628
1999	2,250,164	1,194,380
2000	2,510,652	1,285,680

The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has also informed me that 999 calls passed to the police and other emergency services by the telephone suppliers is estimated to be:

Police—60 per cent.

Ambulance—30 per cent.

Fire Brigade—10 per cent.

Coast Guard—Less than 1 per cent.

Burglar Alarms

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many burglar alarm activations were responded to by the Metropolitan police in each of the last five years; and how many turned out to be false alarms. [148215]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has informed me that the number of burglary alarm activations handled by the Metropolitan police service in the last five years for which figures are available is as follows:

Years	*Total activations*	*Total false activations*
1995	321,588	289,589
1996	290,306	218,447
1997	239,368	205,950
1998	215,572	188,420
1999	219,503	183,996

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many hours of Metropolitan police time were occupied by burglar alarm activations in each of the last five years. [148216]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has informed me that the Metropolitan police do not keep records detailing the amount of police time spent dealing with burglar alarm activations.

Mobile Phone Thefts

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many mobile phones were stolen in the Metropolitan police area last year *(a)* during burglaries and *(b)* in motor vehicle crime. [148217]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan police force did not identify, before December 2000, the theft of mobile telephones separately from all telephone equipment, including fax machines, carphones and answer phones etc.

The approximate proportion of offences in the Metropolitan police area where telephone equipment was stolen is shown in the table. The proportions are not exact as the number of telephone equipment items stolen does not correspond exactly to the number of offences where telephone equipment was stolen. For example, a burglary where two telephones were stolen will yield one offence of burglary and two items of equipment stolen.

Number of offences in the Metropolitan area involving telephone equipment

	Burglary	*Theft of vehicles*	*Theft from vehicles*
Total number in 1999–2000[1]	129,145	62,791	112,206
Number of telephone equipment items stolen in 2000[2]	14,831	943	15,559
Percentage of offences involving theft of telephone equipment	11	2	14

[1] Recorded Crime Statistics, full data for the year 2000 are not yet available
[2] Provided by the Metropolitan police; it is not known how many of the items were mobile telephones

Prison Population

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average prison population was in each of the last 10 years; what the population was on the latest date for which information was available; what his projections are for the level of the prison population in the next five years; and if he will make a statement. [148578]

Mr Boateng: The following is the average prison population in each of the last 10 years:

Year	*Number*
1991	45,900
1992	45,800
1993	44,600
1994	48,800
1995	51,000
1996	55,300
1997	61,100
1998	65,300
1999	64,800
2000	64,000

Source:
Prison Statistics England and Wales, 1999, Cm 4805.

The population on the latest date available (1 February 2001) was 63,620.The following is the latest prison population projection, in each of the next five years.

Year	Number
2001	64,200
2002	65,900
2003	67,800
2004	69,200
2005	70,300

Source:
Prison Population Brief, England and Wales, November 2000; http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/whatsnew1.html

Conviction Rates

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many convictions there were, and what the conviction rate was, for *(a)* all crimes, *(b)* violent crime and *(c)* property crime in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [148580]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Available information, taken from the Home Office court proceedings database, showing the number of offenders prosecuted at the magistrates court, convicted at all courts and the conviction rates for *(a)* all crimes, *(b)* violent crime and *(c)* property crime in each of the last 10 years is given in the table.

Offenders prosecuted at the magistrates court, convicted at all courts and the conviction rate for certain offences, England and Wales, 1990–99[1]

	All offences[2]			Violent crime[3]			Property crime[4]		
Year	Prosecutions (thousand)	Convictions (thousand)	Conviction rate (percentage)	Prosecutions (thousand)	Convictions (thousand)	Conviction rate (percentage)	Prosecutions (thousand)	Convictions (thousand)	Conviction rate (percentage)
1990	1,969.3	1,562.7	79.4	126.0	81.2	64.5	280.7	213.6	76.1
1991	1,984.5	1,519.9	76.6	124.7	74.0	59.4	296.2	214.1	72.3
1992	2,047.0	1,528.4	74.7	128.7	71.7	55.7	291.3	205.0	70.4
1993	1,956.3	1,425.3	72.9	127.0	67.3	53.0	278.0	191.9	69.0
1994	1,969.7	1,424.6	72.3	132.9	68.9	51.8	278.6	191.2	68.6
1995	1,927.5	1,429.7	74.2	124.5	68.3	54.8	258.1	181.1	70.2
1996	1,923.0	1,440.8	74.9	129.2	70.3	54.4	251.1	175.5	69.9
1997	1,855.3	1,385.8	74.7	138.4	76.7	55.4	254.0	180.2	71.0
1998	1,951.9	1,469.7	75.3	148.8	82.5	55.4	261.7	189.9	72.6
1999	1,883.6	1,409.7	74.8	153.8	83.1	54.0	266.0	194.5	73.1

[1] Includes allowances for known shortfalls in the data. It is not possible to produce estimates for the more detailed offence categories.
[2] Taken as all indictable, summary non-motoring and summary motoring offences.
[3] Includes the indictable offence groups of violence against the person, sexual offences and robbery and the summary offences of assault.
[4] Includes the indictable offence groups of burglary, theft and handling stolen goods, fraud and forgery and criminal damage and the summary offence of interference with motor vehicles.

Custodial Sentences

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what average length of custodial sentence was given by *(a)* magistrates courts and *(b)* crown courts in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available; what proportion of all sentences were custodial sentences in each of those years; if he will break down the data by category of crime and in total; and if he will make a statement. [148579]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information covering the period 1989 to 1999 and showing the proportion of males and females aged 21 and over sentenced to immediate imprisonment for indictable offences and the average length of sentence given by offence group and type of court is published in tables 7.15 and 7.16, "Criminal Statistics England and Wales 1999" (Cm 5001).

Afghan Hijacking

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the immigration status of those persons who claimed asylum after arriving on the hijacked Afghan airliner in February 2000, how many such persons have left the United Kingdom to date; and if he will make a statement. [148821]

Mrs. Roche: Of the 170 passengers who arrived on the aircraft, 81 returned to Afghanistan. 51 passengers claimed asylum. Because of the exceptional circumstances of the hijack and the wider issues surrounding it, the Home Secretary personally decided each of the asylum claims.

Of the cases which have been considered to date, four have been granted asylum and 35 refused. 30 of the subsequent appeals to the independent appellate authority have been dismissed, confirming the Home Secretary's original decision.

The appellants whose appeals were dismissed are entitled to remain in the United Kingdom pending the outcome of their appeals to the tribunal.

Asylum Support

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the total cost has been in 2000–01 of accommodation paid for by the National Asylum Support Service during the periods when such accommodation was *(a)* occupied and *(b)* unoccupied; and if he will make a statement. [148826]

Mrs. Roche: In the period 1 April to 31 December the total cost of accommodation paid for by the National Asylum Support Service was £26.7 million. Of this, £19.9 million related to payments for properties that were occupied by asylum seekers.

The remaining £6.8 million related to accommodation pre-booked by the National Asylum support Service. This is a necessary operational requirement to ensure that sufficient accommodation units are available to meet demand.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research his Department has conducted into housing asylum seekers in reception

centres; what the conclusions were of that research; if he will place the conclusions of the research in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [148823]

Mrs. Roche: The potential role of reception centres was considered by officials as part of the comprehensive spending review completed in 1998, but there has been no research on this subject.

Asylum Applications

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his plans to reduce the backlog of asylum applications to frictional levels by April; what he estimates will be the size of the backlog in April; and when he estimates that the backlog will be cleared. [148822]

Mrs. Roche: We have substantially increased resources to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND), which has enabled an additional 500 asylum decision-makers to be recruited, and as a result the backlog has fallen for each of the last 11 months.

IND estimates that a frictional level of work is likely to be in the range 25,000–35,000 cases awaiting initial decision, depending on the level of intake, the nationality mix of the intake and external factors (for example, conflicts or civil unrest) which may mean certain groups of cases cannot be substantively considered at a particular time.

Subject to these factors, we expect the backlog to reduce to close to frictional levels during April.

Crime Statistics

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the most recent crime figures for the Vale of Glamorgan. [147105]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand from the chief constable of South Wales police that there have been significant reductions in recorded crime in the Vale of Glamorgan. Domestic burglaries fell by 29 per cent., thefts of a motor vehicle fell by 26 per cent., and theft from a motor vehicle fell by 18 per cent. There was also a small fall in violent crime of 0.6 per cent. (six offences).

Violent Crime

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reverse the growth in violent crime in the Avon and Somerset area since 1997. [148685]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government are committed to reducing violent crime and the fear of violent crime and to ensuring that individuals and communities are protected and safe. We are working in partnership with the police, including Avon and Somerset constabulary, and other agencies across the country on a wide range of ways to tackle violent crime. Our strategic approach to combating violent crime is set out in "fighting violent crime together"—an action plan published in January.

The Government are putting in place the investment to make sure that the police have the resources they need. Under the crime fighting fund, Avon and Somerset constabulary have been allocated 195 additional recruits over and above previous plans, over a three-year period from 2000 to 2003. I understand from the force that they will be able to recruit their full allocation in 2000–01. Last year, the Home Office awarded the Avon and Somerset constabulary a grant of £1.1 million to tackle robbery in Bristol. This will be used to target hot spots and run education campaigns.

Under the Government's crime and disorder reduction partnerships, Avon and Somerset constabulary are working with other agencies to put in place a number of initiatives to tackle violent crime, notably domestic violence, alcohol-related violence and bullying.

Avon and Somerset constabulary have confirmed that some of the rise in recorded violent crime in the Avon and Somerset area is due to the increase in reporting of domestic and racial violence. The Government, the police service and other agencies have been working together to raise awareness of these crimes, and to increase reporting, detection rates and support for the victim. In South Gloucestershire, for example, a number of initiatives are currently in place to tackle domestic violence. The police are working in partnership with hospitals to improve reporting, and in the major casualty units a freephone service has been installed to link domestic violence victims with the police and other agencies when they are most vulnerable.

Charities

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his policy is on the voluntary registration of charities. [149274]

Mr. Boateng: I am grateful to all who responded to the recent consultation on this issue. There was general agreement as to the purposes of registration as set out in the consultation document. The responses received made it clear, however, that voluntary registration is a complex matter which requires further careful examination and consideration before informed decisions can be reached on longer-term policy. I have asked officials to develop more detailed proposals in the light of the responses to the consultation and in discussion with interested organisations.

The current regulations which made registration voluntary for charities connected with a number of religious bodies expire on 1 March 2001. I am today laying a new statutory instrument to extend those regulations until 30 September 2002. This will allow time for the necessary work to be done to enable the way forward to be settled.

I will make a further announcement later this year, but I want at this stage to allay concerns expressed by some of those consulted that one of the proposals in the consultation document meant that umbrella bodies would be compelled to take on responsibilities which neither they nor their members want. I can give an absolute assurance that that was not, and is not, the Government's intention.

Many respondents were also concerned that any change could make it more difficult for the public to find out about charities. The further work that I have commissioned will explore ways of making sure that this is not the case.

Prison Service

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made on the review of the Prison Service's suicide and self-harm strategy; and if he will make a statement. [149275]

Mr. Straw: The review's analysis and recommendations have been accepted by the Director General of the Prison Service and by Ministers, and will be implemented progressively from April 2001 with the aim of year-on-year reductions in prisoner suicide and self-harm. There will be a strong stress on a preventive strategy which invests most resources where the risks are highest. An all-round pro-active approach will be developed which encourages a supportive culture in prisons based on good staff-prisoner relationships, a constructive regime and a physically safe environment. There will be improved identification and case arrangements for high-risk prisoners.

The review's recommendations will be developed and piloted in five establishments: Wandsworth, Feltham, Eastwood Park, Leeds and Winchester. They will be evaluated and rolled out to other prisons. The three-year strategy will involve a major investment of capital and staff in prisons. In the first year, £8 million will be invested in implementation. Improvements will be made to reception and induction areas, for example through installing more first night centres, and by having more safe cells, crisis suites and gated cells. New health care screening procedures will start in 10 pilot prisons. Wing staff will be supported in their work by in-reach mental health teams and by the establishment of dedicated drug detoxification units. There will be full-time suicide prevention co-ordinators in high-risk local prisons. The numbers of trained listeners at high-risk prisons will be increased substantially.

Copies of the review are being placed in the Library. The review recommended:

a move away from awareness towards prevention;

a risk-based strategy which invests more resources where the risks are highest and matches the level of support and intervention to the degree or risk of self-harm or suicide presented by the individual prisoner;

improved screening and levels of specialist support;

a better physical environment for prisoners, particularly when first received into custody;

more training in mental health and suicide prevention for front line staff in particular;

better interventions for the management of repetitive self-injury;

increased numbers of prisoner listeners in high risk prisons; and

better links with other agencies within the criminal justice system.

Police (Expenditure)

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the total expenditure on advertising to recruit special constables was in the last five years; what the total number of new recruits was in the same period; what the net change in the number of specials over the period was; and if he will make a statement. [145710]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[pursuant to his reply, 22 January 2001, c. 490W]:* The figures given were incorrect. The correct figure for the number of special constables recruited for the five years from 1995–96 to 1999–2000 was 17,836. There was a net loss of 5,428 special constables during this period. The net loss figure of 2,137 given in my original reply was actually the number leaving the special constabulary from March 1999 to March 2000 only.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 6 February 2001

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Apes

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what development projects her Department supports which involve the protection of apes. [148834]

Clare Short: Our primary aim is poverty reduction. We are not directly involved in ape protection projects. The sustainable management of ecosystems is important in improving poor peoples' livelihood and in some cases contributes to the conservation of apes and their habitats, principally through support for sustainable forest management. For example, we have recently agreed a £25 million programme to tackle illegal exploitation of forest resources in Indonesia.

Romania

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development for what reasons her Department's support for the Romania Information Centre has ceased. [147212]

Clare Short: We have supported the Romanian Information Centre since 1993. This funding was not intended to be indefinite in duration and the centre has been encouraged for some years to plan for self-sustainability. An independent report, a copy of which is being placed in the Library of the House, did not make a convincing case that the centre could achieve self-sustainability. We decided therefore that we should focus our resources on the poverty challenges to be tackled in Romania.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

CPS (Victim Consultation)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Solicitor-General what *(a)* statutory and *(b)* non-statutory duties there are on (i) the CPS and (ii) the police to consult victims before dropping or downgrading charges. [148978]

The Solicitor-General: In relation to the duties of the Crown Prosecution Service I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 112W, and that given to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) on 5 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 357W.

The police no longer have any power to drop or downgrade charges as the prosecution is in the hands of the Crown Prosecution Service. The 1996 Victim's Charter commits the police to keep victims informed of significant developments in a case—ie when a person has been charged, any decision to drop or substantially alter those charges, the date of trial and the final outcome of the case.

The CPS seeks the views of the police prior to making a decision to discontinue or substantially to alter charges. This procedure provides the opportunity for the police to consult the victim, in appropriate cases, before the final decision is made.

On 7 December 2000, the Attorney-General published new guidelines outlining the approach that should be adopted by a prosecution advocate when considering the acceptability of a defendant's plea. The guidelines emphasise that the prosecution should keep victims or victims' families attending court informed of developments in a case and, wherever practicable, speak with them so that their views and interests can be taken into account as part of the decision-making process.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Marriage Support

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what bids have been received in each year since 1996 for funding for marriage support; how much each bid has been worth; which of the bids have been successful; and what is the total value of grants towards marriage and relationship support. [148482]

Jane Kennedy: The table sets out the Department's funding for marriage and relationship support since 1996. In general, funds have been allocated after negotiation, rather than as a result of a formal bidding process. The total funding will increase to £4.5 million in 2001–02, and to £5 million in 2002–03.

Total funding for marriage and relationship support since 1996

£

Organisation	*Financial year* 1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
Core					
Relate	1,683,020.00	1,898,620.00	1,953,680.00	2,067,477.00	2,396,585.00
One Plus One	63,401.65	167,000.00	171,843.00	217,139.08	270,000.00
Marriage Care	163,770.00	263,770.00	271,419.00	292,876.41	333,516.00
Tavistock Marital Studies Institute	375,435.00	385,759.46	396,946.00	422,757.65	486,161.00
Jewish Marriage Council	16,912.00	16,912.60	41,972.00	49,009.80	48,313.00
Family Welfare Association	23,458.25	23,458.25	24,138.00	30,741.45	99,925.00
Inter-Agency Co-operation	—	21,200.00	—	—	—
London Marriage Guidance Council	—	—	—	50,000.00	100,000.00
Parentline Plus	—	—	—	20,000.00	60,000.00

Total funding for marriage and relationship support since 1996

£

Organisation	*Financial year* 1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
Projects					
Relate	—	58,250.00	18,300.00	—	—
One Plus One	—	134,720.00	10,000.00	14,700.00	87,000.00
Marriage Care	—	67,214.00	15,000.00	—	—
Tavistock Marital Studies Institute	—	10,550.00	10,550.00	—	—
Family Welfare Association	—	72,550.00	40,600.00	—	—
Marriage Resource	—	138,128.00	—	—	—
African Family Mediation Service and London Marriage Guidance	—	89,190.00	21,680.00	—	—
The Light House (Christian Care Ministry)	—	29,580.00	29,580.00	—	—
All Souls College	—	42,751.00	35,864.00	—	—
Oasis Media—National Marriage Week	—	—	—	16,291.38	30,000.00
Community Family Projects	—	—	—	—	30,000.00
2as1.net	—	—	—	—	40,000.00
Asian Family Counselling Service	—	—	—	—	18,500.00
Total	2,325,996.90	3,419,653.31	3,041,512.00	3,180,992.77	4,000,000.00

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Lottery Grants (Scotland)

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what proportion of successful applications to each Lottery distribution body came from each Scottish local authority area in each year since the National Lottery began; [148282]

(2) what proportion of applications made to each lottery distributor from each Scottish local authority area have been successful in each year since the National Lottery began; [148280]

(3) what proportion of the money awarded by each Lottery distribution body went to each Scottish local authority area in each year since the National Lottery began; [148283]

(4) what proportion of applications to each Lottery distribution body came from each Scottish local authority in each year since the National Lottery began. [148281]

Kate Hoey: We have contacted the National Lottery distributing bodies to request the information required, and I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as it is available, placing copies of my letter in the Libraries of both Houses.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he will take to reduce the geographical differences in the distribution of Lottery grants in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [148284]

Kate Hoey: The Government are keen to see all parts of the United Kingdom receive a fair share of Lottery funding. Reforms introduced through the National Lottery Act 1998 are designed to encourage this. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State also issued new policy directions which direct distributors to ensure that all parts of the country have access to funding, and to take into account the need to reduce economic and social deprivation.

Ministers in the Scottish Executive can make directions and take other decisions about the Scottish operations of Lottery distributors where they relate to devolved policy areas. My Department and Lottery distributors commissioned research into the impact of the Lottery on the coalfields and other areas of low take-up and my right hon. Friend has established an action group to take forward the report's recommendations. Lottery distributors in Scotland participate in the work of the group, which also has the support of the Scottish Executive.

Mr. Robert Bourne

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 16 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 135W, on what date he was first informed that Mr. Robert Bourne had made donations to the Islington, South and Finsbury Labour Party. [148565]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 2 February 2001]:* I was first informed of such donations when they were made, prior to becoming a Minister. In relation to subsequent events I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 16 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 135W.

Millennium Commission

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) on what date, and by whom, instructions were first given to the Millennium Commission with regard to the holding of, and management of, reserves; [148658]

(2) what reserves were held by the Millennium Commission on 31 December *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000; and what plans there are for the (i) management and (ii) disposal of these reserves. [148657]

Mr. Chris Smith: This is a matter for the Millennium Commission. I will write to the right hon. Member in my capacity as Chairman of the Commission, and place copies of my reply in the Libraries of both Houses.

New Opportunities Fund

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list for each of the past 12 months *(a)* income and *(b)* expenditure of the New Opportunities Fund; and what the latest figure is for his (i) unused and (ii) uncommitted reserves of that fund. [148860]

Kate Hoey: Monthly income and expenditure figures from January to December 2000 are shown in the table. At 31 December 2000 the New Opportunities Fund's cumulative income since its establishment in July 1998 was £724 million, including interest; £636 million has been awarded as grants. The balance available in the National Lottery Distribution Fund is £553 million, of which £511 million is committed to grant recipients.

New Opportunities Fund Income and Expenditure for the 12 month period 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2000

£000

	Income	Expenditure (incl. hard commitments)
January	16,522.5	15,977.1
February	22,652.5	40,423.3
March	37,364.2	16,138.1
April	16,312.4	12,221.3
May	21,239.1	20,797.0
June	18,528.0	1,727.0
July	21,691.7	54,118.7
August	43,749.5	-7,016.0
September	21,936.9	30,629.7
October	21,213.8	21,831.5
November	18,754.7	20,943.6
December	18,575.5	48,407.7
Total	278,540.8	276,199.0

[1] An adjustment to hard commitments in August created the credit balance

Note:
Hard commitments outstanding at 31 December 2000 were £277,621,583.01

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the New Opportunities Fund grants to schools in the Harrow, West constituency in each year since May 1997. [148324]

Kate Hoey: The New Opportunities Fund has made five awards to projects in the Harrow, West constituency through the Out of School Hours Child care programme, totalling £91,674. Details of awards are shown in the table.

New opportunities fund out of school hours childcare grants in the Harrow, West constituency since 1997

Date of Award	School	Organisation Running Project	Amount (£)	Provision
1999	Earlsmead F and M School	Earlsmead F and M School	3,559	16 before and 16 after school places for children aged 5 to 14 years old
1999	Harrow High School and St. Gregory's High School	Kufi Educational Service	10,000	Summer School
2000	St. George's School	St. George's School and Parents and Staff Association	23,200	35 additional after school, 20 before school and 20 holiday places for children aged 3 to 11 years old
2000	Schools local to Rayners Lane Estate	Rayners Lane Estate Tenants and Residents Association	6,915	25 place holiday club for children ages 5 to 11 years old
2000	Kenmore park First School, Roxeth Manor Middle School and Horsenden School	Chosen Generation Services	48,000	84 after school and 40 before school places for children aged 3 to 11 years old

The Fund has also allocated £718,884 to Harrow local education authority under the Information and Communications Technology Training for Teachers programme.

Playing Fields

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he plans to publish a report on the findings of the Playing Fields Monitoring Group. [148696]

Kate Hoey: The Playing Fields Monitoring Group has met three times since being established in April last year. The Group is currently working to produce a comprehensive and unified set of statistics from the DfEE, DETR and Sport England on playing fields, which will give a clear indication of the position of playing field disposals for publication later this year. I should like to pay tribute to the assistance which the Central Council of Physical Recreation and the National Playing Fields Association are providing to the work of the Group.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to the oral answer of 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 637, to the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones), what criteria are used by his Department to define school playing fields. [148698]

Kate Hoey: In the context of my answer of 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 637, to my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones), my Department uses the definition of school playing fields as

set out in the Education (School Premises) Regulations 1999. These Regulations define school team game playing fields as

> "any playing fields within the meaning (in relation to both England and Wales) of section 77 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 which, having regard to their configuration, are suitable for the playing of team games and which are laid out for that purpose."

PRIME MINISTER

Mobile Phone Industry

Mr. Green: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the meetings he has had with representatives of the mobile phone industry since 1 January 2000. [148532]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* I have meetings with a wide range of organisations and individuals. As with previous Administrations it is not my practice to provide details of all such meetings.

Hinduja Brothers

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on progress made by the inquiry conducted by Sir Anthony Hammond; and what representations he has received relating to the scope of the inquiry. [148952]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to her right hon. and hon. Friends by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 167W.

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Prime Minister if he will notify Sir Anthony Hammond of the information he has received from the Intelligence services on the Hinduja brothers. [148388]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 2 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 335W.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Road Surfaces

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which sections of concrete roads are planned to be surfaced with quieter materials in the financial year beginning in April 2001; and what criteria were used to select them for priority treatment. [145445]

Mr. Hill: The Highways Agency is consulting on proposed criteria for prioritising the resurfacing of concrete roads with quieter materials to meet the Government's commitment that all concrete trunk roads will be resurfaced within 10 years. As indicated in the Agency's consultation letter, copies of which are in the Libraries of the House, the sections of concrete roads that are planned to be resurfaced in the financial year beginning April 2001 are:

M5: part of Junction 26 to Junction 27

M25: Junction 26 to Junction 27

M27: Junction 2 to Junction 4 (both directions)

M42: Junction 9 to Junction 10 (northbound)

A1: Winthorpe to north Muskham

A12: part of a section from M25 to Witham (Essex).

For this year priority has been given to those roads requiring maintenance to keep them in a safe and serviceable condition. For subsequent years priorities will be set according to the criteria that will be finalised following consideration of the responses to the Agency's current consultations.

Waste Incinerators

Mr. Temple-Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the relationship between the temperature at which municipal solid waste incinerators burn and the impact on the health of local residents associated with emissions from such incinerators; and if he will make a statement. [147509]

Mr. Meacher: There have been no specific studies focusing directly on the relationship between the burn temperature of an incinerator and the health of local residents.

Temperature is not the only factor affecting emissions. It is an important component but the content of emissions is also reliant on residence time within the secondary chamber, the associated oxygen content and the turbulence of gases within this chamber.

The UK is ultimately concerned with emissions, rather than temperature in its own right. The new Waste Incineration Directive sets a minimum temperature for operation but acknowledges that this need not be met where the required emissions limit values can be achieved notwithstanding. The UK will transpose this Directive into domestic legislation by 28 December 2002.

MOX Fuel Shipments

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what information he has received from *(a)* the Japanese Government and *(b)* the Federation of Electric Power Companies of Japan concerning negotiations with Russia to assess the possibility of transporting nuclear waste from Sellafield to Japan via the Arctic. [147742]

Mr. Meacher: None, from either source.

Start Bay, Slapton

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the environmental damage to Start Bay, Slapton following *(a)* the recent storm and *(b)* storms in 1978–79. [147290]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* My Department has not undertaken any such assessments.

Construction of flood defences for Torcross followed the 1978–79 storms.

I understand that South Hams district council and Devon county council are concerned about managing this sensitive area properly and on 18 January held a joint meeting with relevant agencies including the Environment Agency and English Nature to discuss a draft shoreline management plan for the area between Strete and Start Point, which encompasses Start Bay.

Strategic Planning

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the levels of spending on strategic planning per head of population were in *(a)* Staffordshire and *(b)* each other county of England (i) in the current year and (ii) in each of the last three years, distinguishing in each case the element represented by standard spending assessment. [148290]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Local authority expenditure on strategic planning is not separately identified in any of the returns made by local government to central Government. The SSA system does not make a separate provision for strategic planning; rather it is one of the many services funded through the Environmental, Protective and Cultural Services SSA block. Consequently we are unable to provide the information requested.

Secondments

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the secondments from commercial companies to his Department since 1997. [148405]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Secondments are part of the Interchange Initiative which promotes the exchange of people and good practice between outside organisations and the Civil Service. All sectors of the economy are involved: Voluntary, Education, Health, Public and Private. Interchange is a key component of the reform agenda. The Modernising Government White Paper committed us to increasing interchange, in particular by bringing in more people on secondment and sending more of our people out.

The commercial companies that have seconded staff to the Department since 1997 are as follows:

ABROS
AMEC Construction Ltd.
Anchor Trust
Balfour Beatty
Bank of Scotland
Bellway Urban Renewal
Boots Chemists
Bovis Europe
British Gas
British Telecom
Building Research Establishment Ltd.
Buro-Happold Consulting Engineers
Christiani & Nielsen
Civil Aviation Authority
Crime Concern
Crown House Engineering
The Church of England
D. A. Dawson & Associates
Development Trust Association
Digital Futures
Drake and Scull Engineering Ltd.
EHF NHS Trust
English Nature
Geoffrey Reid Associates
Halcrow Group
Hider
Institute Of Fiscal Studies
IPPR
Japanese Construction Industry
KPMG
Kvaerner Cementation Foundations
Kvaerner Construction
London Transport
Look Ahead Housing and Care
Marks and Spencer
National Grid
National Housing Corporation
OPM
OVE Arup
Robert Gordon University
Rothschilds
Safe in the City
Taylor Woodrow Construction Ltd.
Unilever
Waste Watch
Waters Ltd.
Wates Construction Ltd.

Pensions

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the payment of pensions to members of NBPF and BEST and the National Bus Company transferees. [148303]

Mr. Hill: I refer my hon. Friend to my reply to the Adjournment debate held on 25 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 1183–85, on this subject, in which I urged all the parties involved to reach early agreement on the outstanding matters which are impeding completion of the distribution to beneficiaries of the National Bus Company pensions settlement.

Pollution Regulations

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the implementation of the Pollution Prevention and Control (England and Wales) Regulations 2000 as they apply to small firms preparing environmental impact assessments. [148286]

Mr. Hill: There are no plans to review this aspect of the PPC regulations, which largely transpose the provisions in the IPPC Directive. We are, however, looking at ways in which information provided through the Environmental Impact Assessment and Pollution Prevention and Control procedures can complement each other, within the constraints set by EC legislation, to minimise the impact on small businesses.

Diabetes (Drivers)

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many drivers suffering from diabetes have informed the DVLA of their condition. [148617]

Mr. Hill: The treatment of diabetes can be by insulin, tablet or diet or a combination of these.

Diabetics treated by diet do not need to notify the Agency of this condition.

Diabetics treated by tablets do need to notify the Agency, but no further medical investigation is needed. A reply is sent to the driver explaining that the licence can be retained and the Agency only need to be further notified if certain conditions apply in relation to diabetic control (tablet/diet). Some 15,000 such notifications are received on an annual basis.

Diabetics treated by insulin must notify the Agency of this. Drivers are sent a detailed questionnaire to complete. Provided the diabetes is well controlled, a three year licence is issued. Some 100,000 diabetics on insulin have notified this condition to the Agency.

Registered Social Landlords

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what resources have been allocated over the next three years to enable the transfer of council housing stock to registered social landlords. [148637]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Housing Policy statement on 13 December 2000 confirmed that the Government's spending plans for 2001–02 to 2003–04 include provision to support the transfer of up to 200,000 local authority homes to registered social landlords each year from 2001–02, where tenants support the proposals.

Crop Protection Chemicals

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the joint industry submission, Minimising the Environmental Impacts of Crop Protection Chemicals, Revised proposals February 2001. [148868]

Mr. Meacher: The November 2000 pre-Budget report announced that, in the run up to Budget 2001, the Government wished to see the Crop Protection Association make further improvements to the package of voluntary measures that the industry has been developing over the last year. This latest submission from the CPA, and a number of other stakeholders involved in the supply and use of crop protection products, was received by the Government on 29 January. It is currently being evaluated and a further statement will be made in the Budget report.

Housing (Leeds)

Mr. Mudie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many housing capital approvals were given to Leeds in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000. [148870]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Housing capital allocations made to Leeds city council through the Housing Investment Programme and Capital Receipts Initiative for the years specified were as follows:

	£ million
1997–98	16.459
1998–99	22.123
1999–2000	23.903

In addition, the council received the following grant for the continuing Estate Action schemes at Belle Isle, Ebor Gardens and Halton Moor:

	£ million
1997–98	3.856
1998–99	4.069
1999–2000	3.412

The council is also progressing its PFI pilot project—one of only eight nationally—at Swarcliffe, which received endorsement by the PFI inter-departmental Project Review Group in November 1999.

Driving Licences

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 9W, on driving licences, what discretion *(a)* he and *(b)* the DVLA has to waive the two year rule regarding the period during which a test pass certificate is valid as the basis for the issuing of a full driving licence. [148652]

Mr. Hill: Neither the Secretary of State, nor the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, has any discretion to waive the two year validity period for a driving test pass certificate. This period is fixed by section 89(1)(a) of the Road Traffic Act 1988 (as amended by the Road Traffic (Driver Licensing and Information System) Act 1989).

The practical test pass certificate carries a clear warning to candidates that they should change the certificate for a full licence within two years of the date of the test, otherwise they will lose the entitlement.

Social Housing

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what measures he is taking to improve the availability of social housing in rural areas; [148966]

(2) what steps he is taking to improve rural housing for people on low incomes. [148960]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: This Government are taking a number of steps to improve housing conditions in both rural and urban areas.

We have set a target to bring all social housing up to a decent standard by 2010. This target will be delivered through a range of investment options available to local authorities and through a significant increase in resources for housing. An extra £1.8 billion is being made available over the next three years to improve existing stock and provide new affordable housing.

In our recent housing policy statement "The way forward for housing" we have set out a range of proposals to tackle poor conditions in the private sector. These will give local authorities more flexibility to help poorer home owners with repairs to their homes and make it easier for them to target interventions on concentrations of poor condition stock in the private sector.

Our Rural White Paper "Our Countryside: the future. A fair deal for rural England", published last year, set out our strategy for delivering more affordable housing in rural areas.

This strategy includes ensuring the housing needs of rural areas are properly assessed and planned for in local housing strategies. We have significantly increased resources for delivering new affordable housing, by nearly doubling the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme with an extra £872 million over the next three years. We will double the number of affordable homes provided through the Housing Corporation's rural programme in settlements of less than 3,000 people over the next three years.

We are also encouraging local authorities to fund new social housing in rural areas where there is high demand, using additional resources allocated to them. We want local authorities to make greater use of their planning powers to negotiate the provision of affordable housing as part of new private housing developments.

Planning

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure the compatibility of planning legislation in Wales and England with European legislation and with the Human Rights Act 1998. [148318]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer to the response by my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning to a question from the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) on 19 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 119W. The judgment of the divisional court has been appealed. The appeal will be heard in the House of Lords on 26 February.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when planning policy guidance 13 will be revised. [149062]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have consulted on a revision to Planning Policy Guidance Note 13: Transport. Work on the final version of the guidance is at an advanced stage and we intend to publish it as soon as possible.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to issue a planning policy statement to clarify the approach that the Government expect local authorities to take towards farm diversification proposals. [149060]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We are actively considering this issue and hope to make a statement shortly, by Easter if possible.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when his Department will publish the revised farmer's guide to the planning system. [149061]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I expect a revised and updated version of "A Farmer's Guide to the Planning System" to be published by the summer.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when planning policy guidance 25 will be revised. [149047]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department published today a consultation document on the revised draft of Planning Policy Guidance Note (PPG) 25 "Development and flood risk". The Government have revised the original consultation draft published in April 2000 to take account of consultation responses, lessons from the floods and the Second Report of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee "Development on, or affecting, the flood plain", which was published on 20 December 2000.

The revision toughens and sharpens the precautionary risk-based focus of the original draft and we feel it necessary, therefore, to seek views from the interested parties before finalising the PPG. This consultation is being conducted in accordance with the Government's January 2001 "Code of practice for written consultation" over a shorter period of four weeks, rather than the standard 12 weeks. The reasons for the shorter consultation period are that this is an urgent matter, on which new guidance is required without delay, and that a full initial round of consultation has already been carried out. The revised draft substantially reflects the Select Committee report. The Government have concluded that, in the light of continuing experience with major flooding, and in line with the views of the Select Committee, the final text should be issued as soon as is consistent with consulting on the important changes to the previous draft.

The main changes to the previous draft are:

1. the introduction of an explicit risk-based sequential test that directs authorities and developers towards sites at lower risk from those at higher risk;
2. within that test, a flexible approach should be used in those extensive areas of flood risk and other areas where alternative low-risk sites are not available to avoid a virtual moratorium leading to social and economic blight, while minimising any additional risk;
3. a clear statement that building in the functional flood plains, where water flows or is held at times of flood, should be wholly exceptional and limited to essential infrastructure that has to be there;
4. a stronger emphasis on planning in relation to river catchments at all stages in the plan-making process;
5. a request that planning authorities should review land allocations in their development plans in the light of the latest information on flood risk, where possible in combination with the reviews of land suitable for housing already recommended

in PPG 3. Within this requirement, planning authorities and developers should continue to give preference to previously developed land when it is possible to do so in terms of flood risk;

6. a requirement that applicants should assess the flood risk to their proposed developments and the impact of their proposals more widely;

7. guidance to local authorities that, where other funding is not already available, builders and developers should fully fund the provision and future maintenance of the flood mitigation and defence works required by their proposals;

8. guidance that all new developments should, as far as possible incorporate sustainable drainage measures to avoid adding to flood risks elsewhere and to encourage developers to promote building designs that are better able to resist and cope with flooding, and which, when flooded, can recover faster;

9. encouragement to local planning authorities to make flood-risk information available to prospective developers and property owners making planning searches.

The Government are committed to monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of the new guidance when it is issued through the MAFF high-level targets and the relevant Government statistics. They are also committed to reviewing the impact of the guidance on development three years after its publication and with particular reference to the latest information about climate change.

I am also considering the possibility of a Flooding Direction, which would ensure that the views of the Environment Agency on flood risk are properly considered. However, I propose to wait before consulting on such a Direction until the compatibility of the Secretary of State's call-in power with the Human Rights Act 1995 has been considered by the House of Lords within the next few months, on appeal from a number of decisions by the High Court in December 2000.

The experience of the last few months has demonstrated the costs to all parties of development being located in vulnerable areas. Flood risk has to be taken more seriously, particularly since climate change is likely to increase the scale and frequency of flooding in the future. A proper consideration of flood risk requires the stronger and tougher guidance on which we are now consulting. As part of the consultation, we will be seeking views on the regulatory impact and the costs and benefits of implementing this guidance.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to increase transparency and openness in the planning process. [148924]

Ms Beverley Hughes: It is vital that the planning system be open and transparent if it is to command public confidence. It needs to encourage the positive involvement of local people and others in the process and ensure that high standards of probity are maintained.

Through our "Modernising Planning" programme we are taking a range of initiatives to promote these objectives—for example, through improvements to the arrangements for preparation of regional planning guidance and development plans, through the introduction of Best Value, and in our forthcoming proposals on planning obligations.

The Government endorse the Local Government Association's "Probity in Planning", which recommends the practices and procedures which local authorities' codes of conduct should cover to ensure propriety in decision-making.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what arrangements his Department has for examining the codes of conduct prepared by local authorities. [148932]

Ms Beverley Hughes: At present councillors are guided by the National Code of Local Government Conduct as set out in DOE Circular 8/90. Part III of the Local Government Act 2000 provides for the replacement of the national code by a new statutory model code of conduct. This will contain mandatory provisions which must be included by councils in codes of conduct that they will be required to adopt. Once adopted, councils' codes of conduct will be subject to the scrutiny of a new independent body—the Standards Board for England—which will be able to investigate breaches of a council's code by its members.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to monitor the observance of planning codes of conduct by individual local authorities. [148931]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have no current plans to do so. However, the Government endorse the Local Government Association's "Probity in Planning" which recommends the practices and procedures which local authorities' planning codes of conduct should cover. This advises that failure to follow its recommendations without good reason could be taken into account in investigations of maladministration, either by the Local Government Ombudsman or a council's internal investigation of a complaint, and have implications for the standing of councillors and professional officers.

Affordable Rented Housing

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his estimate is of the number of *(a)* new build and *(b)* newly converted affordable rented housing which will be available in (i) London and (ii) England in each of the next five financial years. [148387]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Department does not make forecasts of new build or conversions.

Homes Bill

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many times *(a)* the Minister for Housing and Planning and *(b)* his officials met service charities to discuss Part II of the Homes Bill; and what the outcome was of these meetings. [149103]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: There have been no meetings between the Minister for Housing and Planning and service charities to discuss Part II of the Homes Bill. Officials from my Department's Rough Sleepers Unit have met service charities a number of times to discuss the prevention of homelessness among ex-servicemen.

Clean Fuel Vehicles

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will estimate how many new and nearly new cars have high enough noxious emission ratings to qualify for a full conversion grant to LPG; [147898]

(2) if he will list the schemes funded by his Department to encourage greater use of clean fuel vehicles, indicating the sums of money devoted to each such scheme; [147900]

(3) how many grants are paid by Government sponsored schemes to encourage the use of clean fuel vehicles; [147901]

(4) what plans he has to extend the eligibility of grants for conversion to encourage the use of clean fuel vehicles. [147902]

Mr. Hill: The Powershift programme, sponsored by my Department and operated by the Energy Saving Trust, provides grants towards the cost of converting new vehicles and those less than one year old to cleaner fuels including LPG. To be eligible for grant, conversion packages must be approved as safe and effective in reducing emissions. Grants range up to 75 per cent., depending on the reduction in emissions delivered.

Conversion packages eligible for grant are available for most cars. The number of cars whose conversions could attract the full 75 per cent. grant depends on the number of different cars, and different conversion packages, chosen by consumers.

The following table summarises the number of vehicles broken down by fuel type that have received grants from the Powershift programme:

Fuel type	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*[1]
Liquefied petroleum gas	187	686	1,618	4,425
Natural gas	78	99	28	59
Electricity	38	47	105	82
Total	303	832	1,751	4,566

[1] Up to 31 December 2000

My Department is providing Powershift with £9.9 million for the current financial year and £30 million over the next three financial years.My Department also sponsors the Clean Up programme, also operated by the Energy Saving Trust, which aims to reduce emissions from existing vehicles operating in urban areas. The programme includes projects to fit emission reduction technologies and to convert older vehicles to run on cleaner fuels where it proves cost effective and environmentally beneficial to do so. Clean Up is currently receiving £6 million for this financial year and £30 million over the next three financial years.

My Department will also spend £9 million over the next three financial years to encourage the early introduction of technologies such as hybrid and fuel cell vehicles offering significant environmental benefits.

The Clean Up programme has only just been launched. However, it has already provided grants towards the cost of converting 25 existing London taxis to run on LPG.

My Department will be consulting shortly on the future direction of the expanded Powershift programme.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will extend the scheme to allow new and nearly new cars to qualify for grant aid to encourage conversion to LPG and other clean fuel systems. [147899]

Mr. Hill: The Powershift programme, which is sponsored by my Department, provides grants towards the cost of converting vehicles less than one year old to cleaner fuels including LPG.

The Government have significantly extended the scale of the scheme. This year's budget is £9.9 million. This was increased in the 2000 spending review, to £30 million over the next three financial years

My Department will be consulting shortly on how the expanded Powershift programme should best be targeted in future years.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire of 14 November 2000 on behalf of his constituent Mr. Gillett. [149206]

Mr. Hill: I regret the delay in this matter. A reply will be sent to the right hon. Member shortly.

Heathrow Airport

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if preparatory building works for the proposed fifth terminal at Heathrow have begun. [148835]

Ms Beverley Hughes: This is a matter for the relevant local planning authority, which has responsibility for the enforcement of planning control.

Aircraft Icefalls

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many icefall incidents were reported for each month in 2000; [148838]

(2) what bacteriological investigations are required when ice falls from aircraft occur; [148840]

(3) what plans he has to introduce fines for airlines which operate aircraft which show signs of leakage from toilet service valves; [148837]

(4) what arrangements have been made to compensate persons injured from ice falls where the airline concerned cannot be identified. [148839]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: I refer the hon. Member to my predecessor's reply on 23 November 2000, *Official Report,* column 287W.

The Secretary of State has no plans to introduce fines for airlines operating aircraft that show signs of defects in toilet service valves. The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has issued guidance on checking aircraft water systems, but this only applies to UK operators and aircraft. Operators are instructed to carry out a regular review of their servicing procedures and scheduled maintenance requirements for such systems. The CAA also reminds

operators of the requirement to initiate corrective action as soon as a defect on a sealing system is detected. Aircraft are regularly checked by the CAA in the UK and by other regulating bodies abroad for evidence of leaking systems. Responsibility for the safety of foreign aircraft however, rests with the respective State of Registry.

The details of all reported icefall incidents in the UK are included on the Civil Aviation Authority's Mandatory Occurrence Reporting System (MORS). The MORS database shows that a total of 39 incidents were recorded in the year 2000. A monthly breakdown is shown:

Month	*Number*
January	6
February	7
March	2
April	5
May	3
June	7
July	2
August	2
September	2
October	1
November	0
December	2

The CAA will investigate any icefall incident reported to them in sufficient detail to allow a probable identification of the source of the ice. However, this is not an easy process and it is extremely rare to be able to confirm the origin of an icefall. Where the source of an icefall can be identified then the operator, regardless of nationality, can be prosecuted under the Air Navigation Order. In such a situation, a person suffering loss or injury resulting from the icefall could also seek damages through a civil action under the Civil Aviation Act 1982. This course of action is only available where the offending aircraft can be identified.

Given the nature of icefall incidents, it is also extremely difficult for either the Government or the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) to carry out a bacteriological investigation, and there is no current requirement to do so. In many cases the ice melts or disperses within a relatively short period after the time of the incident.

Apes

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received concerning the establishment of a labelling system of ape-friendly products for imports which have not resulted in the destruction of ape habitats. [148833]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: This Department has received 24 letters in support of a campaign launched in September 2000 by the Ape Alliance, calling for direct action to help conserve great apes, including the labelling of timber products from forests harvested in an environmentally responsible manner. Advice provided in my Department's "Green Guide for Buyers" and on our internet website, actively encourages buyers to purchase timber products from sustainably managed sources, and we are also investigating additional ways to help buyers to identify such products.

DEFENCE

Bowman Personal Role Radio

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the Bowman Personal Role Radio. [149426]

Dr. Moonie: I am pleased to announce that the contract for the Bowman Personal Role Radio was signed on 2 February. British-based Marconi has been selected to supply the short-range tactical radio, which will be used within small military teams. The project has made excellent progress since we took the decision to introduce it ahead of the main Bowman programme and we expect to see the first deliveries before the end of the year. The contract award is good news for British industry—creating or sustaining around 80 jobs at Marconi and its UK sub-contractors—and of course for the front line which will see this capability introduced earlier than had been previously planned.

The competition for the main Bowman system is also progressing well. Bids for the supply and support contract are due on 7 February from TRW, Thales and Computing Devices Canada.

Service Discipline Acts (Journalists)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if journalists working alongside British forces in times of conflict are subject to the Service Discipline Acts. [148203]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* The Service Discipline Acts provide for the cases in which people accompanying British forces are subject to those Acts. This will be the case if a person accompanies British forces on active service or if a person is authorised by the Defence Council to accompany British forces outside the United Kingdom for the purposes of his profession or employment. In these circumstances a correspondent would be subject to the Service Discipline Acts.

During armed conflicts involving British forces, there is an established procedure under which correspondents are accredited as accompanying British forces. Only with such accreditation are correspondents accepted to accompany British units in the front line during the build-up to potential conflict or in war. As part of the procedure a correspondent applying for accreditation is given a copy of the MOD's regulations for correspondents accompanying an operational force. This includes information that an accompanying correspondent will be subject to Service law. For accreditation as an accompanying correspondent the applicant must also give some undertakings, including to comply with the relevant Service Discipline Act, while subject to naval, military or air force law.

Journalists who are in the theatre of operations of British forces but who are not accompanying them are not subject to the Service Discipline Acts.

Arctic Campaign Star

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the awarding of a campaign star to veterans of the Arctic campaign in the Second World War; and if he will make a statement. [149197]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr. Campbell) on 5 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 360W.

Falcon System

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Falcon studies will be completed; and if the Falcon system has the same capability as the Bowman system. [148555]

Dr. Moonie: The concept studies for Falcon are expected to complete in autumn 2001. Falcon and Bowman are separate but complementary communications capabilities which will operate together to support command and control across the whole spectrum of land tactical operations. In broad terms, Bowman will support tactical operations up to brigade level and will provide some elements of divisional communications infrastructure. Falcon meanwhile will support higher formations strategic and operational communications from corps level down to brigade.

Export Licences

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will name the division within his Department with responsibility for handling export licences and the name of the civil servant who leads it. [148597]

Dr. Moonie: Overall responsibility for export licensing of strategically controlled goods rests with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. Within my Department, the Directorate of Export Services Policy (DESP) is responsible for seeking and co-ordinating the views of a range of advisers within the Department to produce agreed MOD advice on all export licence applications circulated for advice by the Department of Trade and Industry. The Directorate is headed by a senior civil servant, Mr. M. K. Jenner.

Armed Forces Discipline

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the disciplinary offences falling to summary discipline procedures for each of the armed services and the punishments which may be imposed. [148201]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* A list of disciplinary offences falling to summary discipline procedures and the punishments available will be placed in the Library of the House.

An offence should be tried by court martial if it is likely to merit punishment in excess of a Commanding Officer's powers of punishment, when imprisonment might be awarded, or if there are legal complexities, or where the accused elects trial by court martial.

Officer Legal Training

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many officers received legal training in 2000; how long this training took; what it cost; and who the trainers were. [148202]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* All Service lawyers undertook Continuous Professional Development during the year. The Royal Navy, unlike the Army and the Royal Air Force, selects officers from within the Service to receive professional legal training. This is provided by the College of Law and the Inns of Court School of Law, with pupillage in chambers. There are seven officers currently undergoing this training, whose course fees and supporting material are costing a total of approximately £34,000 for the current financial year. In addition, officers received training from a variety of internal and external sources in relation to the new procedures brought in by the Armed Forces Discipline Act 2000 as well as more general training to enable them to understand the legal aspects of their administrative and command functions. It is not possible to provide details of the associated lengths of training, the costs and the trainers, since this information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Welfare Phone Facilities

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to extend welfare phone facilities to those on exercises. [148923]

Mr. Spellar: Consideration is being given to extending free welfare telephone facilities to Service personnel for exercise deployments outside the country in which they are based, where the deployment is expected to last for two months or more. This facility would apply to both land-based and maritime exercises and would give exercising personnel the same access to free welfare telephone facilities as those on operational deployments.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

First Point International

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will carry out an investigation into the operations of the company First Point International, and the reasons for defaulting on its creditors. [148904]

Dr. Howells: A winding-up order was made against First Point International Limited on 10 May 2000. The Official Receiver is under a statutory duty to investigate the causes of the company's failure and the promotion, formation, business, dealings and affairs of the company, and to make any appropriate reports to the court. There is therefore no need for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to mount a separate investigation of these matters.

Coal Mining Subsidence

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to receive the Coal Authority's Sixth report on its administration of the Coal Mining Subsidence Damage Repair and Compensation Scheme. [149587]

Mr. Hain: I have now received this report from the Coal Authority, and have arranged for copies to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses today.

Industrial Gas Prices

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the effect

the new Bacton-Zeebrugge gas pipeline link between Britain and continental Europe has had on industrial gas prices in the UK. [148300]

Mr. Hain: A major cause of the price rise has been arbitrage across the UK-Belgium interconnector with high oil related gas prices in continental Europe. This has been made worse by the lack of liberalisation and competition in the Continental market and the consequent absence of real gas to gas competition.

The high wholesale price has led to sharp increases in the price of gas to industry—particularly companies with contracts tied to the spot price.

While arbitrage is an accepted market mechanism, the Government have had concerns about aspects of the operation of the interconnector. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry therefore wrote to Commissioner Monti requesting a Commission competition inquiry into the interconnector. I am pleased to say that on 1 February the Commission announced that they would be looking into this.

In the meantime the Government will be pressing for increased liberalisation and competition in the Continental market. We firmly believe that this is the key to a long term solution.

Environmental Protection (State Aid)

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the European Commission's guidelines for granting state aid to firms that promote environmental protection; and if he will make a statement. [149136]

Mr. Alan Johnson: When the guidelines are finalised, they will be published in the Official Journal. I will arrange for an English Language version to be placed in the Library of the House, and I will also send one to the hon. Member.

Electricity

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what he estimates the cost of delay will be to consumers and industry if the New Electricity Trading Arrangements are not implemented by 27 March. [146951]

Mr. Hain: While we have already seen some of the benefit of the New Electricity Trading Arrangements (NETA) through lower forward prices over the past year, clearly the full benefit of NETA will not be realised until it is actually introduced. The priority is therefore to ensure that NETA is implemented on 27 March, as the target implementation date confirmed by Ofgem on 31 January.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what measures Ofgem are carrying out to ensure that the new electricity trading arrangements will be implemented by 27 March; [146949]

(2) when he will announce whether the new electricity arrangements are on course to go live on 27 March. [146948]

Mr. Hain: When the revised timetable for the implementation of the New Electricity Trading Arrangements (NETA) was announced last October, it was the result of a comprehensive replanning exercise undertaken by Ofgem. Since then, Ofgem have closely monitored the progress of the project against a series of key milestones. The programme is now moving into the final phase of testing, known as Unified Pre-production and, subject to the successful outcome of this, NETA remains on course for implementation on 27 March.

I also refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) on 31 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 188W.

BAE Marine

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what communications he has had relating to the Type 45 proposal submitted by BAE Marine; and if he will make a statement. [149086]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have received communications from ministerial colleagues, hon. Members and other interested parties.

The Government's response to BAE Systems's unsolicited proposal for the T45 Destroyers was set out by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 20 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 238W.

Crop Protection Chemicals

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the joint industry submission, "Minimising the Environmental Impacts of Crop Protection Chemicals", revised proposals February 2001. [148863]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The November 2000 pre-Budget report announced that, in the run up to Budget 2001, the Government wished to see the Crop Protection Association make further improvements to the package of voluntary measures that the industry has been developing over the last year. This latest submission from the CPA, and a number of other stakeholders involved in the supply and use of crop protection products, was received by the Government on 29 January. It is currently being evaluated and a further statement will be made in the Budget report.

Ilisu Dam

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the most recent estimate of the number of Kurdish people who will be displaced from the banks of the River Tigris as a result of the Ilisu Dam project; and if he will make a statement. [148537]

Mr. Caborn: We do not yet have a final estimate of those affected by the project. A number of estimates have been made at different times and 78,000 has been suggested as an upper estimate of the number of people possibly affected in any way. We expect this to be clarified by the Environmental Impact Assessment Report and the Resettlement Action Plan when they become available.

Not all of the affected people would need resettlement, and the effect on some would be quite minor. Nevertheless, the interests of all affected people must be taken into account.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the environmental assessment relating to the Ilisu Dam project will be published. [148507]

Mr. Caborn: We expect that a presentation on the Environmental Impact Assessment Report will be made to the export credit agencies shortly, and that the Environmental Impact Assessment Report will be made publicly available after this presentation, and before any decision is taken regarding export credit support from the UK. As we are not the owners of the reports we cannot be more specific about timing.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate was included of the number of homeless Kurdish people in the plans to create the Ilisu Dam when it was first brought to the attention of his Department; and if he will make a statement. [148538]

Mr. Caborn: When the Export Credits Guarantee Department was first approached, it was advised that in the region of 15,000 people might be affected by the Ilisu Dam.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what compensation will be offered to the Kurdish people displaced to accommodate the Ilisu Dam project; and if he will make a statement. [148539]

Mr. Caborn: Compensation for those displaced or otherwise affected by the project is one of the issues we expect to see addressed in the Resettlement Action Plan.

Human Rights (Turkey)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has held with the Government of Turkey regarding human rights, specifically with regard to the Kurdish people. [148548]

Mr. Caborn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has had no recent discussions with the Government of Turkey on this subject. However, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and my hon. Friend the Minister for Europe regularly raise human rights issues in routine bilateral contacts with the Turkish government.

Petroleum Discoveries

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress PILOT has made in identifying clusters of petroleum discoveries with potential for development. [149588]

Mr. Hain: The formal invitation for companies to apply for licenses for blocks 113/28 and 113/29 in the Eastern Irish Sea has now appeared in the *Official Journal*. These blocks contain gas discoveries that have been identified by PILOT's Undeveloped Discoveries Workgroup, as having potential for development. I am pleased that the efforts of the Workgroup have led to this invitation being made.

There is tremendous potential on the UKCS for the development of existing oil and gas discoveries. The Workgroup has made good progress in identifying a number of discovery 'clusters' that will benefit from being developed as a group rather than being assessed as individual projects.

The decision to offer these blocks for licence was taken after consultation with a number of organisations including the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and English Nature. In the event that licences are awarded, activities carried out under them will be subject to a separate approvals process that will take account of the requirements of relevant environmental legislation.

Mivan Ltd./Kier International

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place details of his Department's accounting officer's note of dissent relating to Mivan Ltd. and Kier International to construct housing and provide water services in Romania in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [148287]

Mr. Caborn: I have considered this request under the terms of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information and concluded that providing this information would harm the frankness and candour of internal discussion within Government. The request therefore falls within the terms of exemption 2 of the Code of Practice.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the dates of *(a)* the meetings and *(b)* other contacts made by Ministers with the Hinduja brothers, indicating which (i) Ministers and (ii) other hon. Members were present and which hon. Members arranged the meeting. [148620]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave on 2 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 336W, to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe).

SOCIAL SECURITY

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 15 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 80W, concerning winter fuel payments, how many of the people who were incorrectly issued with a winter fuel payment in 1997–98 were allowed to keep the money. [148497]

Mr. Rooker: As I said in my written answer of 15 January 2001, no further information is available.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioner households in Crosby have benefited from the winter fuel allowance. [148336]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested, as Winter Fuel Payment statistics are not collected by household. For such information as is available on the number of payments made in each parliamentary constituency so far this winter I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 31 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 238W.

Fraud

Mr. Kilfoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the cost of anti-fraud measures was in *(a)* 1997–98 *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000. [145201]

Mr. Rooker: The Department set out its strategy for tackling fraud and error in the paper—"A New Contract for Welfare: Safeguarding Social Security" (Cm 4276)—published on 23 March 1999. The overall aim of the strategy is to have a benefit system which is secure from first claim to final payment.

The implementation of this strategy means that an anti-fraud focus is integral to the work of the Department, as is dealing with the wider agenda of error and incorrectness in benefit payments. It is therefore not possible to account for the cost of all anti-fraud work separately. It is an important part of the Department's work.

National Insurance Numbers

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what checks are being undertaken to ensure the veracity of National Insurance numbers; and when the programme to check the accounts held on the Departmental Central Index will end. [148489]

Mr. Rooker: All adult applicants for a National Insurance number (NINO) will be interviewed by specially trained staff. Information given by the applicant in support of their application will be corroborated. Expert staff will also scrutinise documentation provided using specialist equipment.

We have developed an enhanced NINO process for adult registration which will be rolled out nationally by 31 March 2001. This enhanced process will increase the veracity of new National Insurance numbers with less duplicate accounts being created.

The Departmental Central Index (DCI) Data Cleaning Project will end on 31 March 2001. Since the project began we have removed over 204,000 duplicate records from the DCI database.

Acquired Brain Injury

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people with acquired brain injury are in receipt of welfare benefits. [147971]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

As at 1 April 1999 there were 8,300 Industrial Injury Disablement Benefit recipients with a primary diagnosis of fractured skull and facial bones, intracranial injury or crushing injury of the head.

As at 31 August 2000 there were 3,900 Incapacity Benefit recipients and 600 Severe Disablement recipients with a primary diagnosis of fracture of the skull, intracranial injury or other head injury.

Notes:

1. All cases of incapacity are coded using the International Classification of Disease, 10th Edition. Acquired brain injury is not recorded as a separate category in this code.

2. Disorders recorded as secondary conditions are not recorded.

3. Figures for Incapacity Benefit and Severe Disablement Allowance are based on a 5 per cent. sample of the benefit computer system and will exclude a small number of clerically held cases.

4. Figures for Industrial Injury Disablement Benefit are based on a 10 per cent. sample of clerical records.

5. Figures for Disability Living Allowance and Income Support are not available by this category of diagnosis.

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what assessment he has made of *(a)* the cost of benefit payments to individuals with acquired brain injury and *(b)* the number of people with acquired brain injury who have not returned to work; [147963]

(2) what support his Department offers to people with acquired brain injury. [147960]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

There is a wide range of Social Security benefits available.

It is not possible to estimate reliably the expenditure on benefit payments to individuals with acquired brain injury because it is not recorded as a separate category of incapacity for receipt of benefit. However, the latest available information on the number of people in receipt of benefit due to head injury is as follows.

As at 1 April 1999 there were 8,300 Industrial Injury Disablement Benefit recipients with a primary diagnosis of fractured skull and facial bones, intracranial injury or crushing injury of the head.

As at 31 August 2000 there were 3,900 Incapacity Benefit recipients and 600 Severe Disablement Allowance recipients with a primary diagnosis of fracture of the skull, intracranial injury or other head injury.

Notes:

1. All cases of incapacity are coded using the International Classification of Disease, 10th Edition. Acquired brain injury is not recorded as a separate category in this code. Disorders recorded as secondary conditions are not recorded.

2. Figures for Incapacity Benefit and Severe Disablement Allowance are based on a 5 per cent. sample of the benefit computer system and will exclude a small number of clerically held cases.

3. Figures for Industrial Injury Disablement Benefit are based on a 10 per cent. sample of clerical records.

4. Figures for Disability Living Allowance and Income Support are not available by this category of diagnosis.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his oral answer to the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) of 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 9, if he will make a statement on the basis on which the Minister of State said that Tesco is planning to take contributions at its supermarket checkouts. [148406]

Mr. Rooker: Tesco have advised that they are considering taking contributions to a stakeholder pension at their checkouts, but to date have not made a final decision on the matter. I relied, for part of my answer to my hon. Friend the Member, on a paraphrase of an item in *The Observer* of 21 January 2001

Maintenance Assessment Procedure

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what his current estimate is of the date by which all existing Child Support Agency cases will be moved on to the new maintenance assessment procedure. [148491]

Angela Eagle: The child support reforms in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000 will be introduced for new cases by April 2002. Existing cases will be transferred at a later date, once we are sure that the new system is working well.

Pensions (Overseas Residents)

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones) of 15 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 79W, how many pensioners who live abroad and receive an annually up-rated basic state pension are *(a)* single and *(b)* married; and how many in each group are under the age of 75 years. [148503]

Mr. Rooker: We estimate that as at 31 March 2000 there were 359,800 pensioners residing overseas who had an annually up-rated basic state pension. We further estimate that 238,600 pensioners were under the age of 75. Details are not available based on marital status.

Notes:

1. The case count figures quoted are in thousands and are rounded to the nearest hundred.

2. Includes all retirement pensioners resident overseas.

3. Pensioners resident in the Channel Islands are not included in the case count figures.

4. We are unable to supply information from the Pension Strategy Computer System based on marital status.

Source:

5 per cent. sample from the Pension Strategy Computer System at 31 March 2000.

Northgate Office (Running Costs)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* staff, *(b)* personal computers, *(c)* printers, *(d)* fax machines and *(e)* vehicles are based at his Department's offices at Northgate in Glasgow; and what the annual running costs are of this facility. [148434]

Angela Eagle: This is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. John Swinney, dated 5 February 2001:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your Parliamentary Question about how many (a) staff, (b) personal computers, (c) printers, (d) fax machines and (e) vehicles are based at his Department's offices at Northgate in Glasgow; and what the annual running costs are of the facility.

There are 875 staff employed at Glasgow Benefits Centre, Northgate. 151 of these work on a part-time basis. Salary costs for April 1999 to March 2000 were £12,097,992. Non-staff costs for the same period were £934,705.

There are 712 personal computers (PCs) attached to the benefit processing computer systems, 272 stand alone PCs, 12 laptop computers, 185 printers and 41 fax machines. There are no vehicles based at Northgate.

I hope this is helpful.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Government Grants (Central London)

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list each category of grant, and the amount of each grant, paid by his Department to *(a)* Westminster and *(b)* Kensington and Chelsea in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99, (iii) 1999–2000 and (iv) 2000–01; and what the projected figure is for 2001–02. [146309]

Ms Estelle Morris: Listed are the Department's school education grants and funding allocations paid to the City of Westminster and the Royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea for each of the last three years and the current year, and projected grant figures for 2001–02 where known. These do not include funding for former GM schools in 1997–98 and 1998–99 which received grant directly from the Funding Agency for Schools. The figures for 2000–01 are the total grants currently estimated to be paid to these local education authorities.

Allocations 1997–98 to 2000–01 for the City of Westminster

£000

Grant	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
School Capital	1,072	2,025	1,339	4,089
Standards Fund	490	742	3,153	5,464
School Standards Grant	—	—	—	687
School Budget Support Grant	—	—	—	128
Transitional Funding for former GM Schools Grant	—	—	—	—
Nursery Education Grant (4-year-olds)	1,209	507	521	525
Nursery Education Grant (3-year-olds)	—	—	218	1,065
Teachers Pay Reform Threshold Special Grant	—	—	—	450
Partners for Study Support Grant	—	—	—	3
Independent/State School Partnership Grant Scheme	—	9	7	—

Allocations 1997–98 to 2000–01 for the Royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea

£000

Grant	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
School Capital	362	1,090	682	1,929
Standards Fund	353	311	1,757	4,147
School Standards Grant	—	—	—	430
School Budget Support Grant	—	—	—	70
Transitional Funding for former GM Schools Grant	—	—	—	99
Nursery Education Grant (4-year-olds)	806	252	208	229

Allocations 1997–98 to 2000–01 for the Royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea

£000

Grant	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
Nursery Education Grant (3-year-olds)	—	—	—	806
Teachers Pay Reform Threshold Special Grant	—	—	—	270
Partners for Study Support Grant	—	—	—	10
Independent/State School Partnership Grant Scheme	—	—	—	1

Projected grant figures for 2001–01, where known

£000

Grant	Westminster	Kensington and Chelsea
School Capital	2,683	1,109
School Standards Grant	1,240	810
Nursery Education Grant (3-year-olds)	1,091	826
Partners for Study Support Grant	9	10

Final allocations of the Standards Fund, transitional funding for GM schools and Teachers Pay Reform Threshold Special Grant are not yet known for 2001–02.

In addition, Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea will receive in 2000–01 and 2001–02 Special Grant funding to support other elements of the pay reform package:

performance pay progression;

appointments to assistant head posts (leadership group grant);

deputies assimilation.

It is not possible to predict figures per local education authority.

The Volunteer Bureau within the Royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea in partnership with Westminster Volunteer Bureau have been awarded £80,000 funding spread over two years, 2000–02, to co-ordinate both the recruitment of volunteers and the provision of mentoring support across both boroughs. This includes training volunteers' mentors to support a number of primary and secondary schools mentoring programmes.

Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea are one Excellence in Cities partnership. In 1999–2000 and 2000–01 they jointly received £35,000 for small scale projects and £6,000 for laptops in respect of this partnership. In 2000–01 they received £2,000 for good practice in respect of the partnership.

There have also been a number of miscellaneous payments made to Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea regarding the Graduate Teacher Programme and Registered Teacher Programme. This information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Under this Government, funding per pupil has already increased by over £300 in real terms, and it will increase by a further £150 per pupil for 2001–02. Under the last Government, funding per pupil fell by £60 in real terms between 1994–95 and 1997–98. There will be further increases in funding following the year 2000 spending review: a further £370 per pupil over the three year period, taking the total increase to nearly £700 between 1997–98 and 2003–04.

Early Years Education

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for the *(a)* United Kingdom and *(b)* each local authority, the number of three-year-olds with free early years education places providing five or more sessions of education per week in (i) 1979, (ii) 1990 and (iii) for each year from 1992 to 2000. [147244]

Ms Hodge: The information is not available in the form requested. Up to September 1999, free places for three-year-olds were available only in maintained nursery and primary schools. Since September 1999 specific funding by the Government for three-year-olds has been extended to private, voluntary and independent providers via the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships. The table accounts for places only in the maintained sector.

The available information on the numbers of three-year-olds in free early years provision for England and in each local education authority up to January 2000 is shown in the table. During 2000–01, £100 million has been made available to provide a further 40,000 free places for three-year-olds. In 2001–02, £250 million will be made available to provide 80,000 new additional places.

All four-year-olds have been guaranteed a free place since September 1998. By September 2004 all three-year-olds will have a free early education place. By 2004 expenditure on nursery education will have doubled from £1 to £2 billion.

For information on three-year-olds with free early years places in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, I refer the hon. Member to the Ministers responsible for Education in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, respectively.

Table 1: Children aged three in free early years education places[1]
England and each local education authority in England, 1996–2000

Position as at January	1996[2]	1997[2]	1998[2]	1999[2]	2000[3,7]
England	210,075	214,173	222,031	225,669	266,350
North East	23,955	23,707	22,944	22,452	24,280
Cleveland[5]	7,427	—	—	—	—
Hartlepool[4,6]	—	1,143	1,179	1,193	1,100
Middlesbrough[4,6]	—	1,919	1,898	1,840	1,740
Redcar and Cleveland[4,6]	—	1,988	1,794	1,784	1,800
Stockton-on-Tees[4,6]	—	2,351	2,177	2,001	1,980

Table 1: Children aged three in free early years education places[1] England and each local education authority in England, 1996–2000

Position as at January	*1996*[2]	*1997*[2]	*1998*[2]	*1999*[2]	*2000*[2,7]
Durham[3]	5,161	5,132	—	—	—
Darlington[6]	—	—	1,082	1,002	980
Durham[4,6]	—	—	3,935	3,786	4,150
Northumberland	2,194	2,255	2,207	2,109	2,120
Gateshead[4]	1,334	1,259	1,340	1,314	1,940
Newcastle-upon-Tyne[4]	1,896	1,878	1,755	1,789	2,340
North Tyneside[4]	1,905	1,837	1,783	1,816	1,840
South Tyneside[4]	1,599	1,525	1,470	1,476	1,450
Sunderland[4]	2,439	2,420	2,324	2,342	2,860
North West	42,042	42,204	41,967	41,667	49,920
Cheshire[3]	3,839	4,021	3,856	—	—
Halton[4,6]	—	—	—	663	1,190
Warrington[6]	—	—	—	880	960
Cheshire[6]	—	—	—	2,242	2,250
Cumbria	2,256	2,597	2,609	2,490	2,420
Bolton[4]	2,250	2,295	2,177	2,104	2,950
Bury	1,092	1,079	1,071	1,045	1,050
Manchester[4]	3,744	3,722	4,382	4,229	4,490
Oldham[4]	1,626	1,540	1,547	1,594	2,370
Rochdale[4]	1,421	1,407	1,476	1,374	2,180
Salford[4]	2,597	2,231	2,181	2,113	2,190
Stockport	1,386	1,634	1,494	1,608	1,630
Tameside[4]	1,732	1,705	1,631	1,620	2,090
Trafford	1,877	1,856	1,684	1,627	1,580
Wigan[4]	1,436	1,434	1,428	1,443	1,510
Lancashire[3]	5,601	5,648	5,623	—	—
Blackburn with Darwen[4,6]	—	—	—	1,024	1,250
Blackpool[4,6]	—	—	—	316	1,590
Lancashire[6]	—	—	—	4,427	4,250
Knowsley[4]	2,104	2,044	2,037	2,032	2,140
Liverpool[4]	4,433	4,187	4,039	3,920	5,060
St. Helens[4]	1,108	1,108	1,050	1,113	1,460
Sefton[4]	2,028	2,051	1,975	2,089	2,370
Wirral[4]	1,512	1,645	1,707	1,714	2,940
Yorkshire and the Humber	31,407	31,844	32,499	32,884	38,730
Humberside[3]	4,670	—	—	—	—
East Riding of Yorkshire[6]	—	1,053	1,110	1,103	1,030
Kingston-upon-Hull, City of[4,6]	—	2,240	2,284	2,252	2,570
North East Lincolnshire[4,6]	—	922	978	1,010	1,520
North Lincolnshire[6]	—	521	551	554	590
North Yorkshire	2,174	—	—	—	—
York[6]	—	676	752	811	790
North Yorkshire[6]	—	1,642	1,728	1,808	1,800
Barnsley[4]	1,269	1,264	1,394	1,406	1,630
Doncaster[4]	2,435	2,364	2,294	2,249	2,330
Rotherham[4]	1,251	1,304	1,310	1,443	2,170
Sheffield[4]	2,542	2,594	2,707	2,837	4,550
Bradford[4]	4,132	4,376	4,795	4,694	5,510
Calderdale[4]	1,240	1,309	1,281	1,234	1,310
Kirklees[4]	3,030	2,974	2,679	2,627	2,990
Leeds[4]	6,023	6,065	6,074	6,231	6,950
Wakefield[4]	2,641	2,540	2,562	2,625	3,010
East Midlands	16,772	17,140	17,985	18,333	21,450
Derbyshire[3]	5,013	4,943	—	—	—
Derby[6]	—	—	1,690	1,645	1,930
Derbyshire[6]	—	—	3,387	3,472	4,240
Leicestershire[3]	2,365	2,479	—	—	—
Leicester[4,6]	—	—	2,361	2,343	3,230
Rutland[6]	—	—	41	75	100
Leicestershire[6]	—	—	72	89	90
Lincolnshire	1,563	1,686	1,752	1,744	1,790
Northamptonshire	2,214	2,277	2,398	2,330	2,300
Nottinghamshire[3]	5,617	5,755	6,284	—	—
Nottingham[4,6]	—	—	—	2,573	3,310
Nottinghamshire[6]	—	—	—	4,062	4,460
West Midlands	29,020	29,098	30,665	30,522	35,690
Hereford and Worcester[3]	567	762	1,663	—	—
Herefordshire[6]	—	—	—	313	340
Worcestershire[6]	—	—	—	1,376	1,530

Table 1: Children aged three in free early years education places[1]
England and each local education authority in England, 1996–2000

Position as at January	*1996*[2]	*1997*[2]	*1998*[2]	*1999*[2]	*2000*[3,7]
Shropshire[5]	749	790	955	—	—
Telford and Wrekin[4,6]	—	—	—	510	1,000
Shropshire[6]	—	—	—	381	420
Staffordshire[5]	4,630	4,664	—	—	—
Stoke-on-Trent[4,6]	—	—	2,023	1,950	2,290
Staffordshire[6]	—	—	2,745	2,656	2,560
Warwickshire	1,408	1,357	1,415	1,490	1,600
Birmingham[4]	7,488	7,427	7,527	7,420	10,200
Coventry[4]	1,420	1,674	1,905	1,968	2,920
Dudley	2,270	2,267	2,279	2,283	2,230
Sandwell[4]	3,290	3,035	3,104	3,106	3,240
Solihull	1,188	1,250	1,359	1,464	1,540
Walsall[4]	3,239	3,079	3,004	2,951	3,000
Wolverhampton[4]	2,771	2,793	2,686	2,654	2,820
East of England	9,642	11,658	13,331	14,048	14,870
Bedfordshire[5]	1,937	2,035	—	—	—
Luton[6]	—	—	889	966	950
Bedfordshire[6]	—	—	1,245	1,269	1,210
Cambridgeshire[5]	1,495	1,466	1,511	—	—
Peterborough[6]	—	—	—	318	320
Cambridgeshire[6]	—	—	—	1,161	1,090
Essex[5]	1,166	1,964	2,353	—	—
Southend-on-Sea[6]	—	—	—	392	450
Thurrock[6]	—	—	—	435	470
Essex[6]	—	—	—	1,984	1,960
Hertfordshire	3,853	4,095	4,951	4,908	5,890
Norfolk	739	1,493	1,823	1,898	1,890
Suffolk	452	605	559	717	630
London	39,869	40,536	42,304	44,864	57,190
Inner London	18,696	18,959	19,597	21,437	29,160
City of London	12	11	15	11	10
Camden[4]	765	802	890	928	1,450
Hackney[4]	1,536	1,474	1,543	1,624	2,430
Hammersmith and Fulham[4]	1,055	1,053	1,055	1,061	1,470
Haringey[4]	1,894	2,004	1,944	1,949	2,210
Islington[4]	1,342	1,266	1,256	1,283	1,840
Kensington and Chelsea	486	542	523	513	590
Lambeth[4]	1,396	1,462	1,855	1,911	3,150
Lewisham[4]	1,363	1,412	1,475	1,877	2,560
Newham[4]	2,074	2,030	2,103	3,189	3,860
Southwark[4]	2,158	2,222	2,290	2,278	2,820
Tower Hamlets[4]	2,288	2,340	2,264	2,405	2,610
Wandsworth[4]	1,590	1,614	1,590	1,584	2,860
Westminster[4]	737	727	794	824	1,300
Outer London	21,173	21,577	22,707	23,427	28,030
Barking and Dagenham[4]	1,331	1,332	1,408	1,329	1,630
Barnet	1,780	2,021	2,010	2,026	2,010
Bexley	1,009	1,069	1,242	1,300	1,390
Brent[4]	1,778	1,712	1,706	1,708	2,380
Bromley	111	107	197	216	240
Croydon	1,420	1,537	1,720	1,859	1,830
Ealing[4]	2,705	2,625	2,692	2,686	3,140
Enfield	1,110	1,112	1,136	1,235	1,230
Greenwich[4]	1,785	1,981	1,841	1,889	2,600
Harrow	489	451	588	576	620
Havering	378	449	464	459	550
Hillingdon	473	560	620	636	1,360
Hounslow[4]	1,562	1,563	1,605	1,505	1,990
Kingston upon Thames	931	888	892	892	940
Merton	1,749	1,644	1,707	1,668	1,670
Redbridge	626	687	824	1,318	1,600
Richmond upon Thames	597	570	587	555	590
Sutton	270	325	259	289	250
Waltham Forest[4]	1,069	944	1,209	1,281	2,040
South East	10,128	10,602	11,763	12,155	13,300
Berkshire[5]	1,427	1,413	2,049	—	—
Bracknell Forest[6]	—	—	—	90	110
Windsor and Maidenhead[6]	—	—	—	290	310
West Berkshire[6]	—	—	—	216	260

Table 1: Children aged three in free early years education places[1] England and each local education authority in England, 1996–2000

Position as at January	*1996*[2]	*1997*[2]	*1998*[2]	*1999*[2]	*2000*[3,7]
Reading[4]	—	—	—	614	740
Slough[4]	—	—	—	822	930
Wokingham[4]	—	—	—	90	140
Buckinghamshire[5]	758	887	—	—	—
Milton Keynes[4]	—	—	301	313	370
Buckinghamshire[6]	—	—	695	686	690
East Sussex[5]	1,351	1,383	—	—	—
Brighton and Hove[4,6]	—	—	816	770	1,460
East Sussex[6]	—	—	606	595	570
Hampshire[5]	1,396	1,459	—	—	—
Portsmouth[4]	—	—	459	495	440
Southampton[4]	—	—	406	428	440
Hampshire[6]	—	—	559	605	600
Isle of Wight[4]	124	115	125	118	160
Kent[5]	1,676	1,847	1,812	—	—
Medway[4]	—	—	—	359	420
Kent[6]	—	—	—	1,495	1,410
Oxfordshire	705	770	866	908	1,000
Surrey	2,053	2,080	2,234	2,384	2,430
West Sussex	638	648	835	877	840
South West	7,240	7,384	8,573	8,744	10,930
Avon[5]	3,551	—	—	—	—
Bath and North East Somerset[6]	—	308	309	317	300
Bristol, City of[6]	—	2,755	2,817	2,836	2,800
North Somerset[6]	—	159	164	157	200
South Gloucestershire[6]	—	403	320	325	330
Cornwall[4]	976	988	962	1,042	2,710
Isles of Scilly	1	0	3	2	0
Devon[5]	1,384	1,378	2,210	—	—
Torbay[4]	—	—	—	326	390
Plymouth[4,6]	—	—	—	747	1,130
Devon[6]	—	—	—	1,172	1,200
Dorset[5]	545	554	—	—	—
Bournemouth[4]	—	—	287	246	270
Poole[4]	—	—	92	78	80
Dorset[6]	—	—	214	208	250
Gloucestershire	17	58	72	83	70
Somerset	401	472	499	477	470
Wiltshire[5]	365	309	—	—	—
Swindon[4]	—	—	324	428	410
Wiltshire[6]	—	—	300	300	320

[1] Prior to September 1999, free places for three-year-olds were available only in maintained nursery and primary schools. Since September 1999 funding has been extended to private, voluntary and independent providers.
[2] Headcount numbers collected from maintained schools in January each year as part of the Annual Schools' Census.
[3] Combining Annual Schools' Census data from maintained schools in January 2000 and data submitted by LEAs for Nursery Education Grant purposes relating to private, voluntary and independent providers in spring 2000.
[4] LEA's eligible to provide funding for three-year-olds in the private, voluntary and independent sectors via Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships. In spring 2000 there were a total of 65 such LEAs in England.
[5] Before Local Government Re-organisation.
[6] After Local Government Re-organisation.
Note:
Figures have been rounded to the nearest 10.

Newly Qualified Teacherss

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the sums provided in to the standards fund grants allocated to local education authorities for *(a)* the cost of the 10 per cent. lighter timetable for NQTs and *(b)* the assessment, monitoring and evaluation of the arrangements for NQTs in (i) 2000–01 and (ii) 2001–02. [147550]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* In 2000–01, the costs of the induction of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) were met as part of the £290.5 million allocated for school improvement through the standards fund. The exact amount allocated to schools for induction purposes was left to local education authorities to decide in consultation with their schools and with reference to guidance issued in relation to the breakdown of the standards fund. For 2001–02, £64.4 million has been specifically allocated for induction for NQTs under the new standards fund arrangements. This includes £5 million for local education authorities to retain centrally for costs relating to assessment, monitoring and evaluation of the induction arrangements, and £59.4 million to be allocated to schools to provide £1,000 per term for each NQT. All figures include both the Government's and local authorities' contributions to the standards fund.

School Playing Fields

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many school playing fields there were in *(a)* 1979 and *(b)* 1997. [147707]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* No data were collected centrally on how many school playing fields there were in either 1979 or 1997. The only data about playing fields under the previous Administration that we are aware of are derived from independent surveys carried out by the Central Council of Physical Recreation. The CCPR published a paper in 1984: "Sports Fields at Risk", which indicated that some 3,630 acres of recreation land recorded on Land Registers were at risk of disposal. A more meaningful way of quantifying the area under threat at that time is to translate it into about 5,000 school playing fields of sports pitch size.

Data to be collected through Asset Management Plans will, in the future, provide a clearer picture of the number of school playing fields throughout England. Once they have been validated, we plan to publish data collected from Asset Management Plans later in the year.

SSAs (Schools)

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average per pupil standard spending assessment is in *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools in (i) England and (ii) north Somerset; and if he will estimate the sums which would be available for education in north Somerset if the average per pupil standard spending assessment for primary and secondary schools in north Somerset were the same as the average for England. [148162]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows the 2001–02 educaton SSA per primary and secondary pupil for north Somerset and England.

£

SSA	*North Somerset*	*England*
Primary per pupil	2,341	2,588
Secondary per pupl	3,026	3,313

If north Sonerset's SSA per pupil for primary and secondary schools were the same as the national average it is estimated that its 2001–02 education SSA would be £6.3 million higher. Between 1997–98 and 2000–01 funding per pupil in north Somerset has increased by £380 in real terms. In addition to an increase of £3.65 million in education SSA, schools in north Somerset will benefit from an estimated £1.83 million in Direct Grant in 2001–02. The authority will also receive £100,000 as their share of the extra £52 million made available to provide support to help some LEAs manage funding changes in 2001–02. Additionally it is estimated that north Somerset (Weston) Education Action Zone will receive DfEE grants totalling £842,400 in 2001–02 and £692,000 in 2001–02.

Mr. Webb To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list, for each local education authority the *(a)* primary education SSA per pupil and *(b)* secondary education SSA per pupil for 2001–02. [148288]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is contained in the table. In addition to SSAs, authorities and their schools also receive funding through the Standards Fund, Direct Grants, and the recently announced £52 million in additional funding for authorities facing particular pressures—these special and specific grants add £110 at national level to the funding received through SSAs. The overall increase in funding for 2001–02 is over £1.9 billion or 8 per cent. This is equivalent to around £150 per pupil in real terms.

£

	Unit allocations 2001–02	
LEA number/name	*Primary per 5–10 pupil*	*Secondary per 11–15 pupil*
201 City of London	3,347.79	14,073.05
202 Camden	3,667.85	4,536.27
203 Greenwich	3,433.58	4,427.49
204 Hackney	3,814.77	5,120.11
205 Hammersmith and Fulham	3,654.93	4,622.48
206 Islington	3,719.03	4,902.99
207 Kensington and Chelsea	3,847.88	4,562.50
208 Lambeth	3,845.04	5,335.77
209 Lewisham	3,564.68	4,630.69
210 Southwark	3,687.69	4,776.13
211 Tower Hamlets	3,895.67	5,031.93
212 Wandsworth	3,332.74	4,250.17
213 Westminster	3,550.07	4,270.38
301 Barking and Dagenham	2,961.78	3,857.86
302 Barnet	2,818.57	3,552.10
303 Bexley	2,671.98	3,415.54
304 Brent	3,238.97	4,181.91
305 Bromley	2,640.57	3,345.60
306 Croydon	2,879.07	3,750.14
307 Ealing	3,061.29	3,994.20
308 Enfield	2,935.16	3,723.75
309 Haringey	3,363.24	4,379.35
310 Harrow	2,775.87	3,629.17
311 Havering	2,632.75	3,389.89
312 Hillingdon	2,768.99	3,544.36
313 Hounslow	2,988.47	3,768.10
314 Kingston upon Thames	2,640.55	3,368.52
315 Merton	2,830.81	3,644.84
316 Newham	3,362.25	4,332.37
317 Redbridge	2,819.16	3,625.59
318 Richmond upon Thames	2,606.31	3,296.95
319 Sutton	2,680.78	3,360.39
320 Waltham Forest	3,116.95	4,000.25
330 Birmingham	2,733.37	3,542.25
331 Coventry	2,565.82	3,302.88
332 Dudley	2,357.33	3,023.23
333 Sandwell	2,593.82	3,352.48
334 Solihull	2,338.77	2,975.91
335 Walsall	2,485.53	3,178.13
336 Wolverhampton	2,610.10	3,362.61
340 Knowsley	2,864.44	3,760.33
341 Liverpool	2,824.15	3,641.64
342 St. Helens	2,482.24	3,205.37
343 Sefton	2,470.79	3,151.80
344 Wirral	2,548.58	3,299.04
350 Bolton	2,470.53	3,160.00
351 Bury	2,394.44	3,064.64
352 Manchester	2,919.98	3,815.11
353 Oldham	2,548.96	3,267.51
354 Rochdale	2,580.79	3,317.22
355 Salford	2,594.01	3,370.05
356 Stockport	2,337.02	3,025.37
357 Tameside	2,464.38	3,156.32
358 Trafford	2,396.57	3,088.26
359 Wigan	2,374.01	3,039.88
370 Barnsley	2,480.09	3,219.41
371 Doncaster	2,536.74	3,282.76
372 Rotherham	2,462.02	3,134.71
373 Sheffield	2,512.16	3,233.81
380 Bradford	2,623.04	3,406.58
381 Calderdale	2,480.12	3,194.24

£

LEA number/name	Unit allocations 2001–02 Primary per 5–10 pupil	Secondary per 11–15 pupil
382 Kirklees	2,505.11	3,228.15
383 Leeds	2,479.65	3,186.71
384 Wakefield	2,409.05	3,102.44
390 Gateshead	2,517.35	3,245.29
391 Newcastle upon Tyne	2,652.70	3,425.14
392 North Tyneside	2,447.17	3,163.73
393 South Tyneside	2,575.53	3,314.67
394 Sunderland	2,530.02	3,259.95
420 Isles of Scilly	4,438.21	5,670.49
800 Bath and North East Somerset	2,315.84	2,926.40
801 City of Bristol	2,545.34	3,292.20
802 North Somerset	2,340.62	3,026.13
803 South Gloucestershire	2,271.91	2,943.26
805 Hartlepool	2,550.29	3,284.84
806 Middlesbrough	2,689.26	3,517.04
807 Redcar and Cleveland	2,542.19	3,252.52
808 Stockton-on-Tees	2,489.55	3,223.13
810 City of Kingston-upon-Hull	2,641.07	3,397.82
811 East Riding of Yorkshire	2,364.65	3,051.22
812 North East Lincolnshire	2,537.29	3,268.12
813 North Lincolnshire	2,463.69	3,198.19
815 North Yorkshire	2,429.46	3,096.47
816 York	2,350.96	3,039.32
820 Bedfordshire	2,522.21	3,240.33
821 Luton	2,742.45	3,522.46
825 Buckinghamshire	2,518.20	3,250.33
826 Milton Keynes	2,596.55	3,349.02
830 Derbyshire	2,363.26	3,046.80
831 Derby	2,531.95	3,263.31
835 Dorset	2,368.71	3,034.68
836 Poole	2,331.85	2,992.33
837 Bournemouth	2,447.69	3,126.46
840 Durham	2,492.59	3,218.79
841 Darlington	2,470.42	3,188.30
845 East Sussex	2,577.07	3,326.17
846 Brighton and Hove	2,669.70	3,424.06
850 Hampshire	2,450.82	3,167.24
851 Portsmouth	2,639.01	3,364.89
852 Southampton	2,678.97	3,467.05
855 Leicestershire	2,292.22	2,959.59
856 Leicester	2,693.29	3,468.54
857 Rutland	2,346.01	2,905.38
860 Staffordshire	2,329.15	3,000.39
861 Stoke on Trent	2,520.12	3,248.60
865 Wiltshire	2,382.75	3,076.98
866 Swindon	2,378.54	3,059.67
867 Bracknell Forest	2,561.93	3,326.12
868 Windsor and Maidenhead	2,581.57	3,270.23
869 West Berkshire	2,452.04	3,125.91
870 Reading	2,640.73	3,464.21
871 Slough	3,009.34	3,965.81
872 Wokingham	2,337.67	3,026.03
873 Cambridgeshire	2,408.39	3,073.16
874 Peterborough	2,569.11	3,301.65
875 Cheshire	2,347.69	3,007.91
876 Halton	2,592.11	3,363.45
877 Warrington	2,325.99	3,003.39
878 Devon	2,436.71	3,147.24
879 Plymouth	2,480.16	3,160.24
880 Torbay	2,474.34	3,187.82
881 Essex	2,572.03	3,307.16
882 Southend	2,619.90	3,362.39
883 Thurrock	2,726.73	3,509.90
884 Herefordshire	2,458.13	3,165.61
885 Worcestershire	2,346.48	3,011.43
886 Kent	2,572.29	3,312.35
887 Rochester and Gillingham	2,547.05	3,275.99
888 Lancashire	2,457.40	3,163.75
889 Blackburn	2,642.25	3,397.12
890 Blackpool	2,500.11	3,249.79
891 Nottinghamshire	2,384.66	3,076.05
892 Nottingham City	2,737.82	3,544.07
893 Shropshire	2,405.90	3,082.27
894 The Wrekin	2,488.61	3,210.42
908 Cornwall	2,468.27	3,186.55
909 Cumbria	2,453.17	3,153.66
916 Gloucestershire	2,373.79	3,043.86
919 Hertfordshire	2,605.09	3,332.83
921 Isle of Wight Council	2,653.77	3,441.02
925 Lincolnshire	2,455.29	3,159.46
926 Norfolk	2,477.09	3,173.84
928 Northamptonshire	2,400.40	3,082.96
929 Northumberland	2,432.91	3,135.74
931 Oxfordshire	2,531.08	3,235.97
933 Somerset	2,404.87	3,097.79
935 Suffolk	2,405.33	3,071.22
936 Surrey	2,574.90	3,298.65
937 Warwickshire	2,361.59	3,026.65
938 West Sussex	2,499.56	3,208.68
England	2,587.69	3,313.17

Asset Management Plans

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 33W, on asset management plans, what the timetable is for publication of local authority asset management plans condition data. [148386]

Jacqui Smith: We have given local education authorities the opportunity of submitting any missing Asset Management Plans condition data. Time will be needed for validation of such submissions and we anticipate that publication of data analysis will not be before this summer.

Emergency Contraception (Staff Liability)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what guidance he has given to schools regarding the potential liability of *(a)* governors and *(b)* staff when emergency contraception is given to girls under the age of 16 by school staff or on school premises without the consent of parents; [148677]

(2) what guidance he has given schools regarding the potential liability of *(a)* school governors, *(b)* teachers, *(c)* head teachers and *(d)* other school staff in the event of emergency contraception being provided to girls under the age of sixteen by school staff or on school premises without the consent of parents. [148678]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* The Learning and Skills Act makes it clear that governing bodies must have regard to our Sex and Relationship Education guidance when developing sex and relationship education policies. The guidance, published last July, clearly states that governing bodies and head teachers should consult parents in developing their sex and

relationship education policy to ensure that they develop policies which reflect parents' wishes and the culture of the community they serve.

Trained staff in secondary schools should be able to give young people full information about different types of contraception, including emergency contraception and their effectiveness. Outside the teaching situation, health professionals such as school nurses can give one-to-one advice or information to a pupil on a health-related matter including contraception. We would not normally expect school nurses to issue contraception or emergency contraception. In the few cases where school nurses are dispensing contraception, this should be made clear in school's sex and relationship education policy, which has to be agreed with parents. These arrangements should not proceed until parents have been consulted.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire of 14 November 2000 to the Secretary of State for Health, which was transferred to him, on behalf of his constituent Mrs. Smith. [149204]

Mr. Wills: A letter responding to the right hon. Member was despatched on 2 February 2001.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Kosovo

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the *(a)* effectiveness and *(b)* value for money of the UN effort in Kosovo. [148925]

Mr. Vaz: The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) has made significant progress in Kosovo since 1999. To date over 1.3 million refugees and displaced persons have been able to return. Hospitals and schools have re-opened, with over 300,000 children back in education. A functioning judiciary has been established. Joint administrative structures have been set up. Municipal elections were held in October 2000. However, much remains to be done, as UNMIK itself recognises. To the end of June last year, UNMIK's projected cost to date is £567.5 million. This would have been far less than the cost of further conflict. We will continue to support UNMIK's efforts to build a lasting peace.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the case for a cantonisation policy in Kosovo. [148922]

Mr. Vaz: HMG do not support cantonisation. We are committed to bringing about ethnic reconciliation throughout Kosovo. Cantonisation would only lead to a continued ethnic divide. Reconciliation will take some time but in the long run we believe it is the only viable option.

St. Helena

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will restore the right of abode to residents of St. Helena; and if he will make a statement. [149199]

Mr. Battle: The restoration of British citizenship to the Overseas Territories will give their citizens the right of abode in the UK.

The Government remain fully committed to introducing legislation to give British citizenship to the people of the Overseas Territories including those of St. Helena. Officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Home Office have been working on the principles to be set out in the Bill and draft instructions have been agreed. We recently initiated a consultation process with the Overseas Territories on issues related to the Bill and its implementation.

We will make parliamentary time available for this measure as soon as practicable.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what purpose the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), caused inquiries to be made about the passport application of Mr. Hinduja; and whom he employed for this purpose. [147285]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply that was given by the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche) on 18 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 351–52W.

The hon. Gentleman will also be aware that Sir Anthony Hammond QC will conduct a review, reporting to the Prime Minister

> "to establish what approaches were made to the Home Office in 1998 in connection with the possibility of an application for naturalisation by Mr. S. P. Hinduja, and the full circumstances surrounding such approaches and the later grant of that application".

Congo

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the Government's position is with regard to troops from *(a)* Uganda, *(b)* Rwanda, *(c)* Zimbabwe, *(d)* Angola *(e)* the Interahamwe and *(f)* Namibia occupying part of the territory of the Democratic Republic of Congo; and if he will make a statement. [148314]

Mr. Wilson: The UK fully supports United Nations Security Council resolution 1291 (2000) reaffirming the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of the DRC and calling for the orderly withdrawal of all foreign forces from the DRC in accordance with the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement.

Indonesia

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will make a statement on violence against Christians in Indonesia and the potential for a United Nations peace initiative; [148576]

(2) what recent representations his Department has made to the Indonesian Government concerning violence directed at Christians in Indonesia. [148575]

Mr. Battle: The latest violence in Ambon illustrates the fragility of the security situation at a time when there had been some recent improvements; the Muslim and Christian holidays in December passed without serious incident in Ambon.

Our Ambassador to Indonesia has just returned from a visit to the province and the Indonesian Minister for Settlement is arranging a further visit to Maluku with a group of diplomats this month. We will continue to work with the Indonesian authorities and UNDP to promote reconciliation, begin wider construction work and to offer practical assistance where appropriate.

We continue to urge the Indonesian Government to exercise tolerance and restraint and remind them of their responsibility to maintain law and order and take immediate steps to bring the perpetrators of the violence to justice. I did so most recently with Foreign Minister Shihab on 12 December.

Export Licences

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will name *(a)* the department within his Department with responsibility for handling export licences and *(b)* the civil servant who heads it. [148596]

Mr. Wilson: Within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office the processing of export licence applications is co-ordinated by the non-proliferation department. The actual scrutiny of licence applications is carried out by the relevant geographical departments, with advice from the non-proliferation department and other specialist FCO departments as needed, and consulting Ministers on sensitive cases. Since 8 January 2001, the head of the non-proliferation department has been Tim Dowse.

Minority Ethnic Liaison Officer

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact of the temporary appointment of a minority ethnic liaison officer; under what length of contract the current officer is employed; and what was the budget allocation for the officer's work in *(a)* 1998–99, *(b)* 1999–2000 and *(c)* 2000–01. [148886]

Mr. Wilson: Linbert Spencer was employed as the Department's minority ethnic liaison adviser from December 1999 to November 2001. He continues to provide the Department with advice on a consultancy basis. He has made a major contribution to widening the Department's recruitment base to minority ethnic communities and to ensuring it benefits from the diversity of its current staff. No specific budget is allocated to this work.

Iran

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Government of Iran about human rights in that country; and if he will make a statement. [149198]

Mr. Wilson: We and our EU partners take every appropriate opportunity to press the Iranian authorities over our concerns about human rights issues in Iran. The Foreign Secretary raised human rights matters with his counterpart, Dr. Kharrazi, when they met in New York on 15 September and with the Iranian Ambassador to London on 4 October. More recently, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) discussed human rights concerns with Ambassador Sarmadi on 22 January. In conjunction with our EU partners, we also table twice yearly UN Resolutions on Human Rights in Iran. The most recent resolution, reflecting both positive developments and remaining concerns, was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 4 December.

Caribbean Territories (Homosexuality)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the Government will make an Order in Council to legalise homosexual acts in the five Caribbean territories where such acts remain illegal. [148842]

Mr. Battle: An Order in Council to de-criminalise consensual homosexual acts between adults in private in Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, Montserrat and the Turks and Caicos Islands, was made by Her Majesty at the Privy Council meeting on the 13 December 2000 and came into force on 1 January 2001.

Premier Oil

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to Premier Oil regarding their operations in Burma. [148841]

Mr. Battle: Premier Oil are well aware of our views which we reiterate at all opportunities: HMG do not encourage trade with or investment in Burma. We have told Premier Oil that we would welcome their moving out of Burma as soon as and to the fullest extent that they lawfully can.

SCOTLAND

Judiciary (Training)

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what training the judiciary in Scotland was given between 1 May 1997 and 1 July 1999. [145890]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 16 January 2001]:* Responsibility for training the judiciary in Scotland lies with the independent Judicial Studies Committee which was funded by the Scottish Office during the period in question. Between May 1997 and 1 July 1999 the Committee ran training events in connection with new legislation on criminal justice in Scotland and on changes in legislation affecting children's cases. Guidance was also issued to all members of the judiciary on a number of other pieces of legislation which came into effect during this period. Training in the use of information technology was also a prominent feature.

Departmental Surveys

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will list for *(a)* 1992–93, *(b)* 1993–94, *(c)* 1994–95, *(d)* 1995–96, *(e)* 1996–97, *(f)* 1997–98, *(g)* 1998–99, *(h)* 1999–2000 and *(i)* 2000–01, (I) her Department's total spending on quantitative and qualitative surveys of policy issues by focus groups, opinion polling, task forces or other means and (II) the cost of each individual project. [146587]

Mr. Foulkes: An important element of the Modernising Government initiative is to ensure effective communication. No expenditure has been incurred by the Scotland Office since 1 July 1999 on surveys through focus groups, opinion polls or task forces. For the Scottish Office before 1 July 1999, such information was not collected centrally and the information could be obtained now only at disproportionate cost.

CABINET OFFICE

Commonwealth Games

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how much sponsorship money has been raised for the Manchester Commonwealth Games and how much more needs to be raised to meet the target set. [148981]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Manchester 2002 Ltd. has to date announced some £18 million in commercial income for the 2002 Commonwealth Games. Manchester 2002 aim to raise income from a combination of sponsorship, television rights, merchandising and ticket sales to meet the operating costs of the Games. In addition, the sale of the Australian television rights to Channel 7 television has just been successfully negotiated. Further sponsorship deals are expected to be announced this month and Manchester 2002 Ltd. are working hard to ensure they stage a successful Games.

Civil Service (Management Functions) Act

Mr. Hope: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what delegations have been made in 2000 under the Civil Service (Management Functions) Act 1992; to whom those delegations were made; and what the main conditions attached to them were. [149507]

Marjorie Mowlam: No such delegations have been made.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Fur Farming (Prohibition) Act

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the Order to implement the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Act 2000 will be made; on what date the Act will commence; and if he will make a statement. [148108]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* The Fur Farming (Prohibition) Act 2000 received Royal Assent on 23 November 2000. We will be consulting the industry on a statutory compensation scheme as required under the Act. Under section 7(3) of the Act, the provisions relating to compensation for existing businesses in section 5 of the Act came into force two months after the Act received Royal Assent.

Under section 7(2) of the Act, the ban on fur farming will come into force on a date to be appointed by commencement order, which cannot be before 1 January 2003. However, fur farmers may close down at any time after Royal Assent and before the ban comes into force, without losing eligibility for compensation. A number have indicated a desire to do so, and we have now appointed independent consultants who will be visiting the fur farms this month. The purpose of this delayed commencement is to give fur farmers an opportunity to adjust their affairs and wind down their businesses in advance of the ban. The Government are committed to implementing the ban at the earliest opportunity.

Fish Farming

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many fish farms there are in the United Kingdom; how much it costs to acquire a licence for fish farming; and how much funding was given to fish farms in each of the last three years by his Department. [148680]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* Fish farming in Scotland is a matter for the Scottish Executive. At 1 February 2001, there were 508 registered fish farms in England and 53 in Wales.

Fish farmers do not require a licence to farm. They do need to be registered, but this is free of charge.

There has been no direct funding given to fish farming by the Department in the last three years. However, some £2 million is spent each year on aquaculture research, particularly in respect of work on disease control.

GM Crops

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what separation distances will apply to the GM farm-scale evaluations this spring. [149560]

Ms Quin: Following the scientific review and public consultation on separation distances that the Ministry commissioned last year, Ministers have asked the industry representative body, SCIMAC, this year to apply the separation distances for the spring farm-scale evaluations as set out in the table, a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House. These include changes to the distance for varietal associations and partially restored hybrids of oilseed rape (increased from 50 metres to 100 metres), and the distance for conventional forage maize (increased from 50 metres to 80 metres).

The purpose of the separation distances is to help ensure that any possible cross-pollination with nearby compatible crops is minimised. Based on best scientific data currently available, the distances in the table should ensure that if any cross-pollination does occur, the resulting GM presence in neighbouring crops would be extremely low. The separation distances agreed should reduce cross-pollination to a maximum of 1 per cent. for any crop and considerably below this maximum in most cases. A background note on the separation distances has been placed in the Library.

The distances in question apply for the purposes of the spring 2001 farm-scale evaluations only, and will be kept under review for future plantings. Steps are being taken to strengthen early communication at local level with farmers in the vicinity of FSE sites. All farmers hosting trials are being given clear guidance by SCIMAC that they should discuss their cropping plans at the earliest possible opportunity beforehand with their immediate neighbours. Ministers are also encouraging early dialogue at local level between FSE operators and all relevant local organic growers, and have asked SCIMAC to work closely with certified seed producers to ensure that current and any prospective EU standards for certified seed can continue to be met. MAFF are arranging a meeting with beekeeping organisations and SCIMAC to discuss specific issues affecting local beekeepers. Communication with local farmers will begin in advance of final decision making and formal public notification, to allow as much time as possible for any potential difficulties to be resolved.

NORTHERN IRELAND

RUC

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many RUC *(a)* assistant chief constables, *(b)* chief superintendents and *(c)* superintendents left the force in (i) 1999 and (ii) 2000; how many are scheduled to leave in years (x) 2001 and (y) 2002; and what percentage of the establishment for those ranks during the relevant years this represents. [144691]

Mr. Ingram: The information requested is as follows:

(a) Number of officers who left the RUC in years 1999 and 2000

	Assistant chief constable	*Chief superintendent*	*Superintendent*
Establishment	9		161
Leavers in 1999	0	2	5
Leavers in 2000	1	2	2
Leavers as percentage of establishment in 1999	0.0		4.3
Leavers as percentage of establishment in 2000	11.1		2.5

(b) Number of officers who will leave under the voluntary severance arrangements up to 31 March 2001, with appropriate percentages

	Assistant chief constable	*Chief superintendent*	*Superintendent*
Establishment as at 15 January 2001	9		161
Police scheduled to leave January to March 2001	3	21	30
Police eligible to leave from April to December 2001	1	17	51
(a) As percentage of establishment	33.3		31.7
(b) As percentage of establishment	11.1		42.2

It should be noted that a further 69 officers will satisfy the necessary criteria for the severance arrangements to leave up to 31 March 2002 but nominations have not yet been sought. In addition it is not possible to determine the number of officers who may apply to leave under natural wastage, for example, resignation, health grounds, termination.

Robberies

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many robberies of *(a)* post offices and *(b)* Royal Mail vehicles there were in each RUC division in each of the last 12 months for which figures are available; and if he will estimate the total sum so stolen in each RUC division in this period. [147044]

Mr. Ingram: The table provides details of armed robberies of post offices and postal vehicles recorded by the Royal Ulster Constabulary for the period 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2000:

(a) Armed robberies on post offices/postal vehicles: 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2000

Date	*Sub-division*	*Target*
4 January 2000	Woodbourne	Post Office, Andersonstown Road, Belfast
5 January 2000	Newtownabbey	Post Office, Glengormley Park, Belfast
14 January 2000	Lisburn	Post Office, Moss Road, Lisburn
16 January 2000	Enniskillen	Post Office, East Bridge Street, Enniskillen
19 January 2000	Downpatrick	Post Office, Derryboye, Crossgar
20 January 2000	Cookstown	Post Office, Coagh
22 January 2000	Castlereagh	Post Office, Hillmount Drive, Moneyreagh
31 January 2000	Lurgan	Post Office, Derryola Road, Ahgalee
24 February 2000	Newcastle	Post Office, Letrim, Castlewellan
28 February 2000	Musgrave Street	Parcel Force Van, Castle Junction, Belfast
2 March 2000	Strabane	Post Office, Umey Road, Claudy
30 March 2000	Bangor	Post Office, Bridge Road, Helen's Bay
5 April 2000	Woodbourne	Post Office, Dairy Farm Shopping Centre, Belfast
21 April 2000	Banbridge	Lenaderg Post Office, Huntley Road, Banbridge
29 April 2000	Dungannon	Post Office, Dungannon Road, Coalisland
6 May 2000	Waterside	Post Office, Ardmore Road, Londonderry
31 May 2000	Grosvenor Road	Post Office, Falls Road, Belfast
6 July 2000	Waterside	Post Office, Ardmore, Londonderry

(a) Armed robberies on post offices/postal vehicles: 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2000

Date	*Sub-division*	*Target*
20 July 2000	Waterside	Post Office, Lettershandoney, Londonderry
27 July 2000	Ballymoney	Post Office, Straid Road, Bushmills
28 July 2000	Woodbourne	Post Office, Glen Road, Belfast
10 August 2000	Ballymoney	Post Office, Glenshesk Road, Amoy
12 August 2000	Strabane	Post Office, Longland Road, Donemana
17 August 2000	Downpatrick	Post Office, Cloughy
25 September 2000	Enniskillen	Comagrade Post Office, Comagrade Road, Enniskillen
10 October 2000	Lurgan	Post Office, Gawleys Gate, Lurgan
21 November 2000	Woodbourne	Post Office, Monagh Road, Belfast
9 December 2000	Carrickfergus	Sunnylands Post Office, Bridewell Drive, Carrickfergus

Notes:
1. Robberies where a firearm or the impression of a firearm is used.
2. Does not include attempted robberies.

(b) The total recorded cash sum taken during the listed robberies amounted to around £270,000 (this figure excludes the undisclosed value of postal orders, cheques, etc., also taken during some robberies).

Saville Inquiry

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much the Saville inquiry has cost to date. [145478]

Mr. George Howarth: *[pursuant to his reply, 24 January 2001, c. 637W]:* The text of my answer relating to the Bloody Sunday inquiry should have read:

"As of 31 December 2000, the cost of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry to this Department amounted to £33,834,904."

TREASURY

Minimum Wage (Morecambe and Lunesdale)

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many workers are estimated to benefit from the minimum wage in *(a)* Morecambe and Lunesdale and *(b)* the United Kingdom. [148962]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Miss Geraldine Smith, dated 6 February 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question about the number of workers in Morecambe and Lunesdale and the United Kingdom who have benefited from the national minimum wage (NMW) (148962).

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has published estimates of the number of jobs paid at less than NMW rates for 1998, 1999 and 2000. These are based on an improved methodology using data from both the New Earnings Survey and Labour Force Survey. Estimates for the United Kingdom and Government Office Regions are available on the National Statistics website at: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/nsbase/themes/labour—market/nmw—lowpay—tables.asp

No estimates are available for Parliamentary Constituencies.

Departmental Duties

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the titles, duties and functions of Mr. Martin Roberts and Mr. Robert Allan in his Department were prior to their transfer to the Financial Services Authority. [149200]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Mr. Roberts and Mr. Allen worked in the Insurance Team of the Department during 1998 prior to their transfer to the Financial Services Authority in January 1999.

Earnings Patterns

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the impact on *(a)* GDP, *(b)* tax revenue and *(c)* savings in benefits if persons (i) over 50 and (ii) between the ages of 50 and 65 had the same patterns of employment and earnings as the average of the rest of the UK labour force. [147607]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

ECOFIN

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish the EMU statistics which were the subject of a progress report at the ECOFIN of 19 January. [148540]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have deposited a copy of "Information requirements in EMU: Third progress report on the implementation of the Monetary Committee's report" in the Library of the House.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what conclusions were arrived at during the ECOFIN of 19 January 2001 regarding the implementation of the Stability and Growth Pact. [148541]

Miss Melanie Johnson: ECOFIN examined and agreed an Opinion on the Swedish Convergence Programme, in line with the Stability and Growth Pact. A copy of the Opinion has been deposited in the Library of the House.

Death Certificates

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what his estimate is of the net yield per annum from the issuing of death certificates *(a)* before and *(b)* after the decision not to authorise the photocopying of death certificates; [148546]

(2) what factors underlay the decision of the Economic Secretary not to authorise the photocopying of death certificates; and if he will make a statement; [148543]

(3) how many offences involving *(a)* the fraudulent use of photocopies of death certificates and *(b)* the fraudulent use of photocopies of death certificates endorsed by solicitors have been committed in each of the last 10 years; [148545]

(4) how many representations he has received *(a)* in favour of and *(b)* against the decision of the Economic Secretary not to authorise the photocopying of death certificates. [148544]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO) Guidance on the Copying of Birth, Death and Marriage Certificates (October 1999) stated that it was Government policy not to authorise the copying of certificates. I received one representation against that policy. After considering this representation, I concluded that it would be inappropriate to allow solicitors to photocopy death certificates issued in England and Wales for endorsement and use as evidence of death. One representation against this decision has been received.

No estimate of the yield per annum from the issuing of death certificates has been made and information about the fraudulent use of photocopied certificates is not held centrally. The policy is based on the potential use of photocopied certificates for fraud and not on commercial considerations.

The Government have a responsibility to reduce the potential for fraud. A death certificate is a certified copy of an entry in a death register. Under statute it may only be certified by the registrar who holds the register and the Registrar General who holds a certified copy of the register. Similar provisions apply to birth and marriage certificates. Photocopies can conceal alterations to original certificates and will by-pass the security features—watermarks, fugitive inks—so that fraudulent use is unlikely to be detected. Misrepresentation of documents is an important element in fraud relating to identity and status. Authorising any use of photocopied certificates for evidential purposes will signify Government approval of the practice and increase their potential use for fraud. For this reason, it has been decided that the photocopying of documents for evidential purposes should not be authorised. Representations by solicitors about the cost and inconvenience when administering an estate were considered. Any inconvenience is regretted but is outweighed by the public interest in limiting the opportunities for fraud.

Certificates of recent events are readily available from a registrar in England and Wales at a cost of £3.50. All income from registration fees, including certificates issued at Register Offices, is paid to local authorities. The fee levels are reviewed every year and adjusted to ensure that the income continues to recover half the costs incurred by local authorities in providing the service.

Paris Club

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy towards Russian debt to the Paris Club is; and if he will make a statement. [149041]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Russia has promised to make debt service payments to Paris Club creditors under successive rescheduling agreements. In its current economic situation, all Russia's Paris Club creditors hold that Russia should not run into arrears on payment obligations.

Barnett Formula

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will bring forward proposals to revise the Barnett formula. [148946]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Government have no current plans to revise the Barnett formula.

Aggregates Tax

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received about the effect of aggregate tax on the quarry industry; what changes he plans to make in respect thereof; and if he will make a statement. [148649]

Mr. Timms: The Government have received a number of representations regarding the aggregates levy from a range of organisations, including the aggregates industry, local authorities and environmental groups. Most of these were in response to HM Customs and Excise's consultation on the administration of the levy in 1998 and the subsequent publications of the draft clauses. These representations will be taken into account as the legislation is finalised.

Petrol Vapour

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the environmental impact of the recovery of petrol vapour for *(a)* use as furnace fuel and *(b)* use in the production of electricity. [148606]

Mr. Timms: No such assessment has been made.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what factors underlay the decision of the Financial Secretary not to allow a rebate on petrol vapour recovered by vapour recovery systems and used to produce electricity. [148607]

Mr. Timms: There is no scope within the provision of the Hydrocarbon Oil Duties Act 1979 to allow such a rebate, and I am not persuaded that such a change is necessary or desirable given that recovery of vapour is required by environmental regulation.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the yield is of customs duty on petrol vapour recovered by vapour recovery systems and used in the production of electricity. [148605]

Mr. Timms: No such figure is available.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the incidence of double taxation in the imposition of duty on petrol vapour recovered by vapour recovery systems and used to produce electricity. [148604]

Mr. Timms: There is no double taxation. Duty is charged only once, when the petrol leaves the refinery. There is no relief from duty on petrol used to power engines or turbines.

Petrol vapour recovered and returned to duty-suspended stocks at the refinery is, by concession, eligible for duty refund to prevent subsequent double taxation when redelivered as liquid fuel.

Children's Tax Credit

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families in Wales have applied for the Children's Tax Credit. [148317]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families in Wales are eligible for the Children's Tax Credit. [148319]

Mr. Timms: It is estimated that 250,000 families in Wales will benefit from the Children's Tax Credit.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made on the introduction of the casework programme of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. [149424]

Mr. Straw: In 1996 Siemens Business Services Ltd. and the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) of the Home Office agreed a specification and contract for the development and operation of an integrated casework system. For a number of reasons delivery in the time scale originally anticipated did not occur.

Officials have however worked closely with Siemens to ensure that the Information Technology (IT) provided by them supports the expansion of immigration casework and current priorities. The systems already operating as an interim solution, with which the Directorate has achieved 110,000 asylum decisions this year, provide the practical support needed. The original full casework application now seems over-complex and out of touch with current working practices. IND has accordingly agreed with Siemens that they should stand down the resources they are using to develop the full casework application.

Siemens continue to work actively in partnership with IND on a programme of further improvements to IND's current IT, to be completed over the next year. IND and Siemens will together work through the consequent changes to the contract and payment schedule. At present, there is no change to the current contract, which runs to October 2003.

Clandestine Entrants

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will extend the application of the civil penalty for carrying clandestine entrants to rail freight trains; when he will set the amount of such a penalty and bring into operation a code of practice for rail freight; and if he will publish a report on the consultation process. [149509]

Mrs. Roche: Following a formal consultation period, which ran from 13 November to 25 December 2000, the main set of Regulations extending the civil penalty to rail freight, the Carriers' Liability (Clandestine Entrants) (Application to Rail Freight) Regulations 2001, were laid before Parliament today along with a draft Code of Practice. The main Regulations come into force, for the purposes of making and laying two related instruments, namely, the Carriers' Liability (Clandestine Entrants and Sale of Transporters) (Amendment) Regulations 2001 and the Carriers' Liability (Clandestine Entrants) (Code of Practice for Rail Freight) Order 2001 on 7 February 2001. The remaining provisions of the main Regulations, and the two related instruments will come into force on 1 March 2001.

The purpose of the main Regulations is to enable penalties to be imposed in respect of clandestine entrants who arrive in the United Kingdom concealed in a rail freight wagon. The other two instruments provide respectively for the amount of the penalty (and certain procedural matters), and for the coming into operation of the Code of Practice.

I am placing a copy of the report, summarising the main responses to the consultation process, in the Library. Copies will also be available on the Immigration and Nationality Directorate website at www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Police Productivity

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of productivity gains for police inspecting ranks in each of the last five years. [149216]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on police performance related to particular police ranks is not collected centrally.

Essex Constabulary

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the total number of police officers who have joined the Essex constabulary as a result of the recent recruitment campaign initiated by his Department. [148697]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The National Recruitment Campaign was launched on 30 August 2000. By 31 January 2001, 22,209 Expressions of Interest had been forwarded to forces from the National Recruitment Campaign call centre, including 370 to Essex police.

In addition to Expressions of Interest forwarded from the national call centre, I have been informed by Essex police that the force has received a further 220 requests for application forms directly from individuals as a result of the national campaign.

Essex police have advised that it is too soon for any of the applications generated as a result of the National Campaign to have progressed to the point of recruitment, but that all the applications received are being progressed by the force in the usual way.

Jury Trial

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his plans to restrict the right to choose jury trial for middle-ranking offences. [148568]

Mr. Charles Clarke: As was affirmed in the Speech from the Throne, the Government propose to give the courts, rather than the defendant, the power to decide where an either-way case should be tried.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire of 5 September 2000 on behalf of his constituent Mr. Smith. [149205]

Mr. Straw: The Home Office has no record of receiving this particular letter in its correspondence database. As I now have a copy of the letter, I will respond to the issues raised very shortly.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letters of 12 December and 15 January from the hon. Member for Northavon regarding Cameron McArthur. [149207]

Mr. Straw: My right hon. Friend the Minister of State replied to the letter of 12 December 2000 on 5 February.

The letter dated 15 January was transferred on 26 January to the Minister responsible for the issue of travellers in the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, North-East (Mr. Ainsworth) I understand that my hon. Friend will reply as soon as possible.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Richmond Park dated 25 October 2000, regarding Miss Rosebell Kirungi (ref. K10003442). [148619]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* I wrote to the hon. Member on 5 February 2001. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

Animals (Scientific Procedures)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce legislation to repeal section 64 of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986; and if he will make a statement. [149111]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There is no section 64 in this Act but the hon. Member may be referring to section 24 of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 which prevents the disclosure of information about the use of animals in scientific procedures that has been provided in confidence. Following the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, all statutory bars are being reviewed, including section 24.

I held a seminar with representatives of animal protection groups and the scientific community in September 2000 to discuss the review of section 24 and officials have subsequently held a series of separate meetings with some of the organisations that participated in the seminar. I have also received views from the Animal Procedures Committee on this subject.

The Government have a clear commitment to Freedom of Information and are equally committed to the maintenance of the necessary protection for individual scientists and their research institutions from the actions of animal rights extremists. I am considering very carefully how these commitments can best be met. A decision on whether to repeal or amend section 24 will not be made until later this year.

Youth Justice Board

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place the Youth Justice Board report, "Delivering the Pledge on Persistent Young Offenders", in the Library. [148979]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This document offered advice to Ministers on the management of the work to deliver the Youth Justice Pledge. We do not propose to issue it. We publish performance figures every month.

Police (Cumbria)

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will list, for each year since 1979, the total number of civilian staff employed by the police force in Cumbria; [147546]

(2) if he will list, for each year since 1979, the total number of *(a)* constables and *(b)* police officers in Cumbria. [147547]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* The information is set out in the tables.

Table A: Police and constable numbers for each year since 1979

Year[1]	Number of police officers	Number of constables
1979	1,056	766
1980	1,093	806
1981	1,108	813
1982	1,121	824
1983	1,107	808
1984	1,114	817
1985	1,092	794
1986	1,127	829
1987	1,118	810
1988	1,141	829
1989	1,135	820
1990	1,166	852
1991	1,184	872
1992	1,179	869
1993	1,196	889
1994	1,174	876
1995	1,167	877
1996[2]	1,115	846
1997	1,144	882
1998	1,164	911
1999	1,126	873
2000	1,084	838
2000[3]	1,048	817

[1] As at 31 March.

[2] From the financial year 1995–96 police numbers were collected on a full-time equivalent basis. In prior years police regulations did not permit the employment of part-time officers.

[3] 30 September.

Table B: Civilian support staff numbers since 1979

Year[1]	*[2]Number*
1979	250
1980	254
1981	257
1982	258
1983	274
1984	280
1985	295
1986	314
1987	310
1988	340
1989	351
1990	380
1991	396
1992	409
1993	414
1994	436
1995	443
1996	408
1997	451
1998	452
1999	442
2000	469
2000[3]	505

[1] As at 31 March
[2] Civilian staff numbers are full-time equivalent.
[3] 30 September.

Football Disorder Act

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* arrests have been made and *(b)* convictions secured under the provisions of the Football Disorder Act 2000. [148407]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Since the Act came into force on 28 July, there have been 1,534 arrests for football-related offences as defined in Schedule 1 of the Football Spectators Act 1989 (as amended by the Football (Disorder) Act 2000). No information is available on the number of convictions. Most types of offences committed in connection with football are not specific to football and convictions are recorded by category of offence rather than by the location or circumstances of the offence. However, during this period, the courts have imposed 191 of the new football banning orders introduced by the 2000 Act.

Vehicle Crime

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will ensure that road safety and the reduction of vehicle crime are included in crime and disorder audits. [148421]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 does not specify what categories of crime and disorder must be included in the audit local partnerships must produce. However, it does require that the partnership conduct a thorough review of the levels and patterns of crime, consulting widely in the local community. It is through this process that partnerships will identify the nature and extent of road safety and vehicle crime problems in their area, as well as other crime and disorder issues .

Crime and Disorder Audits

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the next round of crime and disorder audits will be undertaken. [148420]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 requires that crime and disorder strategies are formulated and implemented for a period of three years and each subsequent period of three years. The implementation date for the next set of strategies is March 2002 and crime and disorder partnerships are beginning to undertake audits in order to formulate their strategies by that date.

Road Safety

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the incidence of the inclusion of road safety in local crime and disorder strategies. [148419]

Mr. Charles Clarke: A Review of Audits and Strategies produced by Crime and Disorder Partnerships in 1999 was published by Home Office, Research, Development and Statistics in November 2000 under reference Police Research Briefing Note 8/00. The review found that of the 363 strategies examined, 37 per cent. (134) of partnerships had specified road safety/dangerous driving as a priority for action. Of those 134 strategies, 37 per cent. (50) contained a specific target.

Soft-tipped Bullets

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which police forces use soft-tipped bullets. [148858]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not available centrally. All ammunition used by the police service is approved by the Police Scientific Development Branch at the Home Office, but it is an operational decision for chief officers of police to decide which ammunition is used by officers in their force.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received from hon. Members and others on the use of soft-tipped bullets by the police; and if he will make a statement. [148857]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In addition to the hon. Member himself, we have received representations recently from four other hon. Members and occasional letters from members of the public on the use of soft-point ammunition by the police.

Hunting Bill

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he has taken to consult the Association of Chief Police Officers on the enforcement of each of the alternatives set out in the Hunting Bill; and if he will place their responses in the Library. [148305]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Association of Chief Police Officers were shown an early draft of the Bill and consulted about the options. The Association made a number of detailed comments on the proposals contained in the three options, set out in a letter of 4 December. They also issued a Press Release, dated 24 January, saying that while it is too early to reach a final view on the resource implications of any of the options, if hunting is banned, they do not anticipate a significant additional burden on the service, over and above its current commitment. Copies of both documents will be placed in the Library.

Proof of Age Scheme

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received on the introduction of a national proof of age scheme. [148866]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have received some correspondence supporting the introduction of a national proof of age card. There are a number of cards, some produced under industry-led schemes and others issued by public authorities, which provide evidence of age; and we are proposing, through the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, to strengthen the duty on licensees to satisfy themselves about customers' ages before selling alcohol to them.

Colin Griffiths

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will call for a report from the Chief Constable of Staffordshire police concerning the death of Colin Griffiths of Stafford on 26 December 1994. [148662]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand that a report from the Staffordshire police on the circumstances of Mr. Griffiths' death is currently under consideration by the Crown Prosecution Service.

Victim Support

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much has been provided for victim support since May 1997. [148893]

Mr. Charles Clarke: When we assumed office in May 1997, Victim Support's annual grant was £11.7 million. It has since been increased as shown:

	£ million
1997–98	12.7
1998–99	12.7
1999–2000	17.5
2000–01	18.4

Special Constables

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 491W, on special constables, what the *(a)* expenditure was on special constable recruitment advertising and *(b)* number of special constables recruited was in each of the last five years. [148582]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* The total expenditure on special constable recruitment advertising is assessed at the end of each financial year in March. The figures for the five years 1995–96 to 1999–2000 are set out in the table:

Year	*£*
1995–96	1,960,000
1996–97	1,950,000
1997–98	420,000
1998–99	355,000
1999–2000	910,000
Five year total	5,595,000

The figures for the number of special constables recruited during the same period are:

Recruited	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
April 1995-March 1996	2,565	1,868	4,433
April 1996-March 1997	2,959	1,949	4,908
April 1997-March 1998	2,255	1,550	3,805
April 1998-March 1999	1,668	1,155	2,823
April 1999-March 2000	1,123	744	1,867
Five year total	10,570	7,266	17,836

Asylum Support

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many units of accommodation the National Asylum Support Service estimates it will provide in total in *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* each of the next three years; how many units have been provided to date in 2000–01; and if he will make a statement; [148824]

(2) how many units of accommodation are provided in property under contract to the National Asylum Support Service; and what proportion of such accommodation was *(a)* occupied and *(b)* unoccupied on the first day of each month in 2000–01 to date. [148825]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* The information is not available in the precise form requested. As at the end of December 2000, 26,700[1] units of accommodation were contracted by National Asylum Support Service (NASS), of which 16,600 units were allocated to asylum seekers and their dependants.

NASS estimates that it will require 44,000 bedspaces in this financial year 2000–01. For 2001–02 NASS estimates that it will require somewhere in the region of 16,000 additional bedspaces. Estimates for future financial years are not available.

[1]Figures rounded to nearest 100

Criminal Records Bureau

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance he gives to voluntary associations which operate in England and Scotland on paying a contribution to the Criminal Records Bureau. [148694]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[pursuant to his reply, 5 February 2001, c. 433W]:* This is to provide additional information to that which I was able to give in my previous reply, in relation to the issue of charges for the voluntary sector. We have listened very carefully to concerns expressed within the voluntary sector, and by others, including right hon. and hon. Members, on behalf of the voluntary sector, about the potential implications of charges to be made by the Criminal Records Bureau. We have made clear our commitment to and support for the voluntary sector and recently announced a major package to promote voluntary and community involvement. It remains our intention that the Bureau should be financed by means of the charges that it makes. But we have concluded that standard and enhanced disclosures, which include those working in sensitive positions with the vulnerable, should be issued free of charge to volunteers. We are continuing our

consideration of the appropriate fees regime and structure for other users of the Bureau's services and we shall make a further announcement shortly.

HEALTH

NHS Plan

11. **Dr. George Turner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on progress in the implementation of the national health service plan. [147339]

Mr. Milburn: Progress on implementing the NHS Plan is well under way. Among other initiatives we have given local health services funding for three years for the first time. Investment and reform are taking hold in cancer and cardiac services, and we have provided earmarked funding for hospital cleaning.

Patient's Charter

14. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress he has made in implementing the Patient's Charter. [147342]

Ms Stuart: On Friday 26 January, we launched "Your Guide to the NHS" a replacement for the old style Patient's Charter.

The "Guide" fulfils the Government's Manifesto commitment of replacing the Patient's Charter with a clearer guide to patients rights, responsibilities and the national standards and services people can expect from the NHS now and in the future.

Health Care (Cumbria)

15. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he next intends to meet representatives of the NHS in Cumbria to discuss matters relating to health care. [147343]

Mr. Hutton: I have no current plans to meet representatives of the National Health Service in Cumbria to discuss matters relating to health care; however, I have regular meetings with NHS representatives in Cumbria.

Transplant Services (Sheffield)

16. **Mr. Allan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent discussions he has had concerning the future of transplant services at Northern General Hospital, Sheffield. [147344]

Yvette Cooper: The Government announced the modernisation and reorganisation of organ transplant services last February. We are currently considering proposals for the future of the national cardiothoracic transplant service submitted by the National Specialist Commissioning Advisory Group which may have implications for services at the Northern General Hospital in Sheffield.

Community Hospital, Gravesend

17. **Mr. Pond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on progress towards the development of the new community hospital in Gravesend. [147345]

Ms Stuart: Public consultation on the proposal to develop integrated health and social care facilities on the Gravesend and North Kent Hospital site is expected to start shortly.

NHS Employees (Cost of Living Allowance)

18. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the distribution of the cost of living allowance to NHS employees. [147346]

Mr. Denham: Cost of Living Supplements are being introduced from 1 April for qualified staff within the remit of the Nurses Pay Review Body, working in high cost parts of England.

The supplements will be payable to staff in designated health authority areas in London and the south of England determined by their staff Market Forces Factor. This is a measure of external labour market pressures on NHS employers.

Renal Services

19. **Tony Wright:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to improve renal services. [147347]

Mr. Denham: The NHS Plan will deliver 450 new and replacement haemodialysis stations over the next three years, providing treatments for another 1,850 patients and better treatment for 1,200 existing patients.

GP Waiting Times

20. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to reduce waiting times for patients to see their GP; and if he will make a statement. [147348]

Mr. Denham: In a modernised National Health Service all patients should be able consistently to secure fast and convenient access to a general practitioner. The NHS Plan sets targets to achieve this by 2004. We are backing this commitment with the Access Fund which exists to help primary care trusts and primary care groups to deliver the access targets.

Hospital Hygiene

21. **Mr. Goggins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what targets he has set for improving the cleanliness of hospital wards. [147349]

Mr. Denham: Our clean hospitals programme means every hospital is making improvements to the patient environment. Unannounced hospital cleanliness inspections are under way.

£31.9 million was allocated this year and a further £30 million will be allocated from 1 April to assist the programme. The first ever clean hospitals standards come into effect from this April.

NHS Manpower

22. **Mr. Casale:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on staff levels in the NHS. [147351]

Mr. Denham: The most recent staff survey (Medical and Dental Workforce Census 30 September 1999 England) for which results are available showed 1,097,350 staff working in the NHS (873,220 whole time equivalent).

This represents a percentage increase in headcount over 1997 figures of 3.66 per cent. (3.18 per cent. whole time equivalent).

Notes:

1. All NHS doctors includes general medical practitioners, hospital medical and dental staff (excluding hospital practitioners and clinical assistants most of whom are Gps and will already have been counted), and medical and dental staff working in Public Health Medicine and Community Health Services.

2. GP retainers were collected for the first time in October 1999. As at 1 October 1999 there were 972 GP retainers (headcount).

3. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.

4. Figures may not equal the sum of component parts due to rounding.

5. Figures exclude agency staff.

Sources:

1. Department of Health Medical and Dental Workforce Census as at 30 September for each year.

2. Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census as at 30 September for each year.

3. Department of Health General and Personal Medical Services Statistics as at 1 October for each year.

Modernisation Fund

23. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the cost of administering the Modernisation Fund. [147352]

Mr. Denham: The NHS Modernisation Fund has been earmarked for modernisation and developing the NHS. The purpose of the Fund is to ensure that additional resources are properly targeted to the places that need it most and can use it most effectively.

The Government have promised, in the NHS Plan, that by 2004 the proportion the NHS spends on management costs will be reduced and a higher share of every pound will go into front line patient care.

Nurse Recruitment (London)

24. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to increase nurse recruitment in London. [147353]

Mr. Denham: The NHS Executive in London, in collaboration with NHS trusts, are implementing a plan to expand the nursing work force in London. Priority areas are:

returning nurses to practice

international recruitment

recruiting from black and ethnic minority communities

improving working lives through improved flexible working arrangements and child care provision

market supplements effective from April 2001

affordable housing.

National Cancer Research Institute

25. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will set up the National Cancer Research Institute. [147354]

Yvette Cooper: An announcement will be made shortly.

Dental Services (Corby)

26. **Mr. Hope:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the provision of dental services in Corby. [147355]

Ms Stuart: We are committed to making NHS dentistry available to everyone who needs it, by September this year. Last year's dental strategy showed how that could be achieved, with up to £100 million of new resources across this financial year and the next. Residents of Corby have benefited from this funding.

Hospital Waiting Lists

27. **Mr. Forth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the procedure for the compilation of waiting lists for *(a)* referral to a consultant and *(b)* admission to a hospital. [147356]

Mr. Denham: Information on numbers of patients waiting for admission to hospital and on numbers of patients waiting more than 13 weeks for an outpatient appointment is collected from NHS Trusts and health authorities by the Department of Health and is published by the Government Statistical Office. The methodology has remained unchanged since we took office.

Cancer Services

28. **Ms Dari Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the development of cancer services in the NHS. [147357]

Yvette Cooper: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given today, *Official Report*, column 180, by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to my hon. Friends the Members for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) and for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson).

Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Strategy

29. **Laura Moffatt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on progress with his sexual health and HIV/AIDS strategy. [147358]

Yvette Cooper: The merger of the sexual health and HIV strategies inevitably led to slippage in the timetable. However, considerable progress has been made with producing an integrated strategy that will set a programme of action on sexual health and HIV for England. We plan to issue the strategy for consultation shortly.

Social Services Funding

30. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the growth of social services funding for community care. [147359]

34. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the recent trend in the level of funding for personal social services. [147363]

Mr. Hutton: The resources provided for personal social services, including those provided for community care, have increased substantially in recent years and will

continue to grow in real terms over the next three years. Last year (1999–2000) the level of resources provided for social services increased in real terms by 3.8 per cent., they increased by a further 3.5 per cent. this year (2000–01), and will continue to rise by, on average, a further 3.4 per cent. per annum over the next three years (2001–02 to 2003–04). It is for councils to decide how much of these additional resources should be used for community care taking account of local circumstances and priorities.

Community Health Councils

31. **Mr. Clappison:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received about community health councils. [147360]

Ms Stuart: A number of representations have been received about community health councils and the new structures.

Debate on the Health and Social Care Bill currently in Committee will provide an opportunity to discuss these issues in detail.

Hospital Beds

32. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many additional high dependency and intensive care beds the NHS has acquired since 1 December 2000. [147361]

Mr. Denham: Bed figures for additional high dependency and intensive care beds the national health service has acquired since 1 December 2000 are not available. The nearest available comparison is between 15 January 2000 and 1 December 2000.

This shows an increase in the total number of available fully staffed critical care beds (which includes both intensive care and high dependency beds) of 451 adult critical care beds over and above capacity for last winter.

The results are given in the table.

Critical care beds—1 December 2000

	Number
Eastern total	211
London total	647
North West total	411
Northern and Yorkshire total	443
South East total	341
South West total	227
Trent total	253
West Midlands total	280
England total	2,813
Beds above 15 January 2000	+451

Source:
1 December Bed Census

CJD

33. **Mr. Jim Murphy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with his European Union counterparts on the incidence of new variant CJD; and if he will make a statement. [147362]

Yvette Cooper: The Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) attended the Health Council in December 2000 and stressed the importance of continued collaboration across Europe to improve our knowledge about variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD). The National CJD Surveillance Unit in Edinburgh maintains close links with its counterparts in the European Union through a Commission-funded surveillance project. We are aware of three cases of vCJD in France, and one in the Republic of Ireland.

Coronary Heart Disease

35. **Mr. David Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress is being made in improving services which will cut the incidence of coronary heart disease. [147364]

Yvette Cooper: The National Service Framework (NSF) for Coronary Heart Disease, published in March 2000, is a radical and far reaching programme which covers the whole spectrum of care from prevention of heart disease, through emergency care, primary and specialist care including heart surgery, and rehabilitation.

The national health service and partner agencies are asked to identify areas of inequality, undertake health impact assessments, and to agree and be contributing to the delivery of the local programme of effective policies on reducing smoking, promoting healthy eating, increasing physical activity and reducing overweight and obesity by April 2001.

Much progress has already been made in improving and expanding services which will cut the incidence of coronary heart disease. By 31 March 2001 a smoking cessation service will be in place across the NHS. Bupropion, a smoking cessation aid, has been made available on prescription since June 2000. By 1 April 2001, subject to consultation, nicotine replacement therapy will be available on prescription from general practitioners. In the future we will expect cessation services to focus on manual socio-economic groups and pregnant women and have set health authorities targets.

As part of the strategy to promote healthy eating and reduce overweight and obesity the Department has started to pilot the National School Fruit Scheme. Currently 32 schools in three areas provide a free piece of fruit every school day to every child in nursery and aged four to six in infant schools. Hundreds more schools are soon to run the programme as part of the next phase. The Department is also funding local five-a-day pilot schemes to develop a local co-ordinated approach to increase the availability and awareness of fruit and vegetables across whole communities. The Department will publish a National Quality Assurance Framework on GP exercise referrals in February 2001.

But the root causes of coronary heart disease are wider than health. Broader Government policies on poverty, employment and education all play a significant role in tackling coronary heart disease. There will be new national health inequalities targets to narrow the health gap in childhood and throughout life between socio-economic groups and between the most deprived areas and the rest of the country.

Folic Acid

36. **Barbara Follett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department is taking to ensure that women are aware of the importance of taking folic acid during pregnancy. [147365]

Yvette Cooper: We encourage all women of child bearing age to increase the amount of folic acid they consume, and they are advised to increase their daily intake of folic acid by eating more folate-rich foods or foods fortified with folic acid. Women who are trying to conceive are advised to take a daily supplement of 400 micrograms until the twelfth week of pregnancy.

We disseminate this important health information which is available with advice through local services and on request.

NHS Operation Statistics

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* hip replacement operations, *(b)* heart operations and *(c)* cataract operations were completed in the NHS in (i) 1979, (ii) 1997 and (iii) 2000. [146988]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 23 January 2001]:* The numbers of operations in the given time periods are shown in the table.

Operation	*1979 (discharges) (HIPE data)*	*1996–97 FCEs[1] (HES data)*	*1999–2000 FCEs[1] (HES data)*
Heart	22,920	162,186	184,671
Hip replacement[2]	20,280	37,697	41,883
Cataract	41,430	159,958	212,398

[1] An FCE (Finished Consultant Episode) is defined as a period of patient care under one consultant in one health care provider. The figures do not represent the number of patients, as one person may have several episodes within the year.
[2] Figures for hip replacement operations exclude emergency admissions and those with primary diagnosis of fractured neck of femur; i.e. the data are for elective hip replacements.

Care should be taken when comparing Hospital Episode Statistics with Hospital In-Patient Inquiry data for time series, as the differences in the data collection and recording means that they are not directly comparable.

Over the last three years, for which comparable data are available, there has been a 14 per cent., 11 per cent. and 33 per cent. increase in the numbers of heart, elective hip and cataract operations, respectively.

The large increase in heart operations between 1979 and 1996–97 reflects in part the growth of revascularisation procedures, including bypass grafting.

Acquired Brain Injury

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have been diagnosed with acquired brain injury in each of the last 20 years. [147964]

Mr. Denham: Information is available, on hospital admissions only, from 1989 onwards. There was a change in the way information was collected in 1995 so the data for the period 1989–90 to 1994–95 are not directly comparable with data for the subsequent period.

Admissions by main diagnosis in NHS hospitals in England

ICD-9 code and diagnosis	*1989–90*	*1990–91*	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*
800.1 and 800.3 fracture of vault of skull with intracranial injury	665	721	760	737	694	651
801.1 and 801.3 fracture of base of skull with intracranial injury	644	688	686	846	899	785
803.1 and 803.3 other and unqualified skull fractures with intracranial injury	412	426	397	376	416	432
804.1 and 804.3 multiple fractures involving skull or face with other bones with intracranial injury	53	40	36	30	23	36
850 concussion	11,113	10,207	8,130	7,118	7,941	7,751
851.0 cerebral laceration and contusion without mention of intracranial wound	522	535	566	623	556	671
851.1 cerebral laceration and contusion with open intracranial wound	15	35	28	33	26	27
852.0 subarachnoid, subdural and extradural haemorrhage, following injury without mention of intracranial wound	1,620	1,616	1,736	1,839	2,050	2,249
852.1 subarachnoid, subdural and extradural haemorrhage following injury with open intracranial wound	41	61	43	51	45	61
853.0 other and unspecified intracranial haemorrhage following injury without mention of intracranial wound	414	422	351	419	513	455
853.1 other and unspecified intracranial haemorrhage following injury with open intracranial wound	13	21	15	19	14	18
854.0 intracranial injury of other and unspecified nature without mention of intracranial wound	77,009	67,547	59,290	60,556	56,423	53,198
854.1 intracranial injury of other and unspecified nature with open intracranial wound	907	737	722	733	772	735
Total	93,428	83,056	72,760	73,380	62,455	61,373

ICD-10 code and diagnosis	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Intracranial injury					
S060 concussion	6,158	5,109	4,221	3,566	2,781
S061 traumatic cerebral oedema	187	157	151	135	182

ICD-10 code and diagnosis	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
S062 diffuse brain injury	928	843	937	831	988
S063 focal brain injury	378	378	420	484	404
S064 epidural haemorrhage	480	530	583	485	558
S065 traumatic subdural haemorrhage	1,741	1,853	1,995	2,032	2,139
S066 traumatic subarachnoid haemorrhage	327	308	380	351	366
S067 intracranial injury with prolonged coma	28	15	18	13	21
S068 other intracranial injuries	544	601	727	591	635
S069 intracranial injury, unspecified	12,456	10,242	7,098	3,454	2,787
Total	23,226	20,036	16,529	11,942	10,860

Note:
The main diagnosis is the first of seven diagnosis fields in the HES data set, and provides the main reason why the patient was in hospital. These data are adjusted for both coverage and unknown/invalid clinical data.

St. George's Hospital, Tooting

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many outpatients who are waiting for treatment at St. George's Hospital, Tooting, live in the London Borough of Wandsworth. [148310]

Mr. Denham: The Department does not collect data on where patients waiting for treatment reside.

Children's Body Parts

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of children's body parts that have been taken without the consent of their parents at *(a)* Norfolk and Norwich Hospital, Norfolk, *(b)* James Royal Hospital, St. Edmunds and *(c)* Queen Elizabeth II Hospital, Kings Lynn. [148398]

Mr. Denham: Information is not available in the form requested. Reliable data at hospital level about the amount of organs and tissue retained following post mortem will not become available until all National Health Service trusts and medical schools have completed the cataloguing exercise to be supervised by the new Retained Organs Commission.

Stem Cell Research

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will ensure that he receives a copy of the report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on stem cell research as soon as it is published. [147608]

Yvette Cooper: Yes. We will work with the House of Lords Select Committee and will consider carefully its conclusions and any recommendations it may make.

Multiple Sclerosis Nurses

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many specialist MS nurses there are in the UK; what plans he has to train more MS nurses; and if he will make a statement. [149196]

Mr. Denham: Information on specialist multiple sclerosis nurses is not collected centrally. However, we understand that the MS Society has recently launched a £2 million fund to encourage the development of MS specialist nurse posts.

The development and funding of specialist nursing posts to treat specific conditions such as MS is for health authorities, in partnership with primary care groups/trusts and other local stakeholders, to determine.

Hospices (Lancashire)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what financial support the Government have given to Derian House hospice and St. Catherine's hospice in Lancashire. [147332]

Yvette Cooper: During the year 2000–01, Derian House Hospice and St. Catherine's Hospice received funding totalling almost £500,000 from the South Lancashire and North West Lancashire Health Authorities.

Alzheimer's Disease

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his plans for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease. [147350]

Mr. Hutton: Developing and improving support for people with Alzheimer's disease is a priority for us. NICE has recently recommended that donepezil, rivastigmine and galantamine should be made available in the NHS as one component of the management of those people with mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease. The forthcoming National Service Framework for Older People will, for the first time, set national standards and define service models for older people's health and social care, driving up the quality and reducing the variations of that care. The NSF will look at conditions that mainly affect older people, including dementia.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 7 February 2001

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Solicitor-General what the average cost was for each CPS prosecution in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* England in each of the last five years. [148668]

The Solicitor-General: The table shows the average cost in pounds of proceedings in respect of all defendants whose case was completed in Wales and England in each of the last five years. The costs are simple averages, and take no account of variations in the weight of cases handled. Separate costs are shown for cases completed in magistrates courts and in the Crown court.

£

	Magistrates courts	*Crown court*
Wales		
1996–97	132.84	1,014.09
1997–98	123.56	897.68
1998–99	118.46	889.11
1999–2000	119.84	910.48
2000–01[1]	129.41	966.26
England		
1996–97	115.16	1,093.43
1997–98	110.33	1,033.72
1998–99	108.45	993.97
1999–2000	112.63	1,030.08
2000–01[1]	112.30	1,091.49

[1] To December 2000

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Solicitor-General what average period of time was taken between the decision to prosecute and the case coming to full court hearing for CPS cases in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* England in each of the last five years. [148669]

The Solicitor-General: The Crown Prosecution Service does not collect information about the time taken from the decision to prosecute to trial, but relies on the Time Intervals Survey conducted by the Lord Chancellor's Department. This includes details of the average time from charge or first laying of information to the first court listing of the case. The figures for indictable cases in magistrates courts, including cases prosecuted by agencies other than the Crown Prosecution Service, are as follows:

Average number of days from charge or laying of information to first court listing

Year	*England*	*Wales*	*England and Wales*
1995	26	30	26
1996	27	33	28
1997	29	32	29
1998	26	31	26
1999	21	24	21
2000	9	12	9

These figures show a marked improvement in the time taken to list cases for the first time, largely associated with the Narey reforms which have accelerated the process for all cases. All agencies within the Criminal Justice System are working to secure further improvement, and additional funding has been provided this year to enable the CPS to appoint case progression officers, and cover additional magistrates court sittings to accelerate the process, particularly of youth cases.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Solicitor-General what advice the police authorities sought from the Crown Prosecution Service; and what response the service gave regarding the bringing of criminal proceedings following the death of Colin Griffiths of Stafford on 26 December 1994. [148661]

The Solicitor-General: In November 2000, Staffordshire police submitted a file to the local Crown Prosecution Service, seeking advice as to whether a prosecution should be brought against any individual in respect of the death of Mr. Griffiths. CPS Staffordshire referred this matter to CPS National Headquarters, where the case is now being reviewed in accordance with the Code for Crown Prosecutors. Advice will be given to the police once the case has been reviewed and a decision made. Preliminary advice regarding any further inquiries will be given to the police on 8 February 2001.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will list for each of the last three years how many cases brought by the CPS *(a)* before magistrates and *(b)* before Crown courts were dismissed on the grounds that the CPS had not prepared the necessary documents concerned; and if he will make a statement. [148651]

The Solicitor-General: The Crown Prosecution Service holds central records showing the reasons for dismissal due to there being no case to answer in magistrates' courts and for non-jury acquittals in the Crown court. However, this information does not include a separate count of the number of these outcomes which resulted from failure to prepare the necessary documentation.

The tables show the reasons for which cases resulted in dismissal owing to no case to answer or non-jury acquittal, during the two years for which figures are held. Cases are divided into four broad categories; insufficient evidence (including cases in which an essential legal element was missing from the prosecution case), public interest, unable to proceed (for example, because a key witness failed to attend court), and a miscellaneous category. Within each of these headings more specific reasons are then given.

The main reason for dismissal due to no case to answer in magistrates courts was that a victim failed to come up to proof when giving evidence: this amounted to 18.9 per cent. of all such outcomes in 1999–2000 and 13.5 per cent. up to December 2000.

Cases resulted in a non-jury acquittal in the Crown court mainly because a victim failed to attend the trial (13.6 per cent. of all non-jury acquittals) or refused to give evidence (12.1 per cent. in 1999–2000 and 13.5 per cent. up to December 2000).

CPS records show that only a small number of adverse outcomes result from a failure on the part of the

prosecution. During 1999–2000, the CPS identified 149 dismissals due to no case to answer, and 891 non-jury acquittals, as being attributable to a failing on the part of the Service. The CPS and the police work together, using joint performance management techniques to identify the reasons for a failed case and to devise local strategies, often involving guidance and training, to bring about improvement.

Reasons for dismissals in case to answer in Magistrates courts

	1999–2000		*[1]2000–01*	
	Number	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Insufficient evidence	788	72.6	568	81.1
Inadmissible evidence—breach of PACE	25	2.3	14	2.0
Inadmissible evidence= other	13	1.2	11	1.6
Legal element missing	103	9.5	91	13.0
Other evidential element missing	141	13.0	85	12.1
Unreliable identification	86	7.9	59	8.4
Victim fails to come up to proof	205	18.9	161	23.0
Other civilian witness fails to come up to proof	148	13.6	106	15.1
Police witness fails to come up to proof	67	6.2	41	5.9
Public Interest	12	1.1	2	0.3
Defendant with serious medical problem	1	0.1	0	0
Effect on victims physical/mental health	1	0.1	1	0.1
Other indictment of sentence	9	0.8	1	0.1
Informer or other PII issue	1	0.1	0	0
Unable to proceed	91	8.4	39	5.6
Victim fails to attend	39	3.6	12	1.7
Other civilian witness fails to attend	33	3.0	15	2.1
Victim intimidation	—	—	—	—
Other civilian witness intimidation	0	0	2	0.3
Victim refuses to give evidence	9	0.8	4	0.6
Other civilian witness refuses to give evidence	10	0.9	6	0.9
Other Reasons	195	18.0	91	13.0
Poor legal presentation	9	0.8	3	0.4
Poor police presentation	18	1.7	9	1.3
Other	168	15.5	79	11.3
Total	1,086	—	700	—

[1] To December

Reasons for non-jury acquittals and bind overs in the Crown court

	1999–2000		*[1]2000–2001*	
	Number	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Insufficient evidence	3,671	37.2	2,701	36.7
Inadmissible evidence—breach of PACE	166	1.7	108	1.5
Inadmissible evidence= other	254	2.6	223	3.0
Legal element missing	650	6.6	452	6.1
Other evidential element missing	865	8.8	653	8.9
Unreliable identification	706	7.2	532	7.2
Victim fails to come up to proof	665	6.7	483	6.6
Other civilian witness fails to come up to proof	321	3.3	216	2.9
Police witness fails to come up to proof	44	0.4	34	0.5
Public Interest	1,357	13.8	1,037	14.1
Defendant with serious medical problem	184	1.9	150	2.0
Effect on victims physical/mental health	128	1.3	88	1.2
Other indictment or sentence	894	9.1	697	9.5
Informer or other PII issue	151	1.5	102	1.4
Unable to proceed	3,245	32.9	2,569	34.9
Victim fails to attend	1,344	13.6	1,001	13.6
Other civilian witness fails to attend	508	5.1	400	5.4
Victim intimidation	18	0.2	4	0.1
Other civilian witness intimidation	27	0.3	21	0.3
Victim refuses to give evidence	1,191	12.1	990	13.5
Other civilian witness refuses to give evidence	157	1.6	153	2.1
Other Reasons	1,592	16.1	1,047	14.2
Poor legal presentation	5	0.1	5	0.1
Poor police presentation	30	0.3	15	0.2
Other	1,557	15.8	1,027	14.0
Total	9,865		7,354	

[1] To December

DEFENCE

JSF Aircraft

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what undertakings he has received from the relevant US authorities that British subcontractors and suppliers to the JSF project will have full access to Stealth and other technologies required to contribute to the manufacture of this aircraft; and if he will make a statement. [147568]

Mr. Hoon: The JSF MOU and the exchange of letters agreed with the US provide for extensive access to technical information that can be used by the UK Government and industry in connection with the JSF programme. These documents are available in the Library of the House.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the carrier-borne aircraft version of JSF and the timetable for a decision on the new Royal Navy aircraft carrier. [148105]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) on 17 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 226–28W.

Work to assess carrier design options is continuous and a decision about proceeding with Demonstration and Manufacture of the vessels is expected at the end of 2003, by which time we expect to have made a decision on JSF variant.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how United Kingdom forces in the Balkans were warned to stay clear of areas in which depleted uranium ammunition had been expended; what precautions they were required to take if they were obliged to enter these areas; what monitoring of their physical welfare took place thereafter; and on what date such precautionary warnings and measures were first announced. [145136]

Mr. Spellar: *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* Specialist explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) troops should be aware of the risks presented by expended DU ammunition through routine training and instructions. EOD troops are most at risk from expended DU ammunition when clearing Armoured Fighting Vehicles. In these circumstances, they are required to wear inner cotton gloves, outer heavy PVC gloves, a Service respirator, a full NBC suit and a Thermoluminescent Dosimeter until the presence of DU can be positively discounted

British forces first deployed to Bosnia in 1992. Non-specialist troops were not briefed about the risks of expended DU ammunition because there was no confirmation DU had been used there. In December 2000, NATO confirmed that small quantities of DU ammunition had been used during 1994 and 1995, mainly around Sarajevo. Although the risk to British forces of being exposed to expended DU ammunition in Bosnia is small, on 12 January 2001, arrangements were made for them to be briefed on the risks of DU. SFOR issued guidance for their forces on 14 January 2001.

British forces first deployed to Macedonia on 7 December 1998 and to Kosovo on 12 June 1999. The Kosovo bombing campaign began on 24 March 1999. On 21 April 1999, HQ Land Command issued a Medical Administrative and Technical Instruction down the medical chains of command entitled "Kosovo—Depleted Uranium Hazard". On 9 June 1999, further advice on the DU risk was passed down the operational chain of command by the Permanent Joint Headquarters to HQ BRITFOR in Macedonia. This was disseminated to Brigade level by HQ BRITFOR on 10 June 1999. From June 1999, the Pre-deployment Training Directive for troops deploying to Kosovo specified DU as one of the topics on which troops should be briefed during their pre-deployment course. From July 1999, the Mounting Order issued to units deploying to Kosovo included the following briefing on DU:

"a. Inside Kosovo/Bosnia you may encounter vehicles that have been destroyed or damaged by projectiles made from Depleted Uranium (DU). DU is only very slightly radioactive and is a chemical poison similar to lead.

b. It will not be possible to tell visually if a vehicle has been struck by DU. If this is the case, a heavy toxic powder may be spread inside and outside the vehicle and its immediate surroundings, which may or may not be visible to the naked eye. DU is only hazardous if it is inhaled, eaten or enters the body through a cut or laceration. The radiation will not penetrate clothing of any kind.

c. You are not to climb onto or into vehicles possibly damaged by fighter ground attack aircraft or tanks unless your duties require it. If you do, you should take the following precautions:

(1) If practicable, wear NBC rubber or leather gloves and a cloth oro-nasal facelet (facemask). Full NBC IPE is not necessary.

(2) Spend as little time as practicable on the task.

(3) As soon as possible after completing the task, change your outer clothing and launder it before it is worn again (keeping facelet on while removing dust contaminated clothing). Wash your hands. Do not eat, drink or smoke until you have done this.

d. If you believe that you may have been contaminated with DU, consult your Medical Officer. He/she will have been instructed to annotate your medical records and seek advice from the nearest Environmental Health Team in conjunction with Commander Medical. Urine analysis will confirm whether any contamination has occurred.

e. It is stressed that this hazard is not comparable to that encountered on an NBC battlefield and is trivial compared with combat risks. Even if a DU fragment were to be inhaled or embedded in your body, by whatever means, the risk of you developing cancer over the next 50 years would only be very slightly increased."

Although instructions are in place for all troops in theatre to be briefed on the risks of DU, contrary to the impression I gave in the answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) on 30 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 727W, my Department is now aware that not all of them have actually been briefed. It has not been possible to establish how many troops have not been briefed. Furthermore, in August 2000, the pre-deployment course briefing on medical issues, including DU, was dropped because of pressure on the course programme and a perception that it duplicated training at units. Instructions to reinstate it were issued on 12 January 2001.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date, and through which channels, his Department first learned from the United States Administration that depleted uranium shells used by the United States forces in the Balkans conflict were contaminated with plutonium; and if British depleted uranium munitions contain plutonium. [147744]

Mr. Spellar: It has long been known in the scientific community, the nuclear industry and by the Defence Radiological Protection Service that depleted uranium (DU) might contain minute traces of isotopes other than U-238, U-235 and U-234. More recently, details about transuranic contamination of US DU, including by plutonium, were made public by the US Department of Energy in September 1999.

Subsequent work in the US, reported by the Office of the Special Assistant for Gulf War Illness (OSAGWI) in December 2000, showed that the trace quantities of transuranic elements and fission products in US DU armour plate added only 0.8 per cent. to the radiation dose from the DU itself. This is insignificant given the low radioactivity of DU.

Information obtained from the Starmet Corporation, who supply Royal Ordnance with the DU they use to make ammunition, tells us that for each gram of DU, there is 0.000 000 000 005 2 grams of plutonium 238 and 0.000 000 001 2 grams of plutonium 239/240. The activity contribution of the three naturally occurring uranium isotopes in 1 gram of DU is 14,818 becquerels. The plutonium contributes an extra 6.14 becquerels, or 0.04 per cent. of the radiation of the naturally occurring uranium isotopes.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much *(a)* plutonium and *(b)* other highly radioactive particles was contained in the depleted uranium shells fired by Britain during the Gulf War. [147379]

Mr. Spellar: Information obtained from Starmet Corporation, the firm who supply Royal Ordnance with the DU they use to make ammunition, tells us that each gram of DU contains:

	Grammes
Uranium-238	0.997 9
Uranium-235	0.001 99
Uranium-234	0.000 01
Uranium-236	0.000 003
Technecium-99	0.000 000 71
Neptunium-237	0.000 000 22
Plutonium-239/240	0.000 000 001 2
Americium-243	0.000 000 001
Americium-241	0.000 000 000 017
Plutonium-238	0.000 000 000 005 2

Any significant increase in the quantity of highly radioactive particles would be detected by our routine radiation monitoring.

DU used in the manufacture of the CHARM 1 round, used at the time of the Gulf conflict, came from the same source.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will set out the source of the depleted uranium used to manufacture depleted uranium-tipped projectiles in the British military stockpile; and what steps are taken to remove high activity contaminants from the depleted uranium stocks before manufacture into weapons. [145283]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the findings of the UN environmental programme that munition tips at sites attacked by NATO during the Kosovo conflict contain traces of highly radioactive enriched uranium, U-236; and if he will make a statement. [147413]

Mr. Spellar: According to preliminary work carried out by the United Nations Environmental Project (UNEP), U-236 makes up 0.0028 per cent. of the uranium found in DU penetrators in Kosovo. They also judge that this amount is too small to change the radiotoxicity compared to DU without U-236. These are just preliminary findings, though, and we await their final assessment.

The U-236 in this DU is from the trace amounts that are in enrichment facilities and from the small amounts of DU that are from the reprocessing of the uranium extracted from nuclear fuel. Work in the US, and reported by the Office of the Special Assistant for Gulf War Illness (OSAGWI) in December 2000, showed that the trace quantities of transuranic elements and fission products in US DU armour plate, including U-236, added only 0.8 per cent. to the radiation dose from the DU itself.

Mr. Horam: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if depleted uranium is stored at Fort Halstead. [148271]

Mr. Spellar: Depleted uranium (DU) is stored at Fort Halstead. It is being held in accordance with statutory regulations and to the satisfaction of both the Environment Agency and the Ministry of Defence's statutory radiation protection advisers. DU rounds have not been fired there.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Stroud of 15 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 44W, on depleted uranium, when he plans to write to the hon. Member. [148843]

Mr. Spellar: I shall write to my hon. Friend in due course about the information he has requested and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if depleted uranium-based ammunition has been authorised in the past for use at *(a)* Tain Air Weapons Range and *(b)* Cape Wrath, by (i) UK forces and (ii) overseas forces. [149212]

Mr. Spellar: Depleted Uranium (DU)-based ammunition has never been authorised for use by UK or overseas forces at Tain Air Weapons Range, or at Cape Wrath Range.

Nancekuke

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what further progress has been made on the environmental survey at Nancekuke. [148907]

Dr. Moonie: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 27 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 620W. Work on the further land quality assessments is progressing

well and I expect to receive the expert consultants report soon. Once we have considered the report we will discuss the way ahead with the Environment Agency and Kerrier district council, as we are obliged to do under Part IIA of the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

Military Discipline

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library copies of *(a)* the Unit Folder entitled, 'Military Custody and Summary Dealing System', *(b)* the Provost Manuals, *(c)* the Army Commissioning Regulations 1999, *(d)* the Military Secretary's Guide to Officers' Confidential reports, *(e)* Army Form AF B9926 and *(f)* Army General and Administrative Instructions, Vol. 5, Instruction No. 6. [149339]

Mr. Spellar: Copies of the Military Custody and Summary Dealing System, The Provost manuals, the Army Commissioning Regulations 1999, the Military Secretary's Guide to Officers' Confidential Reports, Army Form AF B9926 and Army General and Administrative Instructions, Vol. 5, Instruction No. 6 will be placed in the Library of the House. It should, however, be borne in mind that these are all dynamic documents which are subject to frequent updates.

The Military Secretary's Guide to Officers Confidential Reports will be replaced by a tri-service Officers Joint Appraisal Report and it is hoped to issue a new guide to allow reports under the new system to be completed from September 2001.

AF B9926 is being redrafted and it is intended to try to separate the Removal from Appointment and the Termination of Service action into two separate forms, but this is still some way down the line.

Defence Medical Services

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many of the consultants who have left Defence Medical Services in the last three years have taken up employment abroad; and if he will make a statement. [146622]

Dr. Moonie: We do not routinely maintain information on the employment status of consultants who have left the Defence Medical Services to live overseas.

NHS Waiting Lists

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what impact financial incentives to fast track service personnel have had on NHS waiting lists. [146706]

Dr. Moonie: Service personnel, including those referred under the Ministry of Defence Hospital Unit (MDHU) contracts, are counted in overall NHS waiting lists. Those waiting lists are managed by NHS trusts. The MOD has not been made aware that financial incentives included in the MDHU contracts have had any impact on those overall NHS waiting lists.

Infantry Anti-structure Weapon

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if his Department is seeking to source the procurement of an Infantry Anti-structure Weapon system in the UK; what the estimated total cost of the programme will be; and if he will make a statement. [148556]

Dr. Moonie: We have not made a decision to progress with the purchase of any infantry anti-structure weapon. At present, there is no funding allocated to this capability.

On 23 August 2000 we issued a contracts bulletin asking industry to consider how best to provide an anti-structure weapon for the infantry in the urban environment. The contracts bulletin informs potential suppliers world-wide and not just in the UK. We have yet to assess any potential solutions, or to estimate how much these may cost.

KFOR

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the cost of the British contribution to KFOR. [149056]

Mr. Spellar: The latest estimate of additional expenditure likely to be incurred on Operations in Kosovo in 2000–01 is approximately £220 million.

Defence Secondary Care Agency Unit (Organ Parts)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many organ parts are kept by the Defence Secondary Care Agency Unit; where they are kept; for what purpose; if informal consent was obtained in each case; and if he will make a statement. [149096]

Dr. Moonie: The Defence Secondary Care Agency holds 26 pathological specimens in total, all of which are located at the Royal Hospital Haslar. These are being kept both in case further investigation is required into the cause of death and for medical research purposes. Formal consent was obtained in each case.

Maritime Graves

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will publish his consultation paper on the protection of maritime graves. [149179]

Dr. Moonie: The consultation paper will be distributed shortly.

Kosovo (Troops)

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the role of the Royal Marines in MNB (C) in Kosovo. [148926]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 6 February 2001]:* All British forces who have served in Kosovo can be justly proud of their performance. British forces currently serving in KFOR have maintained this high standard of service. Currently, Headquarters 3 Commando Brigade are providing the headquarters for Multi-National Brigade (Centre) (MNB(C)) in Pristina, and 45 Commando Group and 1st Battalion of the Princess of Wales Regiment are providing two manoeuvre battle groups.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he plans to reduce the level of the UK commitment in Kosovo in terms of *(a)* troops and *(b)* equipment. [148930]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 6 February 2001]:* The United Kingdom contribution to the NATO led peacekeeping force in Kosovo (KFOR) is based upon Alliance requirements and agreed with Allies. NATO has well established procedures for the review of forces required for both KFOR and the SFOR mission in Bosnia. Reviews of both are currently under way. The UK will be contributing fully to that review process, and the results will be presented to NATO Ministers in June.

RAF Lossiemouth

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 31 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 183W, how much the new barracks at RAF Lossiemouth will cost; how many single person places it will accommodate; and when it is scheduled for completion. [149215]

Dr. Moonie: Barrack accommodation includes any construction of communal living facilities. In the case of RAF Lossiemouth, it comprises the construction of a replacement Officers' Mess. It will accommodate 100 personnel but there will also be public rooms and other amenities. Its cost is estimated to be in the region of £6 million to £8 million and it is scheduled for completion about December 2002.

Service Widows' Pensions

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many *(a)* Service personnel died between 1973 and October 2000, *(b)* Service wives were widowed between 1973 and October 2000 and *(c)* Service widows whose husbands died between 1973 and October 2000 had their Service widows' pensions stopped as a result of remarriage or cohabitation; [147739]

(2) what estimate his Department has made of *(a)* the total sum saved by the stopping of Service widows' pensions between 1973 and October 2000 on the remarriage or cohabitation of those widows and *(b)* the annual cost which would be incurred by restoring Service widows' pensions to those who were widowed between 1973 and October 2000 but have since remarried or cohabitated. [147740]

Dr. Moonie: Our records show that 5,208 Regular Service Personnel died during the period 1 January 1982 to 31 December 2000, of whom 2,603 were married. This included attributable and non-attributable deaths. While information for the period prior to January 1982 exists, a manual search of records would be required and this would entail disproportionate cost. We are unable to provide the total numbers of Service widows who have had their pensions stopped as a result of remarriage or cohabitation for the entire period requested. However, in my reply to the hon. Member on 27 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 422–43W, I provided figures for the number of widows remarrying in each of the last two years. Information for previous years could be provided only at a disproportionate cost.

We do not have information on the actual sum saved by stopping Service widows' pensions between 1973 and October 2000 as a result of their remarriage or cohabitation. A broad actuarial estimate of the costs of reinstating attributable forces family pensions that ceased on remarriage or cohabitation between 1973 and 31 October 2000 is between £22 million and £26 million (this estimate is based on reinstating the pensions for future but not providing backdating).

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Institute of Management

Mr. Colman: To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on the progress on the award of charter status to the Institute of Management. [149112]

Mrs. Beckett: Officials from my Department have had two meetings with representatives of the Institute of Management. The Institute's application for a Royal Charter is currently being considered by the Privy Council's advisers—those Government Departments with an interest, which are responsible for advising their Ministers in their role as members of the Privy Council. The procedure for the grant of a Royal Charter is explained in my Department's website—www.privy-council.org.uk.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Sexual Abuse Cases

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what support is available during court cases to adult victims of sexual abuse; and if she will make a statement. [148600]

Jane Kennedy: Witness services provide practical help and support to victims and witnesses. There is a witness service in all Crown court centres and services are being rolled out in magistrates courts. The services provide emotional support to all victims and witnesses. They give information about court procedures, arrange pre-court familiarisation visits and liaise with the court about suitable waiting facilities on the day of the trial. A Witness Service volunteer may, if the victim wishes, accompany the victim into court. The Government are committed to improving the experience of the court process for victims in sensitive cases and are implementing the recommendations in "Speaking up for Justice"; a report aimed at improving the criminal justice process for vulnerable or intimidated victims and witnesses to enable them to give their best evidence.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Section 246 Applications

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many section 246 applications have been acceded to in road schemes. [148048]

Mr. Hill: Section 246(2) of the Highways Act 1980 enables the acquisition, by agreement, of property the enjoyment of which will, in the opinion of a highway authority, be seriously affected by the construction or improvement of a road. This power was exercised by the Secretary of State as the highway authority for trunk roads in the case of 10 applications for discretionary purchase

of property in the past calendar year. There is no central record of the use of the power by local highway authorities.

Town and Parish Councils

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many town and parish councils have been abolished by him in each of the last three years; and what the reasons given for their abolition in each case were. [148258]

Ms Beverley Hughes: In implementing recommendations made by district councils under Part II of the Local Government and Rating Act 1997, the Secretary of State has abolished five parish councils, all of which were replaced by alternative parish councils, as follows:

the East Lindsey (Parishes) Order 1999—the common parish council for the three parishes of Saltfleetby All Saints, Saltfleetby St. Clements and Saltfleetby St. Peter was abolished to be replaced by a single new parish and parish council of Saltfleetby;

the Mid Sussex (Parishes) Order 1999—the parish councils of Clayton and Keymer were abolished to be replaced by a new single parish council of Hassocks;

the Tandridge (Parishes) Order 1999—the parish council of Lingfield and Dormansland was abolished to be replaced by two new parish councils, one for each of the villages;

and the West Lindsey (Parishes) Order 1999—on the creation of the parish of Brookenby from part of the parish of Stainton le Vale, the parish council of Stainton le Vale was abolished to be replaced by a new parish council of Brookenby and a parish meeting for Stainton le Vale.

Telecommunications Masts

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when the report arising from the Consultation Paper on Telecommunication Mast Development will be published; [148339]

(2) how many responses were received to the Consultation Paper on Telecommunication Mast Development; and if he will list the individuals and organisations which made submissions. [148338]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The consultation exercise seeking views on possible changes to the planning laws relating to mobile phone masts and associated guidance ended on 31 October 2000. The Department is currently analysing the 365 responses. We shall announce our conclusions as soon as possible. A list of individuals and organisations who responded to the consultation exercise have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many mobile phone transmitter masts have been relocated owing to their proximity to a school in the last 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [148402]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Department does not hold such information. However, the report of the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones does not recommend that the erection of masts on or near schools should be prohibited, nor does it recommend that existing masts be removed or relocated. DfEE has issued information to local education authorities and schools on mobile phones and base stations.

The Government recently announced that the Radiocommunications Agency will begin an audit of mobile phone base stations and masts to measure radiowave emissions. The audits have now commenced, and a continuing programme is planned to cover all schools with base stations that have asked to be included. The results of the audit will be published on the internet.

Gas Refuelling Depots

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* LPG and *(b)* natural gas refuelling depots there are in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* Wales; and if he will make a statement. [148297]

Mr. Hill: There are approximately 660 LPG refuelling points in the UK, of which 48 are in Wales. My Department estimates that the number of LPG refuelling points will rise to over 1,000 by the end of this year. It is not possible to indicate how many will be in Wales.

There are currently 28 compressed natural gas (CNG) refuelling points in the UK, none of which is in Wales. However, my Department will consult shortly on the future direction of the Powershift programme, including how to encourage the wider availability of CNG in urban areas.

Social Exclusion

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the Government's programmes aimed at reducing poverty and social exclusion, indicating the annual cost and coverage of each one. [148484]

Ms Armstrong: We published the second annual report on our strategy for tackling poverty and social exclusion, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" in September 2000 (Cm 4865). This provides a detailed account of the action we have taken since we announced our strategy in September 1999 and what more we need to do. It clearly shows that we are already making a difference to people's lives and that real progress is being made in a number of key areas. "Spending Review 2000: New Public Spending Plans 2001–2004" sets out annual expenditure for the major programmes aimed at reducing poverty and social exclusion.

A number of DETR regeneration and other programmes help to reduce poverty and social exclusion, including English Partnerships, Housing Action Trusts, Coalfields Trust and Fund. In particular, New Deal for Communities and Single Regeneration Budget are aimed at reducing poverty and social exclusion.

New Deal for Communities (NDC) is tackling the deprivation faced by people in some of the poorest neighbourhoods in England. Seventeen partnerships were set up in 1998 under NDC, as part of the Government's strategy to tackle social exclusion. Round two of the New Deal for Communities, launched in 1999, included 22 additional areas being invited to bid for funding. Outturn Government expenditure on NDC in 1999–2000 was £48.5 million. Planned expenditure is £120.7 million in 2000–01 and £450.0 million in 2001–02.

The Single Regeneration budget (SRB) provides funding through the Regional Development Agencies for regeneration schemes in England, which are developed and implemented by local partnerships. It is an important instrument in the Government's drive to tackle social exclusion. There are over 890 partnerships from rounds 1 to 6 with over £5.6 billion in SRB support over their lifetime of up to seven years. It is estimated that these will attract almost over £8.6 billion of private sector investment and help to attract European funding. Outturn Government expenditure on SRB in 1999–2000 was £663 million. Planned expenditure is £814 million in 2000–01 and £878 million in 2001–02.

The Government's Action Plan "A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal", which was launched by the Prime Minister on 15 January, sets out our vision for narrowing the gap between poor neighbourhoods and the rest of the country. It aims to deliver economic prosperity, safe communities, high-quality schools, decent housing, and better health to the poorest parts of the country.

The Action Plan is backed up by a new Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, which is to improve services in the most deprived neighbourhoods. Planned expenditure through the fund, which will be paid to the 88 most deprived local authorities in England, is £200 million in 2001–02, £300 million in 2002–03 and £400 million in 2003–04.

Civil Aviation Authority

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will consult the New Zealand Government on the references provided for Mr. Douglas Andrew, Head of the Economic Regulation Group of the Civil Aviation Authority. [148642]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: I understand that the previous Administration took proper steps to satisfy themselves that Mr. Andrew was the most appropriate person for the post of Director of Economic Regulation. I see no reason to reopen the question.

Departmental Policies (Staffordshire, Moorlands)

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out with statistical information relating as directly as possible to Staffordshire, Moorlands constituency, the effects on Staffordshire, Moorlands of his Department's policies and actions *(a)* since 2 May 1997 and *(b)* in the 12 months ending on 1 May 1997. [149193]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Staffordshire, Moorlands has benefited from a range of Government initiatives since 2 May 1997 and in the 12 months ending on 1 May 1997 as follows:

General Grant

General Grant (Revenue Support Grant, National Non Domestic Rates, and damping grants) is as follows:

	Newcastle-under-Lyme	*Staffordshire, Moorlands*	*Staffordshire CC*
1996–97	6.781	4.794	[1]—
1997–98	6.419	4.586	343.899
1998–99	6.899	4.537	363.545
1999–2000	7.067	4.632	383.788
2000–01	7.315	4.770	397.940
2001–02	7.641	4.941	408.474

[1] No figures for 1996–97 are available as Staffordshire County Council was affected by reorganisation.

Note:

These figures have been adjusted to make year on year comparisons possible.

Staffordshire Local Transport Expenditure Settlement 1997 to 2001

The table shows the local transport expenditure to Staffordshire county council from 1997 to 2001. It should be noted that it is not possible to breakdown the allocations to Staffordshire, Moorlands only. To break down the expenditure into the individual districts of north Staffordshire would require a detailed examination of previous LTP and TPP documents and an estimate made of the cost of the works.

For the year 1996–97, the local transport settlement for Staffordshire included Stoke City Council. To establish a figure for this one year period would necessitate breaking down this figure and this is not easily obtainable.

£000

	Authority/district: Staffordshire	
Provisional TPP allocation	*Staffordshire*	*Newcastle-under-Lyme*
2001–02		
Block allocation	5,700	Not split
Maintenance	8,675	Not split
Major schemes	[2]3,750	Not split
Total	18,125	Not split
2000–01		
Block allocation	2,600	n/a
Maintenance	4,554	n/a
Major schemes	[3]3,800	n/a
Total	10,954	n/a
1999–2000		
Block allocation	2,175	[4]190
Maintenance	3,878	n/a
Major schemes	0	n/a
Total	5,603	190
1998–99		
Block allocation	578	[4]124
Maintenance	4,062	n/a
Major schemes	600	n/a
Total	5,240	124
1997–98		
Block allocation	694	[4]124
Maintenance	5,346	n/a
Major schemes	9,400	n/a
Total	15,440	124

n/a = not available

[1] As part of north Staffordshire package

[2] Includes expenditure for Biddulph Inner Bypass

[3] Includes expenditure for Burntwood Bypass

[4] When combined with north Staffordshire package

Housing investment programme resources to Staffordshire, Moorlands district

£ million

	Programme			
	Main HIP[1]	*Capital receipts initiatives*[2]	*Indicative major repair allowance (MRA)*[3,4]	*Totals*
1997–98	*0.98*	0.161	—	1.141
1998–99	0.876	0.515	—	1.391
1999–2000	0.908	0.482	—	1.39
2000–01	2.05	—	—	2.05
2001–02	1.014	—	1.601	2.615
Total	5.828	1.158	—	8.587
Total less 1997–98 HIP	—	—	—	7.607

[1] The main HIP figure in italics was allocated by the previous Government.

[2] This was the fulfilling of the new Government's Manifesto commitment to allow LAs to spend more of their receipts from Right to Buy sales. The initiative ended in 1999–2000, thereafter additional resources have been allocated through the main HIP programme.

[3] Introduced from 1 April 2001

[4] Staffordshire, Moorlands DC is on the 2000–01 stock transfer programme and have had a successful tenants' ballot. The expectation is that, subject to the Secretary of State's consent, the council will transfer all their stock to a new Registered Social Landlord before the end of 2000–01, in which case the council will not qualify for MRA.

Housing resources allocated in the 12 months ending 1 May 1997

£ million

	HIP[1]
1996–97	1.29
1997–98	0.98
Total	2.27

[1] HIP allocations are issued every December, ie for 1996–97 they would have been issued in December 1995, and for 1997–98 they would have been issued in December 1996.

Rural Development Programme

Staffordshire, Moorlands—Rural Development Programme

	Number of projects	*Total RDC funding*	*Total scheme costs*
1996–97	8	33,846	140,657
1997–98	22	106,271	411,423
1998–99	8	48,483	273,133
1999–2000	14	89,422	383,595
2000–01	8	84,800	369,112
Total	60	362,821	1,577,920

Note:

It is not possible to split the funding as at May in any year and details provided relate to financial years only. Rural Development Programme schemes include: Redundant Building Grants, Rural Development Programme and Workspace projects. This programme is split between Derbyshire and Staffordshire and a number of projects work across North-East Staffordshire and North-West Derbyshire. There is a real sense of joint working between the two areas and therefore the precise split of projects and funding may not be fully illustrated here. The Rural Priority Area covers roughly two-thirds of Derbyshire and one-third of Staffordshire. All projects which are aggregated in this table identify themselves on Advantage West Midland's database as Staffordshire, Moorlands, but may also include some cross-border Derbyshire activity.

Land and property projects

Staffordshire, Moorlands

	Total forecast value	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*Spend to date 2000–01*	*Total spend profile*
Workspace projects							
Ipstones Roofs	26,000	—	15,000	—	—	—	15,000
Victoria Colliery	10,000	—	—	4,894	3,785	584	9,263
Wharf Road	2,000	—	—	1,728	272	—	2,000
Far Lane Est., Ipstones	6,864	—	—	—	—	6,864	6,864
Total	44,864	—	15,000	6,622	4,057	7,448	33,127
EP projects							
Victoria Colliery[1]	40,000	—	—	—	—	—	—
Overall total land and property	84,864	—	15,000	6,622	4,057	—	33,127

[1] Preliminary investigation work

Single Regeneration Budget programme

£000

	Scheme				
	Round 2 Leek	*Round 4 Biddulph*	*Round 5 rural regeneration NE Staffs*	*Total*	*Cumulative pre and post 1996–97*
1996–97	165	0	—	165	—
1997–98	287	0	0	287	—
1998–99	182	37	0	219	506
1999–2000	31	77	27	135	641
2000–01	131	71	277	479	1,120
2001–02	262	114	641	1,017	2,137

£000

	Scheme				
	Round 2 Leek	*Round 4 Biddulph*	*Round 5 rural regeneration NE Staffs*	*Total*	*Cumulative pre and post 1996–97*
2002–03	0	76	853	929	3,066
2003–04	0	66	776	842	3,908
2004–05	0	0	630	630	4,538
2005–06	0	0	551	551	5,089
Total	1,058	441	3,755	5,254	—

The Single Regeneration Budget programmes approved by Advantage West Midland and by the Government Office of the West Midlands prior to Advantage West Midland's existence are Leek, Biddulph and Rural Regeneration. The total spend on the schemes in the period to 31 March 2006 is £5.254 million with £1.12 million to be expended between 1997 to the end of this year and £165,000 in 1996–97.

Planning

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has to place restrictions on the sale of garden plots for development; [148900]

(2) what his policy is on the sale of parts of gardens for residences for development purposes. [148899]

Ms Beverley Hughes: There are no plans to introduce restrictions on the sale of garden plots for development. The planning system is the appropriate means for regulating the development and use of land in the public interest.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make the *(a)* quality of life and *(b)* availability of a varied range of properties a condition of granting planning approval for residential development. [148901]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Planning Policy Guidance note 3 "Housing" (March 2000) requires local planning authorities to *(a)* promote good design in new housing developments in order to create high-quality living environments; and, *(b)* provide wider housing opportunity and choice and a better mix in the size and type of housing than is currently available.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recognition is given through the Standard Spending Assessment formula to the impact upon fire authorities of coping with major inland waterways in relation to *(a)* rescue activities and *(b)* flooding incidents. [148910]

Ms Beverley Hughes: No specific indicators are included within Standard Spending Assessments (SSA) for fire authorities in England with respect to calls to flooding and rescue activities related to inland waterways. However, to the extent that expenditure arising from such calls is included in the 1990–91 expenditure of fire authorities, upon which SSAs are calibrated, indirect allowance is made.

Playing Fields

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* playing fields and *(b)* green spaces available for public use have been lost to development in each of the past three years. [148695]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 February 2001]:* The English Sports Council, now Sport England, was made a statutory consultee on 5 August 1996 for planning applications involving the development of playing fields. The information requested is not available as Sport England did not distinguish between public and private use of playing fields, which are the subject of planning applications, during the period specified.

The Government have introduced a number of new initiatives to meet their commitment to avoid the loss of playing fields. The Town and Country Planning (Playing Fields) (England) Direction 1998 requires referral to the Secretary of State of planning applications for development of local authority-owned playing fields and others in educational use, where Sport England has objected but the local planning authority is minded to grant permission.

The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 empowers the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to protect school playing fields in England from disposal or change of use.

The Government set up the Playing Fields Monitoring Group last year to oversee the effectiveness of these initiatives and to collate more reliable data on proposals to dispose of and develop playing fields.

No separate statistics are available relating to the development of green spaces.

A draft revised version of PPG17: "Sport and Recreation", to be issued shortly for consultation, will update national planning policy on the provision and protection of playing fields and other green space.

Teachers' Pay

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what provision he has made in future Standard Spending Assessments for the increase in new teachers' pay; and if he will make a statement. [149280]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We took account of all pressures on local education authorities when setting the level of provision in the spending review, including teachers' pay. Parliament has recently approved the Local Government Finance Settlement 2001–02 which provides an increase in Education Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) of over £1 billion (4.8 per cent.). The spending review provides further increases in Education SSA of £1.35 billion in 2002–03 and £1.4 billion in 2003–04.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what provision exists for Legacy plc to receive compensation from public funds for costs incurred in bidding for the Dome site in the event of negotiations failing; and if he will make a statement. [149340]

Ms Armstrong: The Government continue to negotiate with Legacy plc as the preferred bidder. The rules of the competition make no provision for meeting the cost of unsuccessful bidders, and that applies to the Legacy negotiations as long as the Government comply with the relevant requirements of the preferred bidder offer in its dealings with Legacy. The details of the preferred bidder documentation are commercially confidential.

Cohousing

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the introduction of cohousing in the United Kingdom. [148883]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Cohousing is an innovative form of housing that attempts to create a sense of community for its residents. It is characterised by private dwellings with their own facilities but also extensive common facilities. I am aware that a number of cohousing projects have been introduced in the UK, including one in Stroud. The Government note this development with interest and wish these projects every success. Since cohousing is confined to the private housing sector, however, any possible future growth in cohousing in the UK will primarily be a matter for private householders and private developers.

Road Traffic Accidents

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* deaths and *(b)* serious injuries have arisen from road traffic accidents (i) between 17 October 2000 and to the latest date for which data is available and (ii) the corresponding period 12 months earlier. [148389]

Mr. Hill: National statistics for road accident deaths and serious injuries are not yet available for any period from 17 October 2000 and therefore no comparison can be made with any corresponding period in the previous year.

M4 Bus Lane

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the overall change in journey times is in person minutes per week as a result of the installation of the M4 bus lane according to the TRL survey. [149335]

Mr. Hill: The M4 bus lane was designed to reduce traffic congestion on the M4, especially during rush hour, and to make journeys more reliable. The latest information on the experiment shows it is achieving both objectives.

TRL have found that, following the introduction of the M4 bus lane, journey times have reduced by 252,000 person minutes per week during weekday peak periods. This reflects the increased reliability of journey times.

These benefits for users are offset by an increase in journey times of a similar amount during weekday off-peak periods, and increased journey times during Saturdays and Sundays averaging 75,000 person minutes a week. These changes in journey times are mainly due to the speed limits introduced at the same time as the bus lane, which have already led to road safety benefits. For instance, there has been a reduction in personal injury accidents on the eastbound M4 between Heathrow and the elevated section since the introduction of a 50mph speed limit.

Local Government Act

Mrs. Fitzsimons: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in implementing the new ethical framework for local government established under the Local Government Act 2000. [149618]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I have today appointed Tony Holland as the Chair of the new independent Standards Board for England.

I will publish a consultation paper tomorrow on the model code of conduct for members and a response to last year's consultation exercise on the general principles of conduct.

Copies of both documents will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Powershift Programme

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 26 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 732W, on the Powershift Programme, what meetings his Department's ministers have had over the past 12 months with vehicle manufacturers to encourage them to manufacture production line gas vehicles; what other measures his Department has taken in pursuit of this objective; and what the response has been from vehicle manufacturers. [148315]

Mr. Hill: Over the past 12 months my Department's Ministers and officials have met a range of gas vehicle manufacturers and converters and the relevant trade associations—the LP Gas Association and the Natural Gas Vehicle Association—to discuss the development of the gas vehicle market, including the introduction of production line vehicles. This issue was also discussed within the Cleaner Vehicles Task Force which my colleague, Lord Macdonald, the Minister for Transport, co-chaired.

The Energy Saving Trust, which administers the DETR funded Powershift programme, maintain an on-going dialogue with vehicle manufacturers, encouraging them to introduce production line gas vehicles. I am encouraged to know that several vehicle manufacturers are considering this.

Flooding

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many separate incidents of flooding were reported to his Department in the past 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [149085]

Mr. Morley: I have been asked to reply.

There is no requirement for such reports to be made on a systematic basis. Flooding can result from many causes and range in severity from minor to major events. The flooding in Portsmouth in September 2000 resulted from exceptionally heavy rainfall and the breakdown of a sewage pumping station after being flooded. However, the extensive flooding in late 2000 resulted from an inability of watercourses to carry away floodwaters from saturated

catchments following the wettest autumn on record. A full report on this flooding is being prepared by the Environment Agency.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Olympic Bid

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will place copies of *(a)* Sport England's report on the feasibility study of Pickett's Lock and *(b)* the British Olympic Association's report on the feasibility study on London as the centre of an Olympic bid for 2012 and 2016 in the Library. [147083]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 25 January 2001]:* Copies of the summary of the Drivas Jones and Ernst and Young technical feasibility study on the Lee Valley stadium were placed in the Library of the House on 6 December 2000.

The British Olympic Association has asked that its report to Ministers about a possible future bid for an Olympic Games in London be treated in confidence at this stage.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proportion of tickets issued for visits to the Millennium Dome were *(a)* free and *(b)* discounted. [147780]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) has advised that it will be publishing full visitor attendance numbers later in the year once the final accounts for the operational year and all the associated data have been audited. The following statistics have been provided at this stage but the right hon. Member will wish to note the caveats which have been set out in the footnotes to the table.

2000	Total free[1]	Total discounted[2]	Total sponsors from discounted[3]	Full price tickets[4]	Total attendance[5]
January	10,164	50,669	14,685	305,586	366,420
February	73,115	56,868	9,169	439,555	569,538
March	103,372	60,209	4,892	392,727	556,308
April	68,773	112,352	12,077	398,208	579,333
May	102,903	157,385	13,456	241,916	502,204
June	135,181	165,461	14,502	239,625	540,267
July	123,077	217,267	15,575	266,175	606,519
August	20,148	263,521	12,958	267,547	551,216
September	109,372	209,374	13,285	144,538	463,284
October	74,448	424,524	16,609	158,652	657,624
November	54,446	230,312	16,284	82,358	387,117
December	145,749	371,614	17,540	219,681	737,044

[1] Includes free school visits, carers for disabled people, sponsor ticket allocation, accompanying teachers on paying school visits, coach drivers, Greenwich residents, NMEC guests and VIPs.
[2] This reflects a range of promotions and offers which are normal for the visitor attraction business and which are factored into the company's business strategy. For example, the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) has run a number of offers and promotions with its sponsors for their customers and also ran a special ticket price for entry after 4 pm. Key promotions with M&S, Boots, Tesco and BT have been undertaken. The Tesco half price promotion was redeemed in October, BT was redeemed in November and December.
[3] Sponsor tickets were purchased and allocated per each individual sponsorship contract.
[4] This number is an approximation and as such should be used for review purposes only. There is insufficient accuracy for them to be regarded as audited or validated information.
[5] Total attendance does not take into account non-attendance by ticket purchasers. It represents visitor footfall via the admission system and not total tickets sold.
Note:
NMEC operated two different systems, one for Ticket Sales (Enta) and one for Admissions (ACS). The admissions system recorded total attendance, but did not show details of the attendance ie purchase source of admission or monetary-value of admission. Consequently figures for Free and Discounted tickets are derived from the ticketing system, whereas total attendance is derived from the admission system.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money IMG raised for the Millennium Dome project; and how much they were paid for their services to the Dome. [147779]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* The role of IMG as originally provided for in the contractual terms with the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) changed as NMEC's in-house Commercial team took on and delivered the task of raising sponsorship. IMG provided significant support to the in-house team but did not itself deliver sponsorship. In December 1998 NMEC and IMG mutually agreed to terminate the contract. NMEC paid IMG £2.8 million taking into account the contribution IMG had made to the sponsorship effort and the actual resource and time input from IMG.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many donations were made to the Millennium Dome exhibition by mobile phone companies; and what the value of each was. [148526]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) did not receive any donations from mobile phone companies.

New Millennium Experience Company

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much the New Millennium Experience Company owes to creditors. [147782]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* As at 31 January 2001 the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) owed its creditors £2.1 million. NMEC is discharging these debts as they become due.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport by what date all the debts of the New Millennium Experience Company will be discharged. [147783]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* Debts are discharged as they become due. All debts will be discharged prior to the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) undergoing solvent liquidation. It is not possible at this stage to give a definitive date on which that will be achieved.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if contracts worth in excess of £1 million were awarded by the New Millennium Experience Company to *(a)* Boots, *(b)* McDonalds, *(c)* BSkyB, *(d)* Tesco, *(e)* BAA, *(f)* BAE Systems, *(g)* British Airways, *(h)* Camelot, *(i)* Marconi, *(j)* 3Com, *(k)* Coca Cola, *(l)* Compaq, *(m)* Kodak, *(n)* Mars, *(o)* Thames Water, *(p)* Typhoo and *(q)* Walls. [148185]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* The value of contractual arrangements between the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) and the companies named were each in excess of £1 million. These encompassed cash payments and value-in-kind to NMEC and non-cash benefits, deriving from their sponsorship association with the Millennium Experience at the Dome and its associated National Programme, to the companies concerned.

Digital Broadcasting

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the take-up rate is of *(a)* terrestrial digital service and *(b)* satellite digital service in (i) Wales and (ii) England. [148298]

Janet Anderson: From the figures declared by the service providers, we estimate that around 18 per cent. of households in the United Kingdom with a television use a digital satellite service and 4 per cent. use a digital terrestrial television service. We do not have a breakdown of take-up figures by country.

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what percentage of the *(a)* Welsh and *(b)* English population has access to (i) terrestrial digital service and (ii) satellite digital service. [148299]

Janet Anderson: The Independent Television Commission estimate that core coverage of digital terrestrial television (those households able to receive all six multiplexes) is *(a)* 42 per cent. in Wales and *(b)* 55 per cent. in England. The figures are up to 6 per cent. higher for access to BBC services, Channels 3, 4 and 5 and S4C. The latest figures indicate that between 96 per cent. and 98 per cent. of households in the United Kingdom are able to receive digital satellite services. We do not have a breakdown of the figures by country.

Free Television Licences

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what evidence he has requested from the BBC to enable Ministers to evaluate the effectiveness of the administration of the free television licence scheme for those aged over-75 years. [148496]

Janet Anderson: The BBC, as Licensing Authority, has statutory responsibility for the administration of the television licensing system, including free licences for the over-75s. The Secretary of State has made no formal request for evidence from the BBC about the administration of over-75 licences, but the Corporation has kept the Department regularly and fully informed of progress with the implementation of the concession.

Museums (Tyne and Wear)

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will review and increase the grant to museums in the Tyne and Wear area. [148614]

Mr. Alan Howarth: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and I will be meeting representatives of the Tyne and Wear Museums Service shortly to discuss funding. As my right hon. Friend has already explained to the Director of the Tyne and Wear Museums Service, he has held back a reserve the use of which he will determine when his current negotiations on the question of irrecoverable VAT are complete.

National Lottery

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what guidelines he has issued to organisations which are beneficiaries of the National Lottery with regard to the withholding of capital in order to secure higher rates of long-term interest on the money; and if he will make a statement. [148644]

Kate Hoey: None.

National Heritage Memorial Fund

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what funds have been *(a)* committed, and *(b)* spent by the National Heritage Memorial Fund in each of the past four years, together with corresponding figures at the end of each of the last four financial years. [148861]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The figures supplied by the National Heritage Memorial Fund for the last four financial years are given in the tables. They cover both the Memorial Fund—which disburses Government grant in aid as a fund of last resort for the heritage—and the Heritage Lottery Fund—which distributes the Lottery proceeds allocated to the heritage. Figures relating to calendar years are not available.

Heritage Memorial Fund

£ million

Financial year	*Committed*	*Spent*
1999–2000	0.7	2.7
1998–99	5.5	4.7
1997–98	2.6	3.1
1996–97	3	6.4

Heritage lottery fund commitments

£ million

Financial year	*Allocated in response to applications*[1]	*Awarded*	*Spent*
1999–2000	270.5	151	265
1998–99	297.5	305	186
1997–98	459.1	358	130
1996–97	463	463	79

[1] Under HLF's two-stage process, sums are earmarked as Stage One passes in response to specific applications (the 'allocated' figure) but are not guaranteed until full applications are approved for an award at a later date (the 'awarded' figure). This explains the two different figures shown for commitments.

HLF's practice is to account for the totality of a commitment in the year in which it is entered. Allowance has to be made for time to raise matching funding and to complete capital works, leading to an average drawdown period for projects over £500,000 of four years. The average drawdown for projects under £500,000 is 18 months.

Sports Action Zone (West Cumbria)

Dr. Jack Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement about progress made by the Sports Action Zone in West Cumbria. [149176]

Kate Hoey: The West Cumbria and Barrow Sport Action Zone is one of 12 Zones designated by Sport England as part of its Lottery Strategy. Sport England is funding a manager for the Zone who has a strong background in sport and regeneration. The manager, who was appointed in September 2000, has been working with key agencies and organisations (eg Health Action Zones, Connexions Strategy Group, local authorities, Single Regeneration Budget stakeholders), as well as the local community in order to produce a detailed needs assessment. This will inform the five year Action Plan for the Zone which is due to be completed in draft form by the end of May. Key themes will be the contribution which sport can make to health, education and life-long learning, social inclusion, regeneration, community safety, taking account of the large size of the Zone and the diversity of partners and issues which are involved. Since the area was designated as a Sport Action Zone there has been considerable investment in it by Sport England. This includes five capital lottery awards (£967,490); 45 Awards for All awards (£159,610) and the establishment of a School Sport Co-ordinator programme (£679,472) which, together with the five year funding of the Zone manager equates to over £2 million Lottery funding. A number of other Lottery bids are being developed with a range of partners and these will be fast tracked for assessment by Sport England.

British Resorts Task Force

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the progress made by British Resorts Task Force at the English Tourism Council. [148959]

Janet Anderson: The English Tourism Council's report on resort regeneration, which takes account of the work of its Resorts Task Force, is due for publication towards the end of this month. We will consider our response to it once it is published.

CABINET OFFICE

Government IT Projects

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the Government IT projects identified as being reviewed in the Cabinet Office publication 'Progress report on successful IT: modernising Government in action'; and if she will publish details of these reviews. [148655]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Gateway Review process has been piloted and will be rolled out across Government in 2001 as the standard form of project review. The projects identified in the Progress Report as having been reviewed are as follows:

Project	*Department/agency*	*Type of review*
IT Re-tendering	DVLA	OGC Gateway Review—Gate 1 (Business justification)
Knowledge Network	Cabinet Office	OGC Gateway Review—Gate 4 (Readiness for Service)
UK Online Citizen Portal	Cabinet Office	OGC Gateway Review—Gate 4 (Readiness for Service)
Traffic Control Centre	Highways Agency	Pre-contract Review
IT 2000	Home Office	Pre-contract Review (with Partnerships UK input)

The Gateway Review reports are intended to help and inform the management of the projects and the organisation's own decisions. They are not intended for publication.

Civil Service Code

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if the e-communicators working with the e-envoy will be fully subject to the Civil Service Code. [148653]

Marjorie Mowlam: Yes, these posts are within the permanent Civil Service.

Performance Targets (Permanent Secretaries)

Mr. Kilfoyle: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office who sets performance targets for permanent secretaries. [145189]

Mr. Stringer: Performance targets for permanent secretaries are agreed with Ministers in charge of Departments, following comments by the Prime Minister and the head of the Home Civil Service. They incorporate targets in the Department's Public Service Agreement and Service Delivery Agreement.

Mr. Kilfoyle: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office who is responsible for assessing whether a permanent secretary has met his or her performance targets; and how many have failed to do so since 1997. [145188]

Mr. Stringer: Responsibility for assessing the performance and pay of permanent secretaries rests with the Permanent Secretaries' Remuneration Committee, which considers a range of evidence including published information, an assessment by the head of the Home Civil Service and the permanent secretary to the Treasury, ministerial views and a self-assessment by the individual.

Permanent secretaries' performance targets cover a range of departmental and personal objectives, not always entirely within the control of the individual and not always capable of being expressed simply in terms of success or failure. The degree to which each individual has performed well against his or her objectives is assessed by the Remuneration Committee. It is not Government policy to divulge information that would reveal details of the performance of individuals, as this would be a breach of confidentiality and hence contrary to the Data Protection Act 1988.

Civil Service Pension Fund

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress is being made on closing the Civil Service Pension Fund to new entrants; and if she will make a statement. [148902]

Mr. Stringer: Plans are progressing for the introduction of new pension arrangements for the Civil Service. Our intention is for new entrants to be given a choice between new defined benefit pension arrangements, and defined contribution arrangements whereby the employer will make contributions to a stakeholder pension selected by the employee from a panel of providers. Existing members of the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme will be given the choice of remaining with their current benefit structure or of paying the higher contributions associated with the new defined benefit arrangement. Our working assumption is for the new arrangements to be introduced from 1 October 2002.

Civil Service

Mr. Ernie Ross: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many staff, excluding those working for bodies responsible to the regional assemblies and the Scottish Parliament, are employed in the UK Civil Service, broken down by Department and place of employment. [148716]

Mr. Stringer: The numbers and location of all staff are shown in the table.

Regional distribution of staff at 1 April 1999 by Government office region

'Full-time equivalents

	Government office regions							
Department (including agencies)	*London*	*South East London*	*Total London and South East*	*South West*	*West Midland*	*North West*	*North East*	*Merseyside*
Non-industrial staff								
Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	2,943	977	3,920	1,256	638	797	444	3
Cabinet Office	1,353	271	1,624	15	18	181	17	1
Crown Prosecution Service	1,311	514	1,825	338	534	649	240	201
Customs and Excise	5,553	3,725	9,278	954	1,011	1,548	530	1,061
Culture, Media and Sport	581	0	581	0	0	0	0	0
Defence	8,503	17,238	25,741	18,899	5,135	1,034	263	777
Education and Employment	7,122	2,140	9,262	2,247	2,529	4,200	2,425	95
Environment, Transport and Regions	3,846	1,340	5,186	1,699	990	1,064	244	75
Health and Safety Executive/Commission	681	154	835	73	165	137	0	1,225
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	4,641	0	4,641	0	0	0	0	0
Health	2,267	252	2,519	125	234	605	119	14
HM Land Registry	778	506	1,284	1,528	619	1,167	0	486
Home Office	5,804	1,077	6,881	212	625	377	65	717
HM Prison Service	4,561	6,164	10,725	2,560	3,292	3,770	2,712	716
Inland Revenue	8,419	6,290	14,709	3,906	3,956	5,497	6,938	2,797
International Development	689	0	689	0	0	0	0	0
Intervention Board	0	933	933	0	0	0	262	0
Lord Chancellor's Department	5,391	1,113	6,504	358	665	688	97	323
National Statistics	780	676	1,456	0	0	117	0	545
Ordnance Survey	12	1,438	1,450	60	51	41	18	11
Registers of Scotland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Scottish Office	26	0	26	0	0	0	0	0
Scottish Prison Service	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Social Security	8,946	5,520	14,466	5,002	6,449	16,352	9,324	3,565
Trade and Industry	4,513	260	4,773	235	415	241	213	85
Treasury	890	0	890	0	0	0	0	0
Welsh Office	17	0	17	0	0	0	0	0

Regional distribution of staff at 1 April 1999 by Government office region

'Full-time equivalents

Department (including agencies)	Government office regions							
	London	South East London	Total London and South East	South West	West Midland	North West	North East	Merseyside
Royal Mint	16	0	16	0	0	0	0	0
Other Departments	3,523	103	3,626	5,079	389	121	74	192
All permanent non-industrial staff	83,166	50,691	133,857	44,546	27,715	38,586	23,985	12,889
Government office for the Regions	229	140	369	159	165	215	149	35
Non-industrial casual staff'	2,717	1,476	4,193	1,023	1,091	2,133	1,103	495
Industrial staff								
Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Cabinet Office	398	0	398	0	1	31	0	0
Defence	650	5,445	6,095	3,978	2,934	391	309	80
Environment, Transport and Regions	11	12	23	13	16	20	7	10
Health	0	0	0	0	16	0	0	0
Home Office	9	9	18	41	4	6	0	0
HM Prison Service	186	456	642	254	313	306	163	25
Royal Mint	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Scottish Office	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Social Security	0	0	0	16	0	0	0	0
Welsh Office	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other Departments	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
All permanent industrial staff	1,254	5,922	7,176	4,303	3,284	754	479	115
Industrial Casual Staff'	52.3	106.9	159.2	120.5	57	35.8	12.5	3.4
All Permanent Staff	84,420	56,613	141,033	48,849	30,999	39,340	24,464	13,004
All Staff	87,189	58,196	145,385	49,992	32,147	41,509	25,580	13,503

'Full-time equivalents

Department (including agencies)	Government office regions							
	Yorkshire and Humberside	East Midlands	Eastern	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Unreported and elsewhere	All areas
Non-industrial staff								
Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	1,447	364	909	399	260	0	18	10,455
Cabinet Office	0	0	191	0	15	0	5	2,067
Crown Prosecution Service	591	347	302	323	0	0	0	5,349
Customs and Excise	925	983	3,823	545	1,357	555	69	22,519
Culture, Media and Sport	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	581
Defence	2,072	1,651	5,340	2,425	6,292	1,486	3,376	74,491
Education and Employment	5,458	2,638	354	1,736	3,145	0	0	34,087
Environment, Transport and Regions	581	510	807	3,679	632	24	0	15,490
Health and Safety Executive/Commission	507	266	191	103	269	0	0	3,770
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	0	0	825	0	0	0	0	5,465
Health	1,127	29	10	0	0	0	9	4,791
HM Land Registry	435	842	817	608	0	0	0	7,786
Home Office	393	71	563	439	242	105	16	10,706
HM Prison Service	3,967	3,006	3,252	664	0	0	1,432	36,096
Inland Revenue	5,051	3,951	3,548	3,822	6,007	1,114	48	61,344
International Development	0	0	0	0	410	0	58	1,157
Intervention Board	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1,195
Lord Chancellor's Department	414	391	565	229	2	0	0	10,234
National Statistics	0	0	0	794	0	0	0	2,911
Ordnance Survey	49	35	58	28	56	0	0	1,857
Registers of Scotland	0	0	0	0	1,130	0	0	1,130
Scottish Office	0	0	0	0	4,967	0	7	5,000
Scottish Prison Service	0	0	0	0	4,824	0	0	4,824
Social Security	7,080	3,402	3,273	3,811	8,845	9	7	81,585
Trade and Industry	288	173	200	1,660	218	6	9	8,516
Treasury	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	890
Welsh Office	0	0	0	2,127	0	0	0	2,144
Royal Mint	0	0	0	331	0	0	0	347
Other Departments	102	100	76	183	2,436	100	21	12,508

[1]Full-time equivalents

Department (including agencies)	Government office regions: Yorkshire and Humberside	East Midlands	Eastern	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Unreported and elsewhere	All areas
All permanent non-industrial staff	30,487	18,639	25,104	23,906	41,107	3,399	5,075	429,295
Government office for the Regions[2]	168.1	135	146.8	0	0	0	0	1,541.4
Non-industrial casual staff[3]	1,213	592	702	977	1,652	52	744	15,970
Industrial staff								
Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	0	0	19	5	0	0	15	40
Cabinet Office	3	0	0	12	0	0	0	445
Defence	1,047	1,009	1,143	2,669	2,997	1,700	1,989	26,341
Environment, Transport and Regions	23	14	29	10	15	0	0	180
Health	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	16
Home Office	3	0	5	3	0	0	0	80
HM Prison Service	295	266	276	66	0	0	17	2,623
Royal Mint	0	0	0	639	0	0	0	639
Scottish Office	0	0	0	0	294	0	0	294
Social Security	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	16
Welsh Office	0	0	0	62	0	0	0	62
Other Departments	3	8	0	0	0	0	0	11
All permanent industrial staff	1,374	1,297	1,472	3,466	3,306	1,700	2,021	30,747
Industrial Casual Staff[3]	60	50	49	92	90	10	80	819
All Permanent Staff	31,861	19,936	26,576	27,372	44,412	5,098	7,095	460,039
All Staff	33,134	20,578	27,328	28,441	46,155	5,161	7,919	476,831

[1] Part-time staff are recorded according to the proportion of full-time hours worked.
[2] Included in departmental totals for DfEE, DETR and DTI.
[3] Regional figures are available only for casual staff from departments that report to Mandate. The unreported and Elsewhere and Total figures include staff not reported to Mandate.
Source:
Mandate and Departmental Returns.

Policing Initiatives

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list *(a)* the Government Departments and *(b)* the publicly-funded bodies which have used the People's Panel to test policing initiatives; and if she will list the initiatives concerned. [148670]

Mr. Stringer: To date the People's Panel has not been used to test any policing initiatives.

The panel is directed towards service delivery and the following is a list of the issues pursued by it:

Department	Description of research
Cabinet Office	Collection of baseline data on attitudes towards public services.
Cabinet Office	Research into attitudes to a wide range of services, with a particular focus on transport, local democracy and complaints handling.
Cabinet Office	To complement the Ministerial Roadshow element of the Listening to Women exercise which identified issues of importance to women.
Cabinet Office	Experiences of citizens using public services to evaluate how well Departments and agencies work together to deliver a joined-up service, and identify suggestions for improvement. The work was commissioned as part of the research for the Modernising Government White Paper.
Cabinet Office	Standards of service the public receive when they contact local and central government agencies.
Cabinet Office	Research to help the Cabinet Office prepare a new directory that brings together information for the main government helplines.
Cabinet Office	People's Panel: Analysis of the views of older people from the first three waves of Panel research.
Cabinet Office	Assessment of demand for extended delivery of public services 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
Cabinet Office	Central IT Unit Portal Demonstrator
Cabinet Office	Attitudes to public services in deprived and non-deprived areas.
Cabinet Office	Research into what people from ethnic minority communities think of the services they receive and how their opinions differ across and between different ethnic minority groups.

Department	*Description of research*
Cabinet Office	Satisfaction with public services; what people expect from them; and perceptions about how public services deal with complaints.
Cabinet Office	Qualitative research to explore public perception of electronic service delivery.
DETR	Research using Panel members living in England to inform the Urban White Paper and Housing Green Paper.
DETR—Commission for Integrated Transport	Research into the public's expectations for transport in the future. In particular to investigate consumer concerns about, and expectations of, transport in the longer term, and their priorities for investment.
DfEE	To investigate parents' attitudes to value added information in school performance tables.
DfEE	Research to examine attitudes to the daily literacy hour in primary schools, during which pupils spend an hour every day reading and writing.
HSE	Attitudes to gas safety and regulation.
MAFF	Qualitative research to evaluate a draft leaflet about GM food leaflet.
MAFF—Food Standards Agency	Research to assess how important it is to consumers to know the country of origin of food and what impact it has on the buying process; and what inferences the public is making about food products based on their country of origin.
Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA)	Qualitative research to investigate perceptions of the ministerial public appointments process.
OST	Research part of a public consultation to explore public attitudes to biosciences regulatory system.
Post Office Counters	Aspects of locations for one-stop shops and electronic service delivery.

Summaries of the research results have been placed in the House Library and published on the internet.

SOCIAL SECURITY

SERPS

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for each year since 1988, how many married men have transferred their company preserved pension into an appropriate personal pension; and what effect this has on a married man's widow's SERPS entitlement should he die before retirement age. [148495]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

A married man who contracts out of SERPS into an appropriate personal pension gives up all or part of his additional pension from the state scheme. He must provide for a widow's benefit when he buys an annuity on retirement.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of proposals to change the arrangement for pension entitlements to a dependent spouse after the death of the policyholder. [147491]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* On the state pensions side, where the person with the SERPS entitlement dies, there will be no change to the current arrangements for the following people:

Those who are already widowed now and are receiving a SERPS pension.

Those who are not widows or widowers now, but whose husbands or wives die between now and 5 October 2002.

We are also consulting on regulations which would mean there would also be no change for people who are widowed on or after 6 October 2002 but whose late husband or wife reached state pension age on or before 5 October 2002.

We have no plans to alter the inheritance arrangements with regard to the basic state pension or to contracted-out occupational pension schemes or appropriate personal pensions.

Incorrect Benefit Payments

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the amount of erroneous *(a)* underpayment and *(b)* overpayment arising as a result of error or fraud was by (i) officials and (ii) customers in respect of each benefit administered by his Department for each year since 1996–97. [148488]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is not available. Snapshot estimates of fraud and customer error in particular benefits are captured in the National Benefit Reviews, which have been placed in the library.

Area Benefit Reviews, which started in October 1997, provide on-going measurement of fraud and customer error for Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance. Reports are placed in the Library.

Uprated Benefits

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts), of 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 139W, if he will recalculate the table on the basis that both *(a)* the basic State Pension and *(b)* the Minimum Income Guarantee were uprated with prices. [148757]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* The information is in the table.

A comparison of total net cost with my previous reply to the hon. Member for Havant suggests that uprating by prices would have reduced net expenditure by about £2½ billion—from around £3¼ billion to around £1 billion.

Estimated costs of uprating selected benefits by prices, 2001–02

Benefit	*Cost*
Basic State Pension	£1,100 million
Minimum Income Guarantee	between –£50 million and zero
Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit for those aged 60 and over	–£50 million
Total cost	£1,000 to £1,050 million

Notes:

1. Figures are in cash terms and are rounded to the nearest £50 million.
2. Estimates relate to Great Britain.
3. The costs of uprating MIG, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit with prices are negative. This can be explained by the fact that the September RPI was higher (3.3 per cent.) than the September Rossi (1.6 per cent.). This means that with price uprating, pensioners' State Pensions would have increased at a faster rate than the applicable amount limits in the income-related benefits.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent representations he has had from disability organisations in relation to Winter Fuel Payments to severely disabled people under the age of 60 years; and what action he intends to take. [148612]

Mr. Rooker: There have been representations from the Kilmarnock and Loudoun Forum on Disability, and from the publication "Disability Now". Both representations concern extending Winter Fuel Payments to younger disabled people who receive the middle or higher rate of Disability Living Allowance.

For younger disabled people, Disability Living Allowance provides a contribution towards the extra costs associated with disability. The care and mobility needs entitlement criteria to the benefit are used as broad indicators of all the extra costs, including heating costs, that a disabled person may have. The disability premium in income-related benefits is paid in recognition that the poorest disabled people need additional help. Disabled people are free to use either of these benefits to pay for additional heating costs.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people who are eligible for a full Winter Fuel Payment have, in the first instance, received only half of the total amount owed in each year since 1997. [148486]

Mr. Rooker: The administration of benefits is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. David Willetts, dated 6 February 2001:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many people who are eligible for a full Winter Fuel Payment have, in the first instance, received only half of the total amount owed in each year since 1997.

The Department of Social Security has not made any payments equivalent to half of the assessed entitlement.

I hope this is helpful.

Pensions (Leeds, Central)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of pensioners in the Leeds, Central parliamentary constituency receive *(a)* less than a full old age pension and *(b)* no old age pension. [148815]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Retirement Pension in the parliamentary constituency of Leeds, Central, 31 March 2000

	Number (Thousand)	*Percentage*
All	13.9	100
Nil	0.1	1.0
Less than full rate	4.5	32.3
Full rate	9.3	66.7

Notes:

1. The case count figures quoted are in thousands and are rounded to the nearest hundred.
2. The figures quoted are based on the monetary value of the basic State Pension.

Source:

5 per cent. sample from the Pension Strategy Computer System at 31 March 2000.

Minimum Funding Requirement

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many responses to the consultation on the minimum funding requirement had been received by the end of the consultation period; when the Government plan to respond; and if they will publish the responses. [148595]

Mr. Rooker: To date 73 responses have been received. We are giving careful consideration to them and will then decide on the best way forward. A summary of views will be published in due course.

Pension Entitlement on Re-marriage

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what discussions he has had with pensioner groups of the importance of pension entitlements after re-marriage; [147490]

(2) if he will make a statement on the impact of pension sharing on an individual after *(a)* divorce and *(b)* re-marriage; [147488]

(3) if he will take steps to ensure that a divorcee does not receive a reduced pension entitlement after re-marriage. [147489]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* We have consulted widely on our pensions policies, including that relating to pension sharing.

Since 1 December 2000 divorcing couples can apply to the courts to share pension rights held in occupational and personal pensions, the State Earnings-Related Pension Scheme (SERPS) and the stakeholder pension, and the state second pension, when these are introduced.

Pension sharing will give each divorcing individual a share in the pension rights. These rights will belong to the recipient and will not be dependent on the circumstances

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of the ex-spouse. They can be kept regardless of subsequent changes in personal circumstances including re-marriage.

Some women expecting to receive a Category B basic pension, based on their former husband's national insurance record, may see a reduction in that pension if they re-marry before reaching pension age. That is because their Category B pension will be based on their new husband's contribution record. However, the exact financial impact on an individual who re-marries will depend on a variety of factors, in particular the couple's financial circumstances.

Benefits (Young People in Scotland)

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in Scotland under 25 years of age were claiming benefits in the years *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000. [145636]

Angela Eagle: The available information is in the table.

Recipients in Scotland aged under 25 years in receipt of key social security benefits May 1997–2000

Year	Total	Under 16s in receipt of DLA	16 to 25 year olds claiming a key benefit
1997	111,700	17,900	93,800
1998	107,900	18,600	89,300
1999	104,900	19,400	85,400
2000	93,600	20,000	73,500

Notes:

Key benefits are Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), Incapacity Benefit (IB), Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA), Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Income Support (IS). Family Credit (FC) and Disability Working Allowance (DWA) were replaced by Working Families Tax Credit and Disabled Persons Tax Credit from October 1999.

Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred.

Source:

Five per cent. caseload samples taken in May of each year.

National Insurance Numbers

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many new national insurance numbers have been *(a)* created and *(b)* cancelled in each year since 1992. [148487]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Number of National Insurance numbers created and removed

	National Insurance numbers	
Year[1]	Created on DCI	Removed from DCI
1992	9,763,571	20,709
1993	3,289,259	18,514
1994	1,057,419	14,523
1995	1,007,641	16,285
1996	978,666	55,492
1997	1,017,500	57,859
1998	1,026,885	28,963
1999	1,021,776	60,878
2000	995,351	181,880

[1] January to December

Source:

Departmental Central Index (DCI)

Departmental Projects

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the projects undertaken for his Department by *(a)* outside consultants, *(b)* academic researchers and *(c)* university departments since 1 May 1997, giving the total expenditure incurred in each category. [144077]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested regarding outside consultants could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The Department commissions a wide range of social research to help inform, develop and evaluate its policies; academic researchers carry out a significant proportion of this work. Details of all social research commissioned by the Department, including costs, are listed in the Department's Social Security Research Yearbook, which is published annually. Copies are in the Library.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Miners' Compensation

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the monthly totals for the number of medical assessment procedures conducted at each testing centre in the miners' compensation for chest disease agreement from January 2000 to date. [149090]

Mr. Hain: A breakdown by testing centres undertaking medical assessment procedures is available only from June 2000 onwards. Between January and June, Healthcall, the company contracted to undertake the Medical Assessment Process, completed a total of 1,163 MAP assessments.

The monthly totals for the number of medical assessment procedures conducted at each testing centre in the miners' chest disease agreement from June to December 2000 are as follows:

June 2000

Test centre	Number medically assessed
Ayr	30
Barnsley	0
Cannock	1
Chesterfield	5
Coventry	0
Deal	0
Durham	2
Edinburgh	42
Hamilton	34
Leeds	0
Lochore	25
Manchester	4
Mansfield	40
Mexborough	21
Mountain Ash	67
Newcastle	9
Newport	104
Nottingham	31
Pontefract	0
Sheffield	41
Stoke	0
Swansea	77
Domiciliary Visits	105
Total	638

July 2000

Test centre	*Number medically assessed*
Ayr	14
Barnsley	5
Cannock	0
Chesterfield	0
Coventry	4
Deal	0
Durham	6
Edinburgh	31
Hamilton	22
Leeds	12
Lochore	12
Manchester	9
Mansfield	18
Mexborough	11
Mountain Ash	47
Newcastle	2
Newport	51
Nottingham	5
Pontefract	45
Sheffield	4
Stoke	0
Swansea	51
Domiciliary Visits	34
Total	383

August 2000

Test centre	*Number medically assessed*
Ayr	50
Barnsley	0
Cannock	4
Chesterfield	24
Coventry	13
Deal	8
Durham	26
Edinburgh	55
Hamilton	91
Leeds	8
Lochore	70
Manchester	9
Mansfield	73
Mexborough	33
Mountain Ash	11
Newcastle	43
Newport	103
Nottingham	41
Pontefract	44
Sheffield	22
Stoke	18
Wrexham	0
Huddersfield	0
Swansea	72
Domiciliary Visits	69
Total	993

September 2000

Test centre	*Number medically assessed*
Ayr	49
Barnsley	55
Bristol	0
Cannock	13
Chesterfield	33
Coventry	16
Deal	35
Durham	34
Edinburgh	29
Hamilton	48

September 2000

Test centre	*Number medically assessed*
Huddersfield	0
Leeds	16
Lochore	68
Manchester	7
Mansfield	74
Mexborough	30
Mountain Ash	135
Newcastle	22
Newport	60
Nottingham	28
Pontefract	65
Sheffield	33
Stirling	0
Stoke	16
Swansea	55
Wigan	0
Wrexham	0
Domiciliary Visits	51
Total	972

October 2000

Test centre	*Number medically assessed*
Ayr	37
Barnsley	63
Bristol	0
Cannock	24
Chesterfield	55
Coventry	29
Deal	4
Durham	61
Edinburgh	41
Hamilton	57
Huddersfield	7
Leeds	31
Lochore	65
Manchester	20
Mansfield	67
Mexborough	36
Mountain Ash	139
Newcastle	34
Newport	84
Nottingham	42
Pontefract	68
Sheffield	46
Stirling	0
Stoke	13
Swansea	83
Wigan	40
Wrexham	0
Domiciliary Visits	58
Total	1,204

November 2000

Test centre	*Number medically assessed*
Ayr	32
Barnsley	51
Bristol	0
Cannock	26
Chesterfield	50
Coventry	33
Deal	28
Durham	62
Edinburgh	57
Hamilton	57
Huddersfield	0
Leeds	33

November 2000

Test centre	*Number medically assessed*
Lochore	52
Manchester	17
Mansfield	55
Mexborough	48
Mountain Ash	111
Newcastle	40
Newport	90
Nottingham	47
Pontefract	66
Sheffield	51
Stirling	0
Stoke	38
Swansea	81
Wigan	22
Wrexham	11
Domiciliary Visits	149
Total	1,307

December 2000

Test centre	*Number medically assessed*
Ayr	27
Barnsley	57
Bristol	0
Cannock	28
Chesterfield	24
Coventry	32
Deal	0
Durham	49
Edinburgh	31
Hamilton	37
Huddersfield	2
Leeds	30
Lochore	50
Manchester	17
Mansfield	36
Mexborough	46
Mountain Ash	93
Newcastle	33
Newport	73
Nottingham	39
Pontefract	55
Sheffield	42
Stirling	0
Stoke	43
Swansea	79
Wigan	25
Wrexham	8
Domiciliary Visits	105
Total	1,061

The tables only show a breakdown for MAPs carried out for live claimants. In the year in total, Healthcall, undertook 8,572 MAPs; a further 5,246 were invited for an appointment.

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the new testing centre for the Medical Assessment Procedure at Ammanford will be operational; and if he will make a statement. [149089]

Mr. Hain: The new testing centre for the Medical Assessment Procedure at Ammanford should be operational by the end of February.

The Department currently has five centres in operation in Wales to undertake the Medical Assessment Process, MAP, for respiratory disease. A further centre at Ystrad Mynach, in addition to that in Ammanford, is due to open in March. It is intended that the two new centres will initially be used for the purpose of assessing priority claimants only, including the eldest of the illest. All the MAP centres are also equipped to carry out spirometry assessment.

In Wales as a whole, over 28,000 claims have been registered. Of these 2,250 claimants have proceeded through the full MAP, and a further 1,729 have appointments.

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the total amount paid out to miners *(a)* for vibration white finger and *(b)* for chest disease in each month from January 2000 to date. [149168]

Mr. Hain: In total, the Department has now made around 65,000 individual payments, including bereavement awards, interim settlements and full and final settlements to claimants in respect of compensation for respiratory disease and vibration related disease, totalling over £333 million. The Department continues to pay out around £1 million per day in compensation.

Total amount of compensation paid relating to Vibration White Finger, VWF, on a month by month basis since January 2000 is as follows:

£ million

Month	*Total amount paid*
February	6.2
March	6.5
April	24.5
May	12.5
June	15.0
July	12.8
August	14.5
September	7.3
October	10.3
November	17.0
December	11.5

Total amount of compensation paid relating to respiratory disease on a month by month basis since January 2000 is as follows:

£ million

Month	*Total amount paid*
February	4.3
March	3.4
April	2.7
May	2.8
June	3.2
July	2.4
August	5.7
September	2.5
October	7.3
November	9.6
December	12.5

Departmental Policies (Morecambe and Lunesdale)

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, including statistical information, the effect on the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [149124]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My Department does not maintain statistical information at constituency level.

My hon. Friend's constituents, like many others throughout Lancashire, will have benefited from my Department's Employment Rights policies which include National Minimum Wage, Working Time Directive, Part Time Working Regulations and improved Maternity Leave.

All of the wards in the City of Lancaster have been included in the revised Assisted Area map for Regional Selective Assistance and the Enterprise Grant Scheme.

In the North West region my Department's policies have contributed to growth in employment by 107,000 and a fall in unemployment by 63,000; reductions in youth unemployment by 75 per cent. and long-term unemployment by 54 per cent.

Steel Imports

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proposals have been made by EU member states to impose *(a)* new and *(b)* additional dumping duties in respect of steel imports into the European Union in general, and those from Russia in particular. [149185]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The European Commission carries out anti-dumping investigations on behalf of member states, normally on the basis of a complaint from EU industry. The Commission consults member states on the opening of investigations and on any proposals for provisional or definitive measures. The final decision on provisional measures is taken by the Commission; the final decision on definitive measures is taken by the Commission for Treaty of Paris products and by the Council of Ministers on a simple majority vote for Treaty of Rome products.

There are currently provisional or definitive anti-dumping measures in force on imports of seven steel products from a total of 17 different countries. Definitive measures are in force on imports of seamless pipes and tubes, and grain orientated electrical steel sheets from Russia. Provisional measures are in force on imports of steel wire ropes and cables from Russia.

Post Offices

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what definition he uses of avoidable closure of a post office in the context of the Government's formal requirement on the post office to maintain the rural network. [149189]

Mr. Alan Johnson: In the context of the Government's formal requirement on the post office to maintain the rural network and to prevent any avoidable closures of rural post offices, an unavoidable closure is when the post office can find no one suitable to take over from a departing subpostmaster, where no suitable premises remain available or where an associated retail business is no longer commercially viable.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate his Department has made of the number of sub post offices that *(a)* have closed and *(b)* will close as a result of compulsory computerisation. [149188]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My Department has made no such estimates and I understand from the post office that they do not have historical data on the reasons for subpostmasters' resignations. Internal post office research in the form of exit interviews with subpostmasters has been undertaken in recent months and I understand that, from the sample of subpostmasters interviewed, 6 per cent. cited computerisation of the post office network as the reason for resignation. However, a subpostmaster's resignation, for whatever reason, does not automatically mean that the post office will close. The post office always advertise a vacancy in order to seek a suitable applicant to take over the office.

Consumer Protection

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps are being taken by his Department to increase consumer protection. [148887]

Dr. Howells: We are taking a number of important steps to increase consumer protection. We have recently implemented Distance Selling regulations which give additional legal protection to consumers purchasing direct from home, including via the Internet. We are promoting e-commerce initiatives to enhance EU and wider international co-operation and enforcement, and to identify further issues which need developing. We will shortly be taking further steps to protect consumers, including introducing Stop Now Orders, which will give Trading Standards Officers new enforcement powers, and legislation for the full pint of beer.

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has for the future of the Export Credits Guarantee Department; and if he will make a statement. [148384]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 5 February 2001]*: I presented to the House on 25 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 520–21W, the report of ECGD's Mission and Status Review. This report set out changes to ECGD's Mission, and set out an important agenda for change. ECGD is incorporating the conclusions of the Review into its strategic planning process and into corresponding change initiatives that will be implemented over the next three years.

ECGD is on course to deliver, by 1 April 2001, the key principles of a capital framework to enhance its risk management systems.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will inquire into the circumstances under which the ECGD provided credit cover to a hotel project in Ghana involving the Bank of Scotland and International

Generics; and what steps have been taken by the ECGD to ensure that the funds were used for the purposes for which they were intended. [148829]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* ECGD provided export credit cover for this project in 1994 following a request from the Ghanaian Ministry of Finance for such support.

The Loan Agreement required that disbursements to the UK supplier, International Generics Ltd., would only be made against qualifying certificates in the form specified by the Loan Agreement, which were signed by the supplier's authorised signatory and accompanied by a supporting certificate from the architect for the relevant project. ECGD has since carried out extensive inquiries into this project, the results of which were passed to the DTI Companies Investigation Branch and the Serious Fraud Office (SFO). The DTI and SFO informed ECGD that they did not consider these cases suitable for investigation owing to the difficulty in finding a criminal offence that had occurred within UK jurisdiction, which they could investigate and prosecute.

However, if the Ghanaian authorities undertake an investigation into whether any illegal activity has taken place, ECGD/DTI/SFO will co-operate with them in any way possible.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what basis the ECGD considered International Generics to be a suitable beneficiary of export credit cover in 1994; and when they ceased to be considered suitable. [148828]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* As an organisation carrying on business in the UK, supplying UK goods and services to organisations carrying on business outside the UK, International Generics were eligible, under the provisions of the Export and Investment Guarantees Act 1991, for ECGD cover in 1994. Under the Statement of Business Principles announced at the beginning of this year, ECGD will not only look at the payment risks, but also make thorough inquiries into the underlying quality of the projects, including their environmental, social and development impacts, put forward by International Generics (or indeed any other exporter) before committing cover.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reason the ECGD accepted a sovereign guarantee from the Bank of Ghana in 1994 against the advice of the IMF and World bank. [148830]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* Neither the IMF nor the World bank gave ECGD any advice regarding the acceptance of Ghanaian sovereign guarantees. However, in providing guarantees, ECGD always sought, and received, assurances from the Ghanaian government that ECGD-backed borrowing was consistent with their agreements with the IMF. Indeed, there was no non-concessional borrowing limit in Ghana's agreement with the IMF until 1997.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many projects supported by the ECGD in the last 10 years have been subsequently discovered to have involved the misdirection of funds to purposes different from those approved by ECGD; and in which countries this occurred. [148831]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* There are no examples of proven cases involving the misdirection of funds to purposes different from those approved by ECGD.

Industrial Gas Prices

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the average price of a unit of gas supplied for industrial use in *(a)* January 2000 and *(b)* January 2001. [148301]

Mr. Hain: The average price of a unit of gas delivered to industrial end users in Great Britain was 0.556 p/kWh in the first quarter of 2000. The latest available comparable figure relates to the third quarter of 2000 when the average price was 0.552 p/kWh. Accurate figures for the average price paid in January 2001 are not available. However provisional information on price movements suggests that, on average, prices paid by industrial end users have risen by about 40 per cent. between January 2000 and January 2001. This average figure will reflect prices paid by all industrial customers, including those on long term fixed contract prices.

MOX Fuel Shipments

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry by what authority UK Atomic Energy constables are accompanying the shipment of Belgonucleaire/Cogema manufactured mixed oxide fuel from France to Japan. [146905]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 24 January 2001]:* The UK Government have accepted the responsibility for ensuring that the shipment is undertaken in accordance with our international obligations on nuclear non-proliferation and physical protection of nuclear material, arising from the fact that the transporting vessels fly the British flag. The Director of Civil Nuclear Security has approved a transport plan for this shipment, of which the UKAEA Constables are an essential element. They are deployed with the agreement of the UKAEA.

Employment Relations Act

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will publish a consultation document on possible extension to the clergy and other official holders of rights under the Employment Relations Act 1999. [149115]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I intend to publish later this year a discussion paper on all the legal issues relating to employment status as they affect the coverage of statutory employment rights. I envisage that the position of members of the clergy and other office holders will be among the issues raised. Any future proposals for changes in the legislation in this regard will be considered in the light of responses to the discussion paper.

Petrol Prices

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list for each of the last

36 months *(a)* the average retail price of four star unleaded petrol and *(b)* the average price of a barrel of oil. [145343]

Mr. Hain: The average retail prices of four star and premium unleaded petrol are given in the following table, together with the average price of a barrel of oil:

Year/month	*4 Star*[1] *(pence per litre)*	*Premium unleaded (pence per litre)*	*Barrel of oil*[2] *($ per barrel)*	*Barrel of oil*[2] *(£ per barrel)*
1998				
January	69.03	63.13	15.77	9.64
February	68.64	62.63	15.05	9.17
March	68.20	62.09	14.12	8.49
April	72.38	65.77	14.48	8.67
May	72.41	65.72	14.63	8.84
June	72.21	65.62	14.03	8.50
July	72.37	66.04	13.30	8.09
August	72.48	66.14	12.61	7.72
September	72.00	65.80	13.85	8.23
October	71.78	65.75	13.40	7.91
November	71.33	65.02	12.11	7.28
December	70.45	63.84	10.41	6.23
1999				
January	69.61	62.87	11.10	6.72
February	69.78	63.02	10.69	6.56
March	73.85	66.51	12.92	7.97
April	77.83	70.20	15.28	9.49
May	77.61	70.04	15.83	9.80
June	77.32	69.80	16.31	10.23
July	78.26	70.98	18.66	11.85
August	79.76	72.87	20.23	12.60
September	80.05	73.02	22.41	13.80
October	80.99	73.85	22.03	13.29
November	80.35	73.36	23.50	14.50
December	81.02	75.42	24.20	15.00
2000				
January	80.84	75.38	24.46	14.92
February	80.75	75.14	25.88	16.18
March	82.99	78.32	26.51	16.77
April	84.45	79.96	23.24	14.68
May	84.04	79.54	26.77	17.75
June	88.34	84.28	28.57	18.93
July	88.76	84.65	28.06	18.59
August	85.86	80.34	29.30	19.67
September	85.70	80.17	32.21	22.44
October	85.07	79.46	31.16	21.47
November	86.92	82.05	31.67	22.22
December	[3]85.03	[3]79.87	25.96	17.75

[1] From October 1999 four star prices represent lead replacement petrol
[2] Two month Brent futures
[3] Provisional data
Source:
DTI Energy Trends and IPE

NORTHERN IRELAND

Life Sentences

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were serving a life prison sentence in prisons in Northern Ireland on 1 January. [148897]

Mr. Ingram: At 1 January 2001 there were 84 men and one woman serving sentences of life imprisonment in prisons in Northern Ireland. The figure of 84 men includes eight prisoners on restricted transfer to NI from the Home Office. In addition there were three males detained at the Secretary of State's Pleasure (convicted of murder committed while under 18 years of age).

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Agriculture Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the outcome of the Agriculture Council held in Brussels on 29 and 30 January was; and if he will make a statement. [148200]

Mr. Nick Brown: I attended the Agriculture Council meeting held in Brussels on 29 January, accompanied by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State and Brid Rogers MLA, Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development in the Northern Ireland Executive.

The main focus of the Council was BSE. The Commission reported on progress by member states in implementing the new measures adopted in December, as

well as on the market and budgetary problems arising from the dramatic fall in beef consumption in many member states. In the light of advice from the Scientific Steering Committee, the Council agreed new rules should be put in place banning the use of mechanically recovered meat from ruminant bones, requiring heat treatment of fat from ruminants for use in feed, and requiring the removal of vertebral columns from cattle. I made clear that the SSC advice required no ban to be imposed on UK beef on the bone and this was not opposed.

The Council will receive, before its next meeting, a package of proposals addressing the problems in the beef market. These will be financed within the budget limits laid down by the Berlin European Council.

The Council also heard presentations from Commissioner Byrne on proposals to improve the welfare of pigs and planned proposals to improve the operation of the Directive on the welfare of animals in transit. I warmly welcomed both and urged the Council to agree to implement the planned improvements for pigs on a faster scale than proposed.

Commissioner Fischler presented new proposals for reform of the olive oil regime and for a pilot scheme introducing a new simplified subsidy to replace certain production-linked aids. The scheme would be limited to farmers receiving no more than euro 1,000 a year.

Fish Farming

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans are in place to lease areas of sea adjacent to the coast for the purpose of fish farming. [148679]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* Requests to lease areas of the sea bed adjacent to the coast should be made to the Crown Estate or the Duchy of Cornwall.

Once a lease has been granted, fishermen can apply to the Minister of Agriculture for legal powers to protect shellfish farming. The creation of Several and Regulating Orders can help to preserve and encourage shellfisheries, while promoting the sustainable future of the fishery.

River Idle/River Don

Caroline Flint: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how frequently *(a)* the River Idle near Bawtry and *(b)* the River Don along the Sprotborough Gorge are dredged; and to what depth. [149067]

Mr. Morley: I understand that the Environment Agency has not identified a need for dredging the River Idle since a flood alleviation scheme was constructed. A recent visual inspection showed no evidence of significant siltation but the Agency is planning a full survey to check against original design depths.

The Agency has no plans to dredge the River Don at Sprotborough Gorge for flood defence purposes. I understand that British Waterways determine the width and depth of the river for navigation purposes.

Caroline Flint: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures the Environment Agency has planned for flood prevention and defence for *(a)* the River Idle and *(b)* the River Don along the Sprotborough Gorge. [149052]

Mr. Morley: I understand the Environment Agency has no plans to add to the flood alleviation works already in place from West Stockwith to Bawtry on the River Idle.

As far as Sprotborough Gorge is concerned, I understand that the Agency will be investigating the adequacy of existing flood defence measures as part of its preparation of a strategy for the River Don later this year.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which Ministers have made inquiries or representations concerning the Hinduja brothers to the Indian Government. [147769]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* No FCO Minister has made any inquiry or representation to the Indian Government concerning the legal proceedings involving the Hinduja brothers.

Abortion

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will request from his counterpart in the US Administration the background information that formed the basis of their decision to withhold US Government funding from organisations providing abortion in the Third World and China; [147700]

(2) if he intends to support the United States President's recently announced policy concerning US Government funding for organisations providing abortion in the Third World and China during his forthcoming visit to the US. [147690]

Mr. Battle: The question of US funding of organisations whose programme includes the provision of abortion services and advice is a matter for the US Government to determine.

Elections (Observer Funding)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what funding is given by his Department to the *(a)* British Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, *(b)* the Inter-Parliamentary Union and *(c)* the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe for election observing; and when this funding was last increased. [148326]

Mr. Wilson: The full title for the 'British Commonwealth Parliamentary Association' is 'Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (UK branch)'. The FCO provides no funding to this organisation. The branch is a registered UK charity and is one of 141 branches world-wide. Each branch is autonomous, raising its own finance. The UK branch relies on 90 per cent of its funding from HM Treasury.

The 'Inter-Parliamentary Union' is again funded directly by HM Treasury; the FCO provides no funding.

The UK provides at least 10 per cent. of the requested personnel for the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Electoral Observation Missions. In 2000 the cost of this was £562,546. In addition the FCO pays assessed contributions amounting to 9 per cent. of the OSCE core costs for election observation, as detailed in the organisation's annual budget. In 2000 this amounted to £187,043. The size of the UK contribution rises or falls each year according to the size and number of election observation missions mounted.

EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 23 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 554W, on the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which person, body or state proclaimed the adopted charter; what statements relating to the charter were signed at Nice and by whom; and if all political declarations made at European councils and in ratified treaties are those of an agreed and collective policy. [148313]

Mr. Vaz: The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights was proclaimed by the three institutions—the Council, the European Parliament, and the Commission on 7 December 2000.

A statement saying that

"the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission solemnly proclaim the text below as the Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union"

was signed by the Presidents of the European Commission and European Parliament and by the French Foreign Minister on behalf of the Council.

A Declaration on the future of the Union, agreed at the Nice European Council, calls for the status of the Charter to be considered at the next IGC in 2004.

Mr. Krishna Maharaj

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when consular staff have met Mr. Krishna Maharaj in the past two years. [149040]

Mr. Wilson: The Vice Consul at our Vice-Consulate in Orlando visited Mr. Maharaj in prison on 9 December 1998. He subsequently visited on 18 December 1999, but Mr. Maharaj had other visitors and decided not to see him at that time.

The Vice-Consul visited most recently on 18 January 2000, and will do so again on 8 February 2001.

Premier Oil

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what response the Government have had from Premier Oil since its request for the company to withdraw from Burma; and if he will make a statement. [149049]

Mr. Battle: Premier Oil remain in Burma. But, as I said in my reply to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) on 6 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 488W, Premier Oil are well aware of our views on their investment and on Burma generally. Our policy has not changed and will not do so until there is substantive progress in that country.

Burma/Yugoslavia (Sanctions)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his policy on imposing sanctions on *(a)* Burma and *(b)* the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; and if he will make a statement. [149087]

Mr. Battle: The UK fully implements and enforces the EU Common Position—measures imposed on Burma since 1996 by the EU because of the severe and systematic violations of human rights and lack of concrete progress towards democracy and national reconciliation in that country. In April last year, the UK successfully argued for the EU Common Position (which already included a full arms embargo, bars on defence links and non-humanitarian aid and visa restrictions) to be strengthened by imposing a ban on the export of equipment that could be used for internal repression or terrorism, strengthening the visa ban list and imposing a freeze of funds on designated members of the Burmese Government, military and security forces and designated Burmese authorities in the tourism sector. There is no consensus within the EU or UN for further measures to be adopted. Unilaterally, the UK does not encourage trade with or investment in Burma and draws attention to the views of Burmese democratic leaders that tourism there is inappropriate. The UK does not intend to soften its approach to Burma until there is substantial change in the political and human rights situation.

With regard to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), EU sanctions were radically revised following the democratic victory of President Vojislav Kostunica in October last year. The oil and flight bans were abolished. Residual sanctions, comprising a visa ban and freeze of funds, have been retained to target specifically Milosevic and persons associated with him. The EU arms embargo and embargo on the supply to the FRY of equipment which might be used for internal repression remain in force.

The UK further implements the provisions of United Nations Security Council resolution 1160 (1998), which imposed an arms embargo on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and a prohibition on arming and training for terrorist activities there.

Prisoners of War (North Korea)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Government of North Korea on the fate of untraced United Kingdom prisoners of war lost during the Korean War. [147788]

Mr. Battle: The Secretary of State has not held any recent discussion with the Government of North Korea on this subject. Establishing diplomatic relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea will allow us to discuss this and other issues with the North Korean Government.

HEALTH

French Meat

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he was first informed of the contents of the report to Directorate D of the Health and Consumer Protection Directorate-General of a veterinary mission to France relating to certain protective measures against BSE and scrapie, with particular reference to implementation of Commission Decisions 94/381/EC, 98/272/EC, 98/703/EC and 97/18/EC; and what action he has taken to protect British consumers since then. [144258]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* The Food Standards Agency has advised that the report was published in December 1999 and concerns a veterinary mission carried out in France in May/June 1999. The purpose of the mission was to examine compliance in France with certain EC measures relating to monitoring and eradication of transmissible spongiform encephalopathies in cattle and sheep. These are all matters for which Agriculture Ministers are responsible.

The Food Standards Agency has been monitoring the incidence of BSE across Europe. Its latest advice is that no additional measures are currently needed in the United Kingdom to protect consumers from legal beef imports from France or other European countries.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what dates he *(a)* spoke by telephone to and *(b)* met (i) the French Minister of Health and (ii) the European Commissioner with responsibility for health and consumer protection, to discuss the contents of the report to Directorate D of the Health and Consumer Protection Directorate-General of a veterinary mission to France relating to certain protective measures against BSE and scrapie, with particular reference to implementation of Commission Decisions 94/381/EC, 98/272/EC, 98/703/EC and 97/18/EC. [144257]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* I have not held any discussions with members of the French Government or the European Commission on the report.

Community Health Councils

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much of the money allocated in 2000–01 by the Northern and Yorkshire National Health Service Regional Office was allocated to *(a)* the South Tyneside Community Health Council and *(b)* each other community health council in the Northern and Yorkshire Region; and what guidelines were used in the allocation of the money. [148616]

Ms Stuart: The moneys allocated by the Northern and Yorkshire National Health Service Executive Regional Office to South Tyneside Community Health Council and each other community health council in the Northern and Yorkshire Region in 2000–01 are detailed in the table.

The allocation to each community health council is calculated using the following formula:

1. "Common requirement"—60 per cent. of the disposable budget to be divided equally between all 28 community health councils in region.
2. Population—32 per cent. of the disposable budget to be allocated to all community health councils based on their proportion of the overall population of the region.
3. Land area—5 per cent. of the disposable budget to be allocated based on overall land area in region.
4. Ethnicity project money—3 per cent. to be held in central reserve managed by a nominated group.

CHC allocations 2000–01

£

2000–01 allocations	*Revised initial budgets*
Airedale	101,299
Bradford	118,968
East Yorkshire	111,659
Hull	96,246
Leeds	165,076
Harrogate	108,538
Northallerton	97,690
Scarborough	91,892
York	109,425
Calderdale	106,571
Dewsbury	94,358
Huddersfield	94,869
North Durham	107,943
Pontefract	110,728
Wakefield	121,519
Newcastle	106,225
North Tyneside	97,001
East Cumbria	107,244
West Cumbria	93,042
Northumberland	114,000
Darlington and Teesdale	98,574
South Durham and Weardale	101,617
Gateshead	101,107
South Tyneside	96,999
Sunderland	102,811
Hartlepool	94,426
North Tees	108,501
South Tees	114,713
Sub total	2,973,040

Food Safety (Fish)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action officials from his Department take to *(a)* monitor and *(b)* receive information about the levels of (i) polybrominated diphenyl ethers and (ii) dioxins and dioxin-like chemicals in fish; and if he will publish information obtained for each of the last 10 years. [148820]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* I am advised by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) that the Government have been monitoring and releasing information for dioxins and dioxin-like chemicals in food, including fish, for over 10 years. Information on fish has been published in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food's Food Surveillance Paper No. 31, and Food Surveillance Information Sheets Nos. 71, 89, 105, 145 and 184. The most recent information has been collected by the Agency and published in FSA Food Surveillance Information Sheet No. 4. Copies of all the above documents are available in the Library of the House.

Similar information on polybrominated diphenyl ethers is not yet available. However, the FSA is intending to start a programme of surveys on polybrominated diphenyl ethers and other related compounds in the near future. The results of this programme will also be publicly released.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the effects on human health of the consumption of more than one (i) 100g and (ii) 130g portion of farmed salmon per week, with particular reference to *(a)* pregnant women and *(b)* children under the age of four years; and if he will make a statement. [148819]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* I am advised by the Food Standards Agency that the health benefits of eating moderate amounts of fish, including farmed salmon, as part of a well-balanced diet outweigh any possible risk to health associated with dioxins and polychlorinated biphenyls in food. The FSA recommends that as part of a balanced diet people should eat two portions of fish per week, one of which should be oily. Pregnant women and small children are advised to follow the same general advice on fish consumption. Consumption of more than a large portion (i.e. a 130g portion) of salmon per week is unlikely to be harmful, provided that it is consistent with a balanced diet.

Health and Social Care Bill

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the costs of *(a)* setting up and *(b)* running patient forums, overview and scrutiny Committees, ILAF and PALS. [148566]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* At this stage of the Bill, it would be inappropriate to go into detail about the cost of the new systems and structures for patient and public involvement until the legislation covering some of the new arrangements has been passed by parliamentary process.

Aerosol Addiction

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people *(a)* under and *(b)* over 16 years were addicted to aerosols in each of the last five years. [148836]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 6 February 2001]:* The information requested is not available in the form requested. However, information about the use of drugs (including volatile substances) by young people in 1998 and 1999 is included in the Statistical Bulletin "Statistics on young people and drug misuse: England, 1998". This is available in the Library. Relevant information from this is shown in the table.

Proportion of young people aged 11–15 years who had used glue/solvents and gas in the last year, England

Per cent.

Drug	*1998*	*1999*
Glue or Solvents	1	2
Gas (Butane, lighter refills)	—	2

Proportion of young people aged 16–24 years who had used glue etc in the last year, England and Wales

Per cent.

Drug	*1998*
Glue etc	1

Information on people presenting to drug misuse services for the first time, or for the first time for six months or more is published in the statistical bulletins "Statistics from the Regional Drug Misuse Databases for six months ending . . ". This is available in the Library. Relevant information from this is shown is in the table.

Number of users presenting for treatment at drug misuse agencies with solvents as their main drug of misuse during the periods ending 1 October 1996 to 31 March 2000—England

	All ages	*Under 20*	*Over 20*
October 1996 to March 1997	158	95	63
April 1997 to September 1997	148	95	53
October 1997 to March 1998	167	116	51
April 1998 to September 1998	157	104	53
October 1998 to March 1999	139	91	48
April 1999 to September 1999	165	116	49
October 1999 to March 2000	176	113	63

Prescription Charges

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of the average cost of medicine the prescription charge represented in the latest year for which figures are available. [149338]

Ms Stuart: For the 12 months January to December 1999, the prescription charge represented 44 per cent. of the net ingredient cost of chargeable items.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of all prescriptions are provided free. [149333]

Ms Stuart: Around 85 per cent. of all prescription items dispensed by community pharmacists and appliance contractors are dispensed free of charge.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimates he has made of the income profile of people who purchased pre-payment certificates. [149332]

Ms Stuart: No such estimates have been made.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of the adult under 60 years old population do not have to pay prescription charges. [149334]

Ms Stuart: It is estimated that around 20 per cent. of the population aged between 18 and 60 do not have to pay prescription charges.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Class Sizes

Paddy Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* primary school and *(b)* secondary school pupils were in classes of 30 or more in (i) Somerset and (ii) Yeovil constituency in each of the years 1994–95 to 2000–01. [144604]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 18 January 2001]:* The available information for Somerset local education authority area and the parliamentary constituency of Yeovil on class sizes collected in January is shown in the following table. Information on class sizes by parliamentary constituency is not available prior to 1997.

Provisional estimates for the year 2000–01 are expected to be published later this year.

We have secured early delivery of our infant class size pledge in Yeovil. The most recent figures show that in September 2000 there were no infant classes in the constituency with more than 30 pupils.

The size of the average secondary class nationally, at 22, is still five below the average primary class. Secondary headteachers are receiving up to £50,000 in direct grant to spend as they choose. If this were spent on recruiting teachers, the average secondary class size could be reduced by up to 0.8.

Number of pupils in maintained primary and secondary schools in classes of size 30 or more taught by one teacher: 1995 to 2000

	Primary		Secondary
January	*Number of pupils in classes of 30 or more*	*Number of KS1 pupils in classes of 30 or more*	*Number of pupils in classes of 30 or more*
Somerset local education authority			
2000	16,579	4,209	37,313
1999	19,092	6,036	38,294
1998	18,818	6,537	37,549
1997	17,786	6,507	37,256
1996	17,039	5,649	36,587
1995	13,866	[1]—	35,800
Yeovil constituency			
2000	3,357	881	7,331
1999	3,709	1,417	7,455
1998	3,399	1,378	7,467
1997	2,919	1,350	7,409
1996	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
1995	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—

[1] Not available

Infant classes taught by one teacher by size

September	*Less than 30*	*30*	*31+*	*Total*
Somerset				
2000	12,919	2,610	443	15,972
1999	11,998	3,000	1,545	16,543
Yeovil				
2000	2,522	720	0	3,242
1999	2,220	720	1,003	3,943

Volunteering

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how he plans to promote volunteering and remove barriers to volunteering from the benefits system. [149508]

Ms Jowell: The Policy Action Team on Community Self-help recommended a relaxation in the current rule in Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), which requires volunteers to be available to take up employment at 48-hours' notice. It also recommended that small advance payments made by voluntary organisations to cover volunteers' costs such as travel expenses be disregarded. I am pleased to announce that, subject to Parliament's approval of the amending regulations, we intend to implement these recommendations.

Firstly, we will extend the 48 hour rule in JSA to one week. This will enable volunteers to give a greater commitment to volunteering by allowing them to give a week's notice before having to start a job. We will, however, retain the requirement that volunteers must be available at 48 hours' notice to attend an interview in connection with employment to ensure that they do not miss out on job opportunities. The change is intended to encourage more unemployed people to consider volunteering as a way of developing skills to improve employability. It should also enable voluntary organisations to plan the activities of unemployed volunteers with more certainty. The relaxation will initially be for a year so that we can evaluate its impact on both unemployed people and voluntary organisations. We shall work in partnership with the voluntary sector to agree the best approach to this evaluation.

Secondly, I am also pleased that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security has agreed to disregard small advance payments by voluntary organisations made to cover volunteers' costs such as travel expenses. Payments made in arrears to reimburse such expenses are disregarded already. This change will mean that all volunteers receiving income-related benefits, not only those who are unemployed, need not be out of pocket as a result of their volunteering. It will strengthen not only our joint aim of developing employability through volunteering but the Government's aim of encouraging volunteering more widely.

Performance Pay

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many and what percentage of teachers in each of the four parliamentary constituencies of Wirral *(a)* have successfully applied for the teachers' performance pay threshold, *(b)* have unsuccessfully applied for the teachers' performance pay threshold and *(c)* are awaiting the outcome of their application for the teachers' performance pay threshold. [146891]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 23 January 2001]:* It is estimated that there are about 250,000 teachers in England who are eligible for the post-threshold pay scale, of whom 81 per cent. have applied. There are no reliable data held centrally about the number of teachers eligible for the post-threshold pay scale in each local authority.

The number of teachers in the Wirral, whether or nor they are eligible for the post-threshold pay scale, and the number of applications to date for the Wirral and its four parliamentary constituencies are as follows:

Parliamentary constituency	*Number of teachers[1] whether or not eligible for the post threshold pay scale*	*Number of applicants to date[1]*	*Percentage of all teachers, whether or not eligible for the post threshold pay scale, that have applied*
Wirral	3,130	1,786	57
Birkenhead	—	394	—
Wallasey	—	517	—
Wirral, South	—	320	—
Wirral, West	—	516	—

[1] Headcount of headteachers, deputy headteachers and qualified classroom teachers in the maintained schools sector at January 2000. It is not possible to provide an appropriate number of teachers by constituency because teachers can teach in more than one school and this would lead to double counting.

[1] There are 39 candidates from the Wirral that have applied through the local authority so the parliamentary constituencies cannot be identified.

At present only two schools in the Wirral have received assessor visits. We hope that the majority of teachers will have been assessed by Easter.

Leeds LEA

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what considerations he has given to Leeds local education authority entering into partnership with a public sector organisation to run its proposed joint venture company. [147272]

Ms Estelle Morris: Leeds city council invited bids from the list approved by the DfEE. That list includes several consortiums involving public sector organisations.

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what evaluation he has made of the performance of Leeds local education authority over the period following the publication of the Ofsted and PricewaterhouseCoopers reports on it. [147273]

Ms Estelle Morris: There has been no further review.

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the costs of implementing the proposed joint venture company to run Leeds local education authority. [147274]

Ms Estelle Morris: Leeds local education authority will transfer to the company sufficient funds to provide education services to schools. In addition, there will be some transitional costs. We are still discussing these with Leeds city council and prospective partners.

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment by what means the costs of establishing and running the proposed Leeds local education authority joint venture company will be met. [147275]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department for Education and Employment will contribute to transitional costs.

Slough Schools

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much additional funding has been made available to schools in Slough *(a)* as a result of the Chancellor's pre-Budget statement and *(b)* since 1997. [147748]

Ms Estelle Morris: Most funding for schools is distributed via local education authorities. £388,000 additional funding was made available to schools as a result of the Chancellor's pre-Budget statement. Shown in the table are the allocations for education in Slough borough council since 1998. In 1997–98 Slough was part of Berkshire and did not exist in its own right.

£000

	Education SSA	*Funding allocations*
1998–99	55,957	1,478
1999–2000	59,000	3,199
2000–01	62,400	8,487

The main elements of funding in 2000–01 are Schools Capital, Standards Fund and School Standards Grant. In addition, Slough will receive in 2000–01 Special Grant funding to support elements of the teachers' pay reform packages. These are demand-led and will depend on the claims that Slough borough council make for each grant.

Under this Government, funding per pupil has already increased by over £300 in real terms, and it will increase by a further £150 per pupil for 2001–02. Under the last Government, funding per pupil fell by £60 in real terms between 1994–95 and 1997–98. There will be further increases in funding following the year 2000 spending review: a further £370 per pupil over the three year period, taking the total increase to nearly £700 between 1997–98 and 2003–04.

School Grants (Harrow)

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the Standards Fund grants to schools in the Harrow, West constituency in each year since May 1997. [148322]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information cannot be provided for an individual constituency, but the following table shows the Standards Fund grants made to Harrow local education authority for 1997–98, 1998–99, 1999–2000 and 2000–01. The figures include all grants paid through the Standards Fund payment system excluding New Deal for Schools capital, which is not part of the Standards Fund programme. All figures include both Government and local authority contributions. The amount actually paid to schools will depend on local expenditure decisions by schools and the local authority.

Standards Fund: Grants to Harrow local education authority

£

Grant name	*Expenditure*
1997–98	
School Effectiveness	456,200
National Curriculum Assessment	120,674
Primary Teachers' Subject Knowledge	61,895
Special Education Needs	55,671
Qualifications	16,000
Bilingual Pupils	21,694
Training for Careers Teachers	20,093
Youth Service	5,774
National Professional Qualification for Headship	16,924
School Security	70,900
Baseline Assessment	27,500
Primary (Key Stage 2) Performance Tables	1,500
Books for Schools	65,758
Total	940,583
1998–99	
School Effectiveness	506,963
School Leadership	33,223
Induction for Newly-qualified Teachers	16,782
Early Years Training and Development	31,555
Assessment	136,147
National Literacy Strategy—Primary	212,825
Summer Literacy Schools	9,988
Special Educational Needs	64,030
Qualifications	23,110
Drug Prevention	30,254
Youth Service	7,874
School Security	71,166
National Grid for Learning	346,914
Books for Schools	74,344
Year 6 Literacy and Numeracy Booster Classes	43,410
Numeracy Consultants and Leading Maths Teachers	1,650
SEN Portable CD-ROM Systems	24,000
Total	1,634,235

Standards Fund: Grants to Harrow local education authority

£

Grant name	*Expenditure*
1999–2000	
Class Size Initiative (Revenue)	58,949
School Improvement	787,471
School Leadership	71,000
Early Years Training and Development: Four-year-olds	26,780
National Literacy Strategy—Primary	175,581
Summer Literacy Schools and Literacy at Key Stage 3	49,455
National Numeracy Strategy—Primary	145,000
Summer Numeracy Schools	10,000
Family Literacy	22,692
Lifelong Learning Development Plans	49,131
Qualifications	8,749
Special Educational Needs	89,923
Social Inclusion: Pupil Support	158,947
Drug Prevention	32,996
Youth Service	8,724
National Grid for Learning	448,152
School Security	70,828
Beacon Schools	18,000
Travellers and Displaced Persons	99,179
Protecting Local Education Authority Music Services	158,000
Ethnic Minority Achievements	863,751
Access Fund for Post-16 Pupils in Schools	4,657
Year 6 Literacy and Numeracy Booster Classes	125,069
School Asset Management Plans (AMPs)	24,030
Computer Systems for Chairs of Education	2,000
Education and Health Partnerships	18,693
Working Environment Fund	45,953
Administrative Support in Small Schools	2,968
Laptops for Heads of Small Primary and Special Schools	13,370
Total	3,590,048
2000–01	
Class Size Initiative (Revenue)	270,000
Schools Improvement	903,137
School Leadership	111,480
Qualifications	16,699
New National Curriculum	59,900
Advanced Skills Teachers (AST): National Programme	42,000
Beacon Schools	49,000
Early Years Training and Development	40,186
National Literacy Strategy—Primary	134,022
National Numeracy Strategy—Primary	163,372
National Numeracy Strategy: Intensive Training	23,930
Summer Literacy and Numeracy Schools and Literacy and Numeracy	63,284
Year 6 Literacy and Numeracy Booster Classes	126,819
Family Literacy and Numeracy	30,800
Study Support	42,839
Ethnic Minority Pupils and Traveller Achievement	1,214,881
Special Educational Needs: Training/Parent Partnerships	130,617
Social Inclusion, Drugs and Youth	381,062
Access Fund for Post-16 Pupils in Schools	5,000
Secondary School Learning Support Units (Capital)	33,764
Secondary School Learning Support Units (Recurrent)	12,662
National Grid for Learning	552,522
School Security	73,408
Protecting Local Authority Music Services	158,000
Lifelong Learning Development Plans	98,099
Education and Health Partnerships	27,369
Support for Parent Governor Representatives	1,200
Teaching Assistants	465,259
Small School Support Fund	10,854
Working Environment Fund	100,981
Performance Management Training	67,648
Support for Performance Management Training	67,648
Administrative Support for Small Schools	33,704
Formula Capital for Schools	543,234
School Laboratories for the 21st Century	111,461
Additional Devolved Formula Capital	477,999
Seed Capital Challenge	138,005
Best Practice Research Scholarships	2,336
Summer Schools for Gifted and Talented Pupils	18,000
Literacy and Numeracy Strategies	108,043
Total	6,911,224

Notes:

1. The expenditure figures are based for the first three years on audited outturn statements from Harrow.

2. The figures for 2000–01 are the total grant expected to be paid to Harrow this financial year.

3. All figures include both Government and local authority contributions.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the direct grants for schools in the Harrow, West constituency in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01, *(c)* 2001–02 and *(d)* 2002–03. [148323]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows the School Standards Grant payable for each school in the 2000–01 financial year. No grant was paid in 1999–2000. In 2001–02 the amounts per school will be substantially increased so that they range from £6,000 to £70,000 per school, but it is not yet possible to say what individual school entitlements will be. In 2002–03, the amounts payable will be further increased by 2.75 per cent.

School Standards Grant 2000–01

Name of school	*Amount (£)*
Pinner Wood First School	9,000
Pinner Wood Middle School	9,000
Roxeth Nursery, First and Middle School	9,000
Grimsdyke First and Middle School	9,000
Cannon Lane Middle School	9,000
Pinner Park Middle School	9,000
Roxbourne Middle School	9,000
Longfield Middle School	9,000
West Lodge Middle School	9,000
Grant Middle School	9,000
Roxeth Manor Middle School	9,000
Cannon Lane First School	9,000
Longfield First School	9,000
Pinner Park First School	9,000
Roxbourne First School	9,000
West Lodge First School	9,000
Grange First School	9,000
Roxeth Manor First School	9,000
Earlsmead First and Middle School	9,000
Welldon Park First School	9,000
Welldon Park Middle School	9,000
Vaughan First and Middle School	9,000
St. Teresa's RC First and Middle School	9,000
St. John Fisher RC First and Middle School	9,000
St. George's First and Middle School	9,000
The Moriah Jewish Day School	9,000
Hatch End High School	50,000
Nower Hill High School	40,000
Whitmore High School	40,000
Rooks Heath High School	40,000
Shaftesbury High School	15,000
Alexandra School	15,000

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Wandsworth Secondary Schools

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much was spent on each pupil at secondary school in the London borough of Wandsworth in the last year. [148327]

Ms Estelle Morris: Net institutional expenditure on secondary schools in Wandsworth local education authority for 1998–99, the latest year for which this information is currently available, was £2,670 per pupil.

The following table sets out the resources made available to Wandsworth local education authority for 11 to 15-year-olds, at 2000–01 prices, on a per pupil basis. These figures are not directly comparable with the net institutional expenditure figure given above, but they do reflect a real terms increase in secondary funding per pupil over the last three years of £470.

£ per pupil

	Standard spending assessment[1]	*Special and specific grants*	*SSA and special/specific grants*
1997–98	3,940	40	3,980
1998–99	3,960	60	4,020
1999–2000	4,030	130	4,160
2000–01	4,100	350	4,450

[1] Based on the secondary SSA sub-block.

Under this Government, overall funding per pupil has already increased by over £300 nationally in real terms, and it will increase by a further £150 per pupil for 2001–02. Under the last Government, funding per pupil fell by £60 in real terms between 1994–95 and 1997–98. There will be further increases in funding following the year 2000 spending review: a further £370 per pupil over the three year period, taking the total increase to nearly £700 between 1997–98 and 2003–04.

Education Funding

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out the basis on which the allocations to individual local authorities contained in his statement of 29 January were calculated, including a list of the variables which were taken into account. [148343]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 2 February 2001]:* In overall terms, Education Standard Spending and special and specific grants for education were planned to increase by almost £1.9 billion or over 8 per cent. before this additional allocation: that is around £150 per pupil in real terms. However, some authorities faced lower increases because of particular pressures: that is why my right hon. Friend announced an extra £52 million in special grant.

This funding was allocated as follows: (a) authorities that had not been allocated funding from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund were allocated £100,000 each; (b) those authorities that faced the greatest pressure as a result of the transfer of Adult Education funding to the Learning and Skills Council were allocated funding to meet that pressure; and (c) the remaining funding was allocated by comparing the pressures on authorities—from pay, prices, the transfer of Adult Education funding and increased contributions to the Standards Fund—with their increase in Education SSA plus the funding at (a) and (b) above and taking account of allocations from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund.

This extra grant takes the increase in funding for education to over £1.9 billion for 2001–02.

Pupil Identification Numbers

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on progress in developing a national register of individual pupil identification numbers. [148383]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* The Department intends to create a central pupil database containing statistical profiles for all pupils in the maintained schools sector in England. Information relating to each pupil will be collated mainly by means of a "unique pupil number" (UPN) allocated to them when they first enter school. This database will track pupils' progress from Key Stage to Key Stage and relate this to contextual information about them. The information that it provides both for central agencies (the Department, the Office for Standards in Education and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) and for local education authorities and schools will make a major contribution to the drive to raise standards, and to monitoring the achievements of ethnic minority and other potentially vulnerable groups. The database will be subject to strict security controls to prevent any improper access to information about individual pupils. This aspect of the project has been, and will continue to be, the subject of detailed discussions with the Data Protection Commissioner.

The backbone of the database will be the "pupil level Annual Schools' Census" (PLASC) to be conducted in January of each year and providing information for each pupil individually referenced by their UPN, rather than just school totals as in the existing Annual Schools' Census (or "Form 7") which PLASC is replacing.

UPNs were allocated to pupils during the 1999–2000 school year, and included in the reporting of all Key Stage assessment results in summer 2000. About 2,000 schools are submitting a PLASC return for January 2001, and a sample of schools in all local education authorities is trialling the process. It is expected that all maintained primary, middle, secondary and special schools in England will be making PLASC returns from January 2002 onwards. The aim is to establish the central pupil database as soon as possible after full implementation of PLASC in January 2002.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Perth (Ms Cunningham), of 15 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 71–72W, how many Jobseeker's Allowance claimants signed on by post. [148505]

Ms Jowell: We do not hold national figures on the numbers of Jobseeker's Allowance claimants who sign on by post. Authorisation of postal signing is the responsibility of local Employment Service business managers.

Fast Track Teacher Recruitment

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many applications for the Fast Track teachers recruitment scheme have been received. [148681]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* The number of applications to join the new Fast Track Teaching Programme received by 31 January 2001 was 1,561. Like other accelerated progression schemes, applicants will now go through a rigorous selection process. Those recruited will be in addition to those entering teacher training through other routes.

Secondary Curriculum and Staffing Survey

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when his Department last conducted a secondary curriculum and staffing survey; and when the next survey is due for completion and publication. [148683]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* There is an annual census of teacher numbers and vacancies, the results of which are published in April each year.

The Department last conducted a secondary curriculum and staffing survey in November 1996. The possibility of conducting a further secondary curriculum and staffing survey in 2001–02 is being considered and if undertaken the results will be published as soon as possible.

The number of regular teachers in maintained schools increased by 6,900 between January 1998 and January 2000. There was a growth of over 2,000 in the number of people training to be teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

Speech Therapists

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* speech therapists there are in (i) primary schools and (ii) secondary schools in each local education authority, *(b)* vacancies exist for such a post and *(c)* people are in training to be school speech therapists. [148705]

Jacqui Smith: This information is not collected centrally. However, DfEE, together with the Department of Health and the National Assembly for Wales, recently commissioned a survey of NHS speech and language therapy services in England and Wales. The findings from this survey are summarised in DfEE Research Report 239, published in November 2000. Two thirds of respondents to the survey indicated that they operated a designated speech and language therapy service to mainstream schools. This provision is mainly focused on primary schools.

Under the Standards Fund 2001–02, we are supporting expenditure of £82 million on special educational needs. We envisage that LEAs will spend £10 million of this on enhancing speech and language therapy provision in conjunction with the NHS and the voluntary sector.

Computers within Reach Scheme

Mr. Mudie: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people broken down by area have obtained computers under the Computers Within Reach Scheme. [148736]

Mr. Wills: As of 9 February, the number of computers that will have been delivered to customers of the first phase of the pilot scheme for Computers Within Reach by area is as follows: 800 Liverpool, 120 Manchester, 50 Sheffield area, 50 Plymouth, 60 Hull and 10 in the London area.

The scheme is currently in its first phase and the regional contractors in other areas have been signing up customers, putting the required infrastructure in place for deliveries and customer training and plan to start deliveries within the next two weeks. Currently the phase one contracts allow for the delivery of 35,000 computers.

It is proposed that there will be 5,000 customers in that part of the first phase pilot being undertaken in Leeds in the following post codes: LS2, LS3, LS4, LS5, LS6, LS7, LS8, LS9, LS10, LS11, LS12, LS13, LS14, LS15, LS16, LS17, LS18, LS19, LS20. Deliveries are expected to start later this week or early next week, as soon as the accompanying printers are received by the contractor.

School Funding (Newcastle)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the schools in the City of Newcastle upon Tyne which received cash resources directly in the financial year 2000–01, with the sum for each school; and if he will estimate how much will be allocated in 2001–02 on the basis of his proposals in the pre-Budget report. [148817]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* The following table shows the School Standards Grant entitlement for each school in 2000–01. In 2001–02 the estimated total School Standards Grant for Newcastle education authority will amount to £2.8 million. Amounts for that year cannot yet be shown for individual schools, but the typical primary school will receive £20,000 and the typical secondary school, £60,000. In addition devolved formula capital grants are payable: in 2000–01 these are £12,000 for a typical primary school and £36,000 for a typical secondary school, increasing progressively to £16,000 and £50,000 respectively by 2003–04.

School Standards Grant—Newcastle LEA

Name of school	*Amount (£)*
Ashfield Nursery School	3,000
Cruddas Park Nursery School	3,000
Atkinson Road Nursery School	6,000
Newburn Manor Nursery School	3,000
Monkchester Road Nursery School	6,000
Walkergate Nursery School	3,000
Valley View Nursery School	3,000
Ashlyns Unit	3,000
Parkway Centre	3,000
Dinnington Village First School	6,000
Archibald First School	9,000
South Gosforth First School	9,000
Regent Farm First School	9,000
Linhope First School	9,000
Gosforth Park First School	9,000
Broadway East First School	9,000
Grange First School	6,000
Atkinson Road Primary School	9,000
Throckley First School	9,000
Newburn Manor First School	6,000
Walbottle Village First School	6,000
West Denton First School	9,000
Knoplaw First School	9,000

School Standards Grant—Newcastle LEA

Name of school	*Amount (£)*
Milecastle First School	9,000
Cheviot First School	9,000
Waverley First School	9,000
Simonside First School	9,000
Farne First School	9,000
Lemington First School	9,000
Westerhope First School	9,000
Byker Primary School	9,000
West Jesmond Primary School	9,000
Benton Park Primary School	9,000
Hawthorn Primary School	6,000
Canning Street Primary School	9,000
Chillingham Road Primary School	9,000
Cowgate Primary School	6,000
Cragside Primary School	9,000
Delaval Community Primary School	9,000
Denton Road Primary School	9,000
Broadwood Junior School	6,000
Broadwood Infant School	6,000
Tyneview Primary School	9,000
North Fawdon Primary School	9,000
Hilton Primary School	9,000
Montagu Primary School	6,000
Mountfield Primary School	9,000
Ravenswood Primary School	9,000
South Benwell Primary School	6,000
Stocksfield Avenue Primary School	9,000
Walkergate Junior School	9,000
Walkergate Infant School	9,000
Thomas Walling Primary School	9,000
Welbeck Primary School	9,000
Westgate Hill Primary School	9,000
West Walker Primary School	9,000
Wharrier Street Primary School	9,000
Wingrove Primary School	9,000
Wyndham Primary School	9,000
Kenton Bar Primary School	9,000
Kingston Park Primary School	9,000
Hotspur Primary School	9,000
Moorside Community Primary School	9,000
Christ Church CofE Primary School, Newcastle	6,000
St. Anthony's CofE Primary School	6,000
Archbishop Runcie CofE First School	6,000
St. Charles' RC Primary School	9,000
St. Oswald's RC Primary School	9,000
St. Mark's RC Primary School	6,000
St. George's RC Primary School	6,000
St. Cuthbert's RC Primary School	6,000
St. John Vianney RC Primary School	9,000
St. Paul's CofE Primary School	9,000
English Martyrs' RC Primary School	9,000
Sacred Heart RC Primary School	9,000
St. Bede's RC Primary School	9,000
St. Cuthbert's Catholic Primary School	9,000
St. Catherine's RC Primary School	9,000
St. Joseph's RC Primary School	6,000
St. Lawrence's RC Primary School	9,000
Our Lady and St. Anne's RC Voluntary Aided Primary School	9,000
St. Michael's RC Primary School	9,000
St. Teresa's Catholic Primary School	9,000
St. Vincent's RC Primary School	9,000
St. Alban's RC Primary School	9,000
Chapel Park Middle School	30,000
Chapel House Middle School	30,000
Throckley Middle School	30,000
Gosforth Central Middle School	30,000
Gosforth West Middle School	30,000
Gosforth East Middle School	30,000
West Denton High School	30,000
Gosforth High School	50,000
Walbottle Campus	50,000
Walker Technology College	50,000
Benfield School	40,000
Kenton School	50,000
Denton Park Middle School	30,000
Chevyside Middle School	30,000
Heaton Manor School	50,000
Lemington Middle School	30,000
West Gate Community College	50,000
Firfield Community School	30,000
St. Mary's Catholic Comprehensive School	40,000
St. Cuthbert's High School	40,000
Sacred Heart RC Comprehensive School	50,000
Trinity School	15,000
Hadrian School	15,000
Sir Charles Parsons School	15,000
Thomas Bewick School	15,000
Total	1,526,000

Education Funding (Tyne and Wear)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out for each authority in the former county of Tyne and Wear the allocations under *(a)* New Deal for Schools, *(b)* the Standards Fund in 2000–01 and 2001–02, *(c)* Excellence in Cities in 2001–02 and *(d)* the additional support for recruitment retention in schools tackling educational disadvantage in 2001–02. [148818]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* Listed in the following tables are the allocations for each authority in the former county of Tyne and Wear under *(a)* New Deal for Schools from 1997–98 to 2000–01, *(b)* the Standards Fund in 2000–01 and 2001–02 and *(c)* Excellence in Cities (EiC) in 2001–02. New Deal for Schools and EiC funding are issued through the Standards Fund and are not included in the following Standards Fund allocations. The EiC allocations cover initiatives for Learning mentors, Learning support units, Gifted and Talented and Beacon Schools. They do not cover initiatives for City Learning Centres, Specialist Schools and Mini-Education Action Zones where total allocations are still to be determined. The Standards Fund allocations for 2001–02 have not yet been finalised. They include allocations already advised to local education authorities, but there are further grants for which allocations have not yet been announced.

New Deal for schools allocations

£000

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Gateshead	352	1,187	962	2,816
Newcastle	487	4,612	6,318	3,300
North Tyneside	406	613	1,364	2,705
South Tyneside	536	1,675	1,270	2,058
Sunderland	719	960	2,030	3,872

Standards Fund allocations

£000

	2000–01	*2001–02*
Gateshead	8,901	10,635
Newcastle	14,885	13,955
North Tyneside	8,533	9,621
South Tyneside	7,242	9,059
Sunderland	11,954	15,165

Excellence in Cities allocations

£000

	2001–02
Gateshead	1,542
Newcastle	1,943
North Tyneside	1,595
South Tyneside	1,497
Sunderland	2,655

£210 million is available under the School Improvement Grant in 2001–02. The majority of this will be devolved to all schools to fund locally identified school improvement priorities. Fifteen per cent. of the grant will be allocated to schools in challenging circumstances. These funds have been allocated to support secondary schools with low levels of attainment or free high school meals and schools in special measures. Allocations of School Improvement Grant (which includes allocations for schools in challenging circumstances) for each authority in the former county of Tyne and Wear are set out in the following table.

School Improvement Grant allocations—2000–01

£000

	School Improvement	*Allocation of School Improvement for schools in challenging circumstances*
Gateshead	810	130
Newcastle	956	110
North Tyneside	667	0
South Tyneside	653	50
Sunderland	1,129	105

Under this Government, funding per pupil has already increased by over £300 in real terms, and it will increase by a further £150 per pupil for 2001–02. Under the last Government, funding per pupil fell by £60 in real terms between 1994–95 and 1997–98. There will be further increases in funding following the year 2000 spending review: a further £370 per pupil over the three year period, taking the total increase to nearly £700 between 1997–98 and 2003–04.

Pupil Exclusions

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils were expelled or suspended from school in each of the London education authorities during the last 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [148898]

Ms Estelle Morris: The latest available data on permanent exclusions are shown in the following table. Data on permanent exclusions in the school year 1999–2000 will be collected in January 2001 and published in May 2001 (provisional date). Further information on permanent exclusions was published in the Statistical Bulletin "Permanent Exclusions from Maintained Schools in England" on 29 November 2000, copies of which are available from the Library, or alternatively can be accessed from the Department for Education and Employment statistical website www.dfee.gov.uk/statistics.

We are providing £174 million this year to help schools and LEAs tackle exclusion—a third more than in 1999–2000 and 10 times more than in 1996–97. This is helping to pay for more than 1,000 on-site Learning Support Units which take disruptive pupils out of the classroom quickly, improve their behaviour and reduce the need for exclusion. Where an exclusion is necessary, provision for excluded pupils is being greatly increased. There are now 1,000 more places and 250 more teachers in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) than in 1997. The quality of PRUs is improving and by 2002 all local education authorities will be required to provide a full timetable for excluded pupils.

Number of permanent exclusions

	Maintained primary[1]	*Maintained secondary*[1]	*Maintained special*[2]	*Total*
England	1,366	8,636	436	10,438
London	249	1,471	62	1,782
Inner London	109	500	30	639
City of London	0	0	0	0
Camden	3	24	5	32
Hackney	13	18	5	36
Hammersmith and Fulham	4	44	0	48
Haringey	11	30	2	43
Islington	8	28	0	36
Kensington and Chelsea	7	20	2	29
Lambeth	9	27	4	40
Lewisham	14	48	3	65
Newham	14	40	0	54
Southwark	12	94	2	108
Tower Hamlets	1	28	3	32
Wandsworth	11	61	4	76
Westminster	2	38	0	40
Outer London	140	971	32	1,143
Barking and Dagenham	13	25	1	39
Barnet	6	36	0	42
Bexley	18	42	1	61
Brent	6	69	2	77
Bromley	6	77	4	87
Croydon	16	109	6	131
Ealing	5	68	1	74
Enfield	5	71	0	76

	Number of permanent exclusions			
	Maintained primary[1]	*Maintained secondary*[1]	*Maintained special*[2]	*Total*
Greenwich	17	59	3	79
Harrow	8	33	1	42
Havering	2	39	0	41
Hillingdon	4	59	3	66
Hounslow	4	62	1	67
Kingston upon Thames	1	24	0	25
Merton	5	19	0	24
Redbridge	7	33	2	42
Richmond upon Thames	1	43	1	45
Sutton	8	29	2	39
Waltham Forest	8	74	4	86

[1] Includes middle schools as deemed
[2] Includes Maintained and Non-Maintained Special Schools

Post-16 Curriculum 2000 Initiatives

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what resources were allocated by his Department for each LEA for *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01 to support post-16 Curriculum 2000 initiatives; [148983]

(2) what extra funds he has made available for the implementation of the new curriculum in the second year of sixth form studies; where those funds are allocated within the standard spending assessment; and if he will make a statement. [149285]

Ms Estelle Morris: Qualifying for Success—the post-16 curriculum reforms was introduced in September 2000. Funding was not therefore made available to support this initiative until 2000–01. £35 million was included in Education Standard Spending in 2000–01 and a further £60 million has been included for 2001–02. Since local authority funding is unhypothecated, the funding is not located within any particular part of the standard spending assessment. It is for local education authorities, in consultation with their schools, to dedicate an appropriate proportion of their Education SSA to support the additional costs of Qualifying for Success in their area.

Capital Investment (Schools)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the total capital investment in schools in the City of Newcastle upon Tyne and in the county of Northumberland from 1996 to 1999, *(a)* in total and *(b)* by funding stream; and what is his forecast for the next three years. [149214]

Jacqui Smith: The following Table A shows the capital allocations made to Newcastle upon Tyne local education authority, by funding stream, from 1996–97 to 2000–01. Table B shows the capital allocations made to Northumberland local education authority, by funding stream, from 1996–97 to 2000–01. Table C shows the forecast investment for both local education authorities over the next three years.

Nationally, capital investment in school buildings has tripled from £683 million a year in 1996–97 to over £2 billion in 2000–01. It will be £3.2 billion in 2003–04, including grant, credit approvals and Private Finance Initiative credits. There will be central Government investment of £7.8 billion in school buildings in total from 2001–02 to 2003–04.

Table A: Central Government capital investment in schools in Newcastle upon Tyne local education authority

£000

Funding stream	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Basic Credit Approvals	360	407	451	896	644
Supplementary Credit Approvals	243	1,215	1,394	692	97
Grant to Voluntary Aided Schools	376	837	702	237	328
New Deal for Schools	—	487	4,612	6,318	3,300
School Security Grant	—	68	84	85	84
Energy Efficiency Initiative	—	—	70	—	—
Key Stage 1 Class Size Initiative	—	—	363	74	79
National Grid for Learning Grant	—	—	1,016	885	820
Assistance with Asset Management Plans	—	—	—	33	—
Seed Challenge Funding	—	—	—	—	172
Devolved Formula Capital for Schools	—	—	—	—	1,787
Renewal of School Laboratories	—	—	—	—	170
Schools Access Initiative Grant	2	—	—	13	42
Nursery Provision	—	—	—	—	65
Total	981	3,014	8,692	9,233	7,588

Note:

The high levels of allocations through Supplementary Credit Approvals in 1997–98 and 1998–99 reflect exceptional funding for two major projects—the provision of Special Educational Needs facilities across the authority and the removal of surplus places at Blakelaw Secondary school. In addition, New Deal for Schools investment was specifically targeted in 1998–99 and 1999–2000 to meet the costs of two major redevelopment projects at Heaton Manor and Gosforth High Schools respectively.

Table B: Central Government capital investment in schools in Northumberland local education authority

£000

Funding stream	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Basic Credit Approvals	2,304	1,325	940	1,280	3,920
Supplementary Credit Approvals	287	297	199	1,090	195
Grant to Voluntary Aided Schools	146	287	259	203	262
Schools Renewal Challenge Fund	275	—	—	—	—
New Deal for Schools	—	542	1,985	1,908	6,577
School Security Grant	—	101	126	130	129
Removal of Outside Toilets	—	—	237	—	—
Energy Efficiency Initiative	—	—	103	—	—
Key Stage 1 Class Size Initiative	—	—	146	939	132
National Grid for Learning Grant	—	—	489	525	1,307
Assistance with Asset Management Plans	—	—	—	66	—
Seed Challenge Funding	—	—	—	—	208
Devolved Formula Capital for Schools	—	—	—	—	2,870
Renewal of School Laboratories	—	—	—	—	216
Schools Access Initiative Grant	—	—	—	—	15
Secondary Learning Support Units	—	—	—	—	102
Early Excellence Centre Grant	—	—	22	75	101
Total	3,012	2,552	4,506	6,216	16,034

Table C: Forecast investment in schools

£000

Funding stream	*2001–02*	*2002–03*	*2003–04*
Newcastle upon Tyne local education authority			
Basic Credit Approvals	286	'—	'—
Grant to Voluntary Aided Schools	1,216	'—	'—
Private Finance Initiative Credits	37,200	'—	'—
New Deal for Schools Devolved Formula	944	1,270	2,451
New Deal for Schools Condition Funding	682	1,922	2,440
Seed Challenge Funding	193	323	323
Renewal of School Laboratories	170	'—	'—
Schools Access Initiative	232	'—	'—
Total	40,923	3,515	5,214
Northumberland local education authority			
Basic Credit Approvals	1,855	'—	'—
Grant to Voluntary Aided Schools	225	'—	'—
New Deal for Schools Devolved Formula	1,539	2,072	3,973
New Deal for Schools Condition Funding	963	2,769	3,513
Seed Challenge Funding	234	401	401
Renewal of School Laboratories	216	'—	'—
Secondary Learning Support Units	89	'—	'—
Schools Access Initiative	349	'—	'—
Total	5,470	5,242	7,887

Notes:'
Future years' allocations shown in the table are those already announced as being attributable to Newcastle upon Tyne and Northumberland local education authorities.
In addition to the amounts shown, schools in both authorities will also benefit from a share of other programmes where allocations have not yet been made. These include over £1 billion of credit approvals, mainly to provide new pupil places; £440 million of grant to governors of Voluntary Aided schools; £555 million funding through the NDS Modernisation programme and £170 million worth of funding under the Schools Access Initiative.
This funding will be augmented by capital receipts and other contributions from local education authority sources, and the contribution which governors of Voluntary Aided schools make to their building work. In addition, more than £1 billion is available nationally through Private Finance Initiative Credits for projects which will sign in 2002–03 and 2003–04.
Funding specifically ring fenced for the renewal of school laboratories and secondary learning support units is ending in 2001–02. Local authorities will be able to prioritise their other increased funding for this purpose, if they wish.

Departmental Policies (Bolton, West)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Bolton, West constituency, the effect on Bolton of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [149102]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 6 February 2001]:* Details of the effect on the Bolton, West constituency and Bolton LEA of a range of the Department's policies are outlined as follows.

Sure Start:

The Sure Start programme is situated in north-west Bolton covering three wards. The programme addresses the need to reshape services and improve parents awareness on child care issues. It works closely with parents to deliver services that address their needs such as the expansion of the books for babies project. On primary health issues they are working closely with the National Childbirth Trust to build on existing services.

The programme was allocated £2.5 million over three years until 2000–01.

Beacon Schools:

Bolton has four beacon schools: Canon Slade CE School, Gilnow County Primary School, St. Teresa's RC Primary School and St. Thomas of Canterbury RC Primary School.

Specialist Schools:

Bolton has four Specialist Schools: Turton High School (Arts), Little Lever School (Language), St. Joseph's RC High School (Sports) and Rivington and Blackrod High School (Technology). Turton will become operational from September 2001.

Education Action Zones:

The Breightment and Tong EAZ began in April 2000 and involves 15 primary, two secondary and one special school.

Key activities: Recruitment of local residents to become classroom assistants and reading helpers; a programme of curriculum enhancement, including partnership with World Challenge to develop the personal and social skills of pupils; extended family literacy and parenting skills courses throughout the Zone; out-of-school hours education; and individualised professional development for teachers and non-teaching staff.

LEA Performance figures:

Key Stage 2 results

Percentage

	2000	*1999*	*1998*	*1997*
English:	—	—	—	—
LEA	75	70	65	63
England	75	71	65	63
Maths:	—	—	—	—
LEA	73	70	60	63
England	72	69	59	62
Science:	—	—	—	—
LEA	82	77	64	67
England	85	78	69	69

GCSE and GNVQ results

Percentage

	2000	*1999*	*1998*	*1997*
5+ A-C:*				
LEA average	41.3	43.2	40.3	40.0
England average	49.2	47.9	46.3	45.1
5+ A-G:*	—	—	—	—
LEA average	89.2	87.6	86.3	86.0
England average	88.9	88.5	87.5	86.4
No passes:	—	—	—	—
LEA average	5.3	7.3	8.6	8.5
England average	5.6	6.0	6.6	7.7

Infant class sizes

£

	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Revenue	0	807,000	1,610,754
Capital	273,546	785,539	156,825

The September 2000 figure shows that there are now no pupils remaining in infant class sizes of 31 or more. The figure in January 1997 was 4,835 (48.4 per cent.).

Education Maintenance Allowance:

The Bolton EMA model is a variation of the core model in that the £30 per week is paid to the parent. In addition there is a term £50 retention bonus plus a £50 achievement bonus. All the bonuses are paid to the young person.

In the academic year 1999–2000 the EMA expenditure in Bolton on paying EMAs to young people was £746,000. Their EMA allocation for this year is £2,733,183 as an EMA is now available to eligible young people in years 12 and 13. The actual spend is likely to be less than this figure as it depends on the uptake of EMAs in the area by young people.

Capital allocations for the LEA

£000

	2001–02	*2000–01*	*1999–2000*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*
ACG	780	1,992	2,460	1,272	1,422
SCA	—	800	1,040	502	548
NDS	—	3,850	3,310	1,422	381
VA grant	1,422	937	628	426	947
Seed	—	192	—	—	—
PPP	2,400	—	—	—	—
Capital formula	—	2,056	—	—	—
NGFL	—	957	608	750	—
Science labs	185	185	—	—	—
SSLU	62	71	—	—	—
Access at per cent. 85	348	33	22	21	13
Security	—	97	97	91	72
Class Size	—	422	782	11	—
Outside Toilets	—	—	—	174	—
Energy Efficiency	—	—	—	86	—
Assistance with AMPs	—	—	38	—	—
Nursery Provision	—	67	—	—	—

PPP:

PFI Credits: £2.4 million—This project is to rebuild Castle Hill Primary School and provide a learning resource centre offering facilities to the wider community.

Examples of New Deal for Schools projects in Bolton, West:

NDS 1: Total Allocation £381,000.

Included within a eight school package: heating facilities—Blackrod Primary and Church Road Primary Schools. Included within a 12 school package: lighting—Church Road Primary and St. Joseph's RC Secondary Schools.

NDS 3: Total Allocation £3.31 million

The Deane School—Refurbishment of school: £2,683,186 the Woodside Senior School—Relocation of school: £626,729

NDS4: Total Allocation £3.85 million

Included in a seven school package: Replacement of temporary classrooms—£1,506,040. Devonshire Road Primary, Lord Street Primary and Markland Hill Primary Schools.

Further education: Student numbers at all FEFC-funded institutions where home postcode is in the Bolton LEA 1996–97 to 1999–2000[1]

	Council funded				*Non Council funded*				
	16–18		*19+*		*16–18*		*19+*		*Grand*
	Full-time	*Part-time*	*Full-time*	*Part-time*	*Full-time*	*Part-time*	*Full-time*	*Part-time*	*total*
Students at FE colleges and external institutions									
1996–97	3,020	962	884	14,208	123	285	13	770	20,391
1997–98	2,906	959	649	13,553	138	412	13	632	19,380
1998–99	2,741	774	570	13,391	170	389	14	607	18,783
1999–2000	2,902	769	555	13,439	152	658	12	807	19,407
FE students at higher education institutions									
1996–97	47	14	16	120	—	1	—	2	200
1997–98	31	25	11	165	—	—	—	4	236
1998–99	28	21	16	120	—	—	—	—	186
1999–2000	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—

[1] Excludes students with invalid/missing postcodes
[2] Data for higher education institutions not yet available

Modern Apprenticeships

Since 2 May 1997, we know of 1,049 starts on Modern Apprenticeships in the Bolton, West constituency (as at 31 October 2000). Broken down by financial year these are:

Financial year	*Foundation modern apprenticeships*[1]	*Advanced modern apprenticeships*[2]	*Total*
1997–98	0	145	145
1998–99	90	183	273
1999–2000	193	197	390
2000–01[3]	116	125	241
Total	399	650	1,049

[1] Foundation Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as National Traineeships, were introduced nationally in September 1997
[2] Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as Modern Apprenticeships, were introduced nationally in September 1995
[3] To date

Notes:
1. The Trainee Database System (TDS), from which these data are taken, is less complete than Management Information supplied to the Department by Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) (around 95 per cent.).
2. In addition, the postcode information on the TDS, from which parliamentary constituency data are compiled, are 95 per cent. complete.
3. TEC Management Information does not provide information at parliamentary constituency level.

Source:

WBTYP trainee database

New Deal Statistics:

In the Bolton, West constituency to the end of November 2000, 438 young people have joined the New Deal, with 235 finding employment. Of these, 174 have entered sustained employment.

Labour Market:

The working age employment rate in Bolton Unitary Authority in autumn 2000 was 74.0 per cent., below the UK rate of 74.7 per cent. The rate in autumn 1997 was 72.2 per cent. and in autumn 1999 73.8 per cent. The claimant unemployment rate has fallen from 3.2 per cent. in December 1997 to 2.8 per cent. in December 2000 in the Bolton, West constituency.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment under what circumstances asylum seekers are able to access Programme Centre facilities. [149213]

Ms Jowell: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service Agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Terry Rooney, dated 7 February 2001:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question concerning the circumstances under which Asylum Seekers are able to access Programme Centre facilities. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

In answer to your specific question, access to Programme Centre facilities depends on the date which individuals applied for political asylum. Following the Introduction of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the eligibility criteria for Asylum Seekers who wish to participate in Programme Centre provision have changed.

For those people who applied for asylum prior to 3 April 2000, non-EEA Overseas Nationals who are subject to employment restrictions and/or a time limit on their stay in the UK are not eligible to join Programme Centres with the following exceptions:

Refugees with indefinite, limited or exceptional leave to stay in the UK; and

Asylum Seekers who have applied for political asylum and who are awaiting a decision to stay in the UK, but have been given permission to work and train in this country by the Home Office.

Both Refugees and Asylum Seekers must then satisfy the usual eligibility conditions that apply to citizens in the UK.

For those people who applied for political asylum after 3 April 2000, Asylum Seekers cannot participate in Programme Centre provision until their application has been processed by the National Asylum Seekers Support (NASS). If the Asylum Seeker is then granted either Refugee Status, or exceptional leave to remain in the UK, they can make a claim for Jobseeker's Allowance and, subject to meeting the normal eligibility conditions, access Programme Centre facilities.

The usual eligibility conditions for access to Programme Centre provision are that participants should be aged 25 or over, unemployed for over 26 weeks, and continuously in receipt (either directly or indirectly) of Jobseeker's Allowance or most other Social Security benefits for those of working age. However, some people who are judged to be at a particular disadvantage in the labour market can have access to Programme Centre provision from day one of unemployment and this flexibility already covers most Asylum Seekers. From 1 April this year this flexibility will be further extended so that all Asylum Seekers aged 25 or over who are entitled to claim Jobseeker's Allowance will be eligible for immediate access to Programme Centre provision. For those aged 18–24 similar provision will be available through the New Deal.

I hope this is helpful.

PRIME MINISTER

Hawk Sale

Q12. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Prime Minister what steps he is taking to help BAE Systems secure an order for Hawk aircraft from the Government of India. [147679]

The Prime Minister: During his visit to the UK in June last year I met Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes and offered my full support for BAE Systems' Hawk proposal. Both the company and the Indian Government have indicated that they are optimistic a final decision will be reached shortly.

NATO

Q18. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Prime Minister if, when he last met the leaders of other member states of NATO, they discussed matters relating to the future structure, functions and membership of the organisation. [147686]

The Prime Minister: NATO leaders last met at the Washington Summit in April 1999. We discussed a wide range of issues including NATO's Open Door policy on enlargement and Alliance plans for meeting future security challenges as outlined in Strategic Concept, which the Summit approved. Copies of the Washington Summit Communique are available in the Library.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the objectives of the attack on Samawa, Iraq, on Saturday 20 January. [147786]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence gave him on 25 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 659–60W. This action had no other objective than the protection of our aircrews while they carry out humanitarian patrols of the no-fly zones. In January alone the Iraqis fired on coalition aircraft on at least 17 occasions, more than in any month in the previous year. In the face of these continuing, determined attempts by the Iraqi Integrated Air Defence System to kill coalition pilots, we will take the appropriate measures to protect them.

Prime Ministerial Meeting

Mr. Spring: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list *(a)* the items discussed and *(b)* conclusions reached at his meeting with Chancellor Schröder. [148763]

The Prime Minister: I discussed a range of issues with Chancellor Schröder, including the future direction of the European Union following the Nice Treaty, EU Enlargement, reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and European defence. We also discussed transatlantic relations and Russia. Finally, we discussed football transfers, in advance of our joint statement issued the following day.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ghana

8. **Mr. Lammy:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's development priorities in Ghana. [147645]

Clare Short: In December Ghana elected a new Government who have committed themselves to continuing economic reform and poverty reduction. Prior to the elections their economic reform programme went off track and there are difficult decisions to be made. Ghana could qualify for HIPC debt relief but has up to now decided not to apply. I will be visiting Ghana to discuss these issues later this month.

Zambia

9. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement about the Government's role in reducing debt in Zambia. [147646]

Clare Short: After years of growing poverty and corruption, Zambia has embarked on a programme of economic reform. In 2000 the Zambia copper mines which were inefficiently run and massively subsidised were finally privatised thus releasing resources for social expenditure. The UK provided $81 million to support his reform. This and commitments to improved economic management and focus on poverty reduction enabled Zambia to qualify for debt relief in December 2000. Debt repayments stand to be reduced by $270 million a year over the next three years. However, calls for President Chiluba to stand again for election in breach of the constitution and a halt to the agreed programme of economic reform could endanger further debt relief.

11. **Mr. Fabian Hamilton:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the effectiveness of micro-credit schemes in Zambia in reducing poverty. [147648]

Clare Short: We provide £10 million for micro-credit programmes in Zambia.

These programmes are currently providing credit to 11,000 people rising to 50,000 over the next four years, both in rural and urban areas, more than half of whom are women.

Our assessments of these programmes have shown that micro-credit clients have higher incomes, better household nutrition and increased access to education and health services.

AIDS

10. **Dr. Palmer:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps Britain and the international community are taking to combat AIDS world wide; and if she will make a statement. [147647]

Clare Short: The fight against HIV/AIDS is a key priority for my Department. We continue to give greatest priority to prevention, but we also place great emphasis on reducing the personal, social and economic impact of illness and death caused by the disease.

Five per cent. of the population of Africa are infected though rates vary greatly between countries. Infection rates among young people in Uganda, Kenya and Zambia are falling.

Infection rates are rising sharply in China, India, Bangladesh and other Asian countries. Because of the large population in Asia there is a risk that numbers of infections will far outweigh those of Africa.

We spent over £100 million on HIV/AIDS related work last year, and we fully expect to spend more this year.

18. **Mr. Jim Murphy:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's work on AIDS in southern Africa. [147656]

Clare Short: We have recently agreed with Southern African Development Community (SADC) a Regional HIV/AIDS Programme channelled through the SADC Health Sector Co-ordination Unit, for the provision of £7.5 million over four years for Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and Namibia. The programme focuses on developing the capacity within each country and across the region to mount an effective response to the epidemic. It complements a number of existing DFID supported HIV/AIDS programmes in South Africa, including support for the National Aids Centre, condom social marketing, Carltonville mineworkers, National Reproductive Health and Provincial reproductive health and in Lesotho, a condom social marketing programme and activities supported by the World Bank, EC, USAID, Belgium and other development assistance programmes.

We are also funding the design of a youth magazine on HIV and AIDS with the goal of distributing a copy to every 12 to 18-year old in Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho and Swaziland. The first official launch of the "Choose Life" booklet took place on 31 January in Botswana.

In South Africa itself, we are planning a new HIV/AIDS Programme to commence this year with a budget of £13 million over four years. This programme will focus on attitudinal and behavioural change activities and technical responses to issues such as Sexually Transmitted Diseases and TB.

EU Aid Budget

12. **Mr. Baldry:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she last met the EU Commissioner for International Development to discuss the EU aid budget. [147649]

Clare Short: I last met EC Development Commissioner Poul Nielson at the EC Development Council on 10 November. I shall be meeting him again tomorrow, 8 February. We have worked closely with Commissioner Nielson to put in place a major reform programme to increase the poverty focus and effectiveness of European Commission development efforts. The new EC Development Policy Statement and action programme are a great advance. We are now focusing our efforts on implementation.

Administration of Justice

13. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what help she is giving to poorer countries to improve the administration of justice and prisons. [147650]

Clare Short: Insecurity caused by crime, is—as the Voices of the Poor study showed—a major concern for poor people, ranking in importance with hunger, unemployment and lack of safe drinking water. We are supporting programmes of reform to make the justice system as a whole more responsive to the needs of poor people in Bangladesh, Jamaica, Malawi, Nigeria and Uganda.

Our new approach designed to make justice systems work for the poor is described in detail in the DFID publication "Justice and Poverty Reduction", which has been placed in the Library of both Houses.

Palestine

14. **Mr. Burden:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on efforts to combat poverty in the west bank and Gaza strip. [147651]

Clare Short: Britain is providing £25 million of assistance to the Palestinian Authority to help reduce poverty and build an accountable, democratic government. However, continuing Israeli closures are causing widespread hardship, economic decline and delays to humanitarian aid.

Conflict Prevention (Africa)

15. **Mr. Patrick Hall:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how her Department is contributing to conflict prevention and resolution in Africa. [147652]

Clare Short: Out of 47 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, 20 are in conflict or recovering from conflict affecting 20 per cent. of population. This is a cause of deep suffering and a major barrier to development.

We contribute to UN and EU efforts to prevent and resolve conflict. We work in many countries to help build democratic systems and respect for human rights in order to prevent the growth of poverty and inequality that fuels conflict.

A joint strategy for conflict prevention and resolution is currently being developed by DFID, FCO and MOD, as part of the arrangements for the Africa Conflict Prevention Joint Pool.

Congo

16. **Mr. David Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what financial aid is being given to the Democratic Republic of Congo; and if she will make a statement. [147653]

Clare Short: The UK committed £3 million in humanitarian assistance to the Democratic Republic of the Congo in financial year 2000–01. These funds have been targeted on health and nutrition, assistance to refugees and other vulnerable groups, and rehabilitation of child soldiers in the eastern provinces. We also contribute £4.2 million of assistance through the EU.

The war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has caused untold suffering and damage in the country and in the surrounding region. We will continue to provide humanitarian assistance and to use our influence to try to promote an end to the DRC's conflict. We continue to support the Lusaka Peace Agreement of July 1999 as the most realistic formula for peace, and in all our contacts with signatories to the Lusaka Agreement we urge its implementation. UK bilateral assistance includes technical and financial support for the peace-keeping and political aspects of the Agreement.

17. **Mr. Walter:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on bilateral and European Union aid to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. [147654]

Clare Short: The UK committed £3 million in humanitarian assistance to the Democratic Republic of the Congo in financial year 2000–01. These funds have been targeted on health and nutrition, assistance to refugees and other vulnerable groups, and rehabilitation of child soldiers in the eastern provinces. We also contribute £4.2 million of assistance through the EU.

The war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has caused untold suffering and damage in the country and in the surrounding region. We will continue to provide humanitarian assistance and to use our influence to try to promote an end to the DRC's conflict. We continue to support the Lusaka Peace Agreement of July 1999 as the most realistic formula for peace, and in all our contacts with signatories to the Lusaka Agreement we urge its implementation. UK bilateral assistance includes technical and financial support for the peace-keeping and political aspects of the Agreement.

The European Community Humanitarian Office provided over 25 million euro of humanitarian assistance to the DRC in 2000 and intends to make 35 million euro available in 2001. The EU will also fund a longer-term rehabilitation strategy for the DRC, including projects in the justice, institutional reform, sanitation, agriculture and transport sectors. The first of these projects is planned to start in 2002, and focus on the judicial system. It will cost 28 million euro over four years.

India

19. **Dan Norris:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's support for poverty reduction in India. [147657]

Clare Short: We are providing over £100 million in development assistance to India this year. This figure is projected at least to triple over the next four years. One in three of the world's poor lives in India, and there are substantial opportunities to work effectively with government and civil society to reduce poverty.

Our programme in India is focused on helping government, at both national and state level, to deliver pro-poor policies and services. We have identified four partner states committed to poverty reduction, with whom we are working closely, including on their programmes of fiscal and public sector reform. We are also working, both at the national level and in our partner states, on increasing access to basic education, health, water and sanitation services for the poor, promoting better management of the natural and physical environment, and promoting greater empowerment of the poor, especially women and members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

In addition to long term development assistance, we remain ready to respond quickly and generously to requests for emergency relief as we have done in the case of the recent catastrophic earthquake in Gujarat.

A copy of our India Country Strategy Paper is in the Library of the House.

Land Mines

20. **Helen Jackson:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on progress in eradicating land mines. [147658]

Clare Short: In late 1997 I pledged to double my Department's annual bilateral expenditure on humanitarian mine action from under £5 million in 1997–98 to £10 million in 2000–01. This expenditure target has been achieved, based on a three year policy which has four main objectives: promoting the globalisation of the Ottawa Convention; undertaking effective mine clearance projects and capacity building in developing countries; strengthening international response; and supporting technological innovation.

Progress reports on the Humanitarian Mine Action programme were placed in the Library of the House in February 1999 and September 2000. A further report, planned for mid-2001, will summarise the three-year programme and evaluate its impact.

Southern Africa

21. **Mr. Win Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's priorities for operations in southern Africa. [147659]

Clare Short: In addition to our programme in South Africa which is focused on governance, health, education and sustainable livelihoods, we are strengthening our regional focus on trade and co-operation, HIV/AIDS, water and enterprise development. In developing our future strategy, we will consult regionally to develop a clearer analysis of the regional dimensions of poverty. This will look at economic interdependence, trade, migration, conflict, disease and the use of scarce natural resources.

Third World Debt

22. **Mr. Ruffley:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations her Department made to the IMF regarding levels of third world indebtedness. [147660]

Clare Short: The UK works closely with the IMF and the World bank in implementing the enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. Last week, I met the Managing Director, Horst Kohler, and the World bank President, Jim Wolfensohn, to discuss debt and other development issues.

EU (Swedish Presidency)

23. **Mr. Hendrick:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions her Department has had with the Swedish Development Ministry about Sweden's development priorities during its presidency of the EU. [147661]

Clare Short: We are working closely with the Swedish Development Ministry on development priorities for their EU presidency in January-June 2001. The former Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes), visited Stockholm in October for discussions prior to the Swedish presidency and there are frequent contacts between officials.

The Swedish EU presidency January to June 2001 is an important opportunity to take forward recent efforts to improve the effectiveness of EC development programmes. In particular, Sweden shares our view that it is essential to see early progress in implementing the EC's recently agreed development policy, with its central objective of reducing poverty.

El Salvador

24. **Rev. Martin Smyth:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the extent of the disaster in El Salvador; and what her Department's response has been. [147662]

Clare Short: The earthquake in El Salvador measured 7.6 on the Richter scale and caused damage affecting over 1 million people, leaving at least 46,000 people in need of direct humanitarian assistance. It is estimated that some 60,000 people are now in temporary shelters. The worst affected areas are now confirmed to be La Libertad, La Paz, Cuscatlan, Sansonate, and San Vicente. Over 700 people are confirmed dead and more than 4,000 people injured. There has been extensive damage to housing and public buildings including six hospitals. Almost all primary routes are now open and electricity supply has been restored to most parts.

My Department has contributed some £1.3 million for the purchase and distribution of immediate relief assistance including shelter, water and sanitation and medical supplies to those affected by the earthquake in El Salvador. This support is being channelled through the UN, Red Cross and a number of NGOs.

The table summarises the funding allocation and the type of assistance provided.

£

Organisation	*Type of assistance*	*Amount*
UNOCHA	UN disaster assessment and co-ordination team	35,000
PAHO	Health	300,000
IFRC	Shelter, food, health, water and sanitation	100,000
Oxfam	Water and sanitation	300,000
CARE	IDP support	138,900
Christian Aid	Emergency shelter	100,000
Plan International	IDP support	50,000
Save the Children UK	Public health, non-food, education	200,000
SCIAF	Emergency shelter	100,000
Total		1,323,900

Water Supplies

25. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the work undertaken by British water companies in developing nations to develop clean water sources and the co-operation given to them by her Department. [147663]

Clare Short: My Department works closely with DETR, the sponsoring Department for the UK water industry, to ensure the companies are fully aware of DFID's work in developing countries and the role they might play in it. My officials meet regularly with representatives of water companies, and the chairman of Severn Trent Water was a member of the UK delegation to last years World Water Forum in The Hague.

DFID supports the World Bank's Business Partners for Development initiative. This involves a number of the companies in pilot projects. Through this initiative water companies are developing new relationships with civil society and public government bodies and exploring collaborative approaches to extending water supply and sanitation services to the poor.

We also recognise the valuable support provided by the customers and employees of British water companies to WaterAid.

Departmental Budget

26. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how far the budget of her Department relating to poverty reduction is set to increase over the next three years. [147664]

Clare Short: All United Kingdom development assistance is focused on the elimination of poverty.

My Department's budget will increase by an average of 6.2 per cent. over the next three years, taking it to the highest level ever both in cash and real terms—almost £3.6 billion—by 2003–04.

Drugs Trade (Colombia)

27. **Mr. McGrady:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has held with her ministerial colleagues in other European countries concerning the plan by the Colombian Government to tackle the drugs trade; and if she will make a statement. [147665]

Clare Short: Plan Colombia sets out the Colombian Government's proposals for tackling violence, social and economic inequalities, abuse of human rights, drug cultivation and trafficking.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed the plan with the Spanish Foreign Minister on 3 July. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office attended a meeting in Madrid on 7 July on behalf of the UK when representatives of European and other countries discussed the issue with members of the Colombian Government. I have not discussed Plan Colombia with European colleagues.

The European Union has pledged assistance of 105 million euro over the period 2000–06 of which the UK share will be about £18 million. It has made clear that this is not a contribution to Plan Colombia but a package targeted towards support for human rights, long-term economic and social development and an end to violence.

Firearms

28. **Mr. Burstow:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of the impact on development programmes of the availability of small firearms. [147666]

Clare Short: The ready availability of small arms has a direct and negative impact upon levels of crime and conflict in developing countries. We are supporting various peace building and disarmament initiatives that address small arms and other conflict related problems, including work to ensure a successful outcome to the "UN 2001 Conference on The Illicit Trade In Small Arms and Light Weapons: All Its Aspects".

Balkans

29. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will assess the effectiveness of aid programmes in the Balkans. [147667]

Clare Short: We have recently published country strategies for our programmes in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania which assess the impact of past aid. We shall review progress on them annually. We are currently reviewing progress on our interim strategies for Kosovo and Macedonia and will revise them as necessary in consultation with their authorities. We are also reviewing our activities in Croatia since the election of the present Government; we shall revise it as necessary.

Individual bilateral projects are subject to a standard process of review for impact and effectiveness.

We have contributed to the design of the new EC Regulation covering assistance to the Balkans with a view to more effective design and delivery. We also work closely with the international financial institutions to encourage high quality programme design which draws on the lessons of experience.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Patrols

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the level of uniformed police patrols was in *(a)* England and Wales as a whole and *(b)* each individual police force in England and Wales in each of the last five years for which data are available; and if he will make a statement. [148063]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 31 January 2001]:* The table records the number of officers who are predominantly assigned to foot, car and beat patrol duties for each year from 1996–97 to 1999–2000. Information for 2000–01 will be available later in the year following its collection at the end of March by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary.

I understand from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary that in 1999–2000, 50.3 per cent. of the total number of officers in England and Wales were deployed to patrol duties. Most of the other half of the police service are deployed to other operational duties, such as Criminal Investigation Department, traffic, and other specialist operational activities.

Officers predominantly assigned to foot/car/beat patrol duty by force

	Time periods			
Forces	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Avon and Somerset	1,442.2	1,432.2	1,438.3	1,538.6
Bedfordshire	543.5	457.0	479.1	478.3
Cambridgeshire	655.7	614.0	586.2	581.9
Cheshire	976.2	1,022.9	969.9	867.3
City of London	369.9	353.2	385.2	[illegible]
Cleveland	771.2	742.7	552.0	676.1
Cumbria	607.0	630.0	619.0	571.1
Derbyshire	911.2	867.7	842.9	818.7
Devon and Cornwall	1,499.9	1,522.4	1,488.1	1,444.4
Dorset	671.0	663.0	665.0	612.1
Durham	694.9	720.1	764.0	741.7
Dyfed-Powys	559.4	601.3	595.9	598.7
Essex	1,407.6	1,549.4	1,512.4	1,535.9
Gloucestershire	565.0	551.2	533.4	501.9
Greater Manchester	3,245.6	3,361.2	3,321.4	3,615.6
Gwent	732.5	707.8	770.1	735.4
Hampshire	1,975.8	2,094.3	2,030.1	1,912.3
Hertfordshire	919.5	910.6	878.7	968.8
Humberside	1,081.6	1,100.6	1,106.5	1,147.5
Kent	1,542.1	1,352.1	1,116.8	1,132.3
Lancashire	1,465.9	1,274.0	1,489.7	1,585.6
Leicestershire	1,010.4	1,007.0	1,016.0	1,083.5
Lincolnshire	607.8	717.1	661.2	613.8
Merseyside	2,300.0	2,211.7	2,033.2	2,098.1
Metropolitan police	12,307.0	12,158.7	11,716.4	12,312.2
Norfolk	761.7	789.0	714.0	691.4
Northamptonshire	622.4	592.8	648.6	557.5
Northumbria	1,965.7	1,909.3	1,972.9	2,069.8
North Wales	730.0	752.0	615.0	656.0
North Yorkshire	685.4	716.2	713.4	749.3
Nottinghamshire	1,198.1	1,198.1	1,185.2	1,099.7
South Wales	1,537.0	1,472.9	1,604.7	1,610.6
South Yorkshire	1,404.9	1,498.9	1,418.0	1,467.6
Staffordshire	1,044.0	1,255.7	1,220.2	996.7
Suffolk	660.4	642.7	628.7	639.7
Surrey	813.5	659.8	786.4	710.8
Sussex	1,601.4	1,512.0	1,324.9	1,175.8
Thames Valley	1,888.8	1,906.3	2,001.7	1,761.0
Warwickshire	429.9	452.4	450.6	458.7
West Mercia	906.0	925.9	903.9	798.0
West Midlands	3,841.6	3,994.7	4,410.6	4,401.9
West Yorkshire	2,677.6	2,725.3	2,614.3	2,487.4
Wiltshire	541.6	577.3	593.2	555.6
England and Wales	62,172.4	62,202.7	61,377.5	61,401.3

Notes:
Figures are full-time equivalent officers

Passport Fraud

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many instances of obtaining British passports by fraud have occurred in each of the last 10 years. [149361]

Mrs. Roche: The Passport Agency's statistics for British passports obtained by fraud in each of the last 10 years are shown in the table.

Year	*Number issued*
2000[1]	68
1999	153
1998	146
1997	281
1996	190
1995	204
1994	182
1993	317
1992	220
1991	144
Total	1,905

[1] These figures are for the period 1 January to 30 September 2000

Police Statistics

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men, *(b)* women and *(c)* police officers in each of the standard age groups were employed by each police force and in total (i) in 1992, (ii) in 1997 and (iii) on the last date for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [148012]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* The information requested is not centrally collected and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the breakdown was of *(a)* length of service and *(b)* age profile of police officers serving in the Metropolitan police on the last date for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [148011]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* The latest information available from the Metropolitan Police Service is for 31 December 2000. I would therefore refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) on 15 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 109W.

Probation Service

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what new responsibilities have been given to probation services since 1997, including new court orders; and if he will make a statement. [148570]

Mr. Boateng: The following are new requirements or responsibilities since 1997:

Criminal Justice Act 1991: Sections 12 and 13 introduced the power to impose a curfew order. Following successful pilots, these orders were rolled out nationally in December 1999. Pre-sentence, the probation service is required to establish the suitability of the proposed curfew address. The order is electronically monitored and enforced by contractors, who liaise with the service.

Crime and Disorder Act 1998: Sections 58–60 deal with extended sentences requiring probation services to supervise certain sexual and violent offenders for longer than normal periods following release from prison.

Crime and Disorder Act 1998: Sections 89–95 introduced the power to impose a drug treatment and testing order. These orders were rolled out nationally on 1 October 2000.

Crime and Disorder Act 1998: Sections 100 and 101 introduced the Home Detention Curfew scheme from 28 January 1999 for prisoners serving sentences of between three months and four years. They are eligible for release up to two months before they would otherwise be released, to serve the remaining part of their sentence in the community subject to an electronically monitored curfew. The probation service contributes to the risk assessment prior to release.

Crime and Disorder Act 1998: Sections 104 and 105 require probation services to supervise offenders following periods of recall or return to custody where previously those offenders would not have been re-released on licence.

In addition there is supporting work:

Multi-Agency Risk Management Work: all areas now have some form of multi-agency arrangements for the assessment and management of risk posed by sex offenders. In many areas similar arrangements apply to other violent offenders. Probation has a key role in this work and is central to risk assessment and planning.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what targets have been set for Probation Service officer recruitment; what changes in the number of Probation Service officers have taken place since targets have been set; and if he will make a statement. [148571]

Mr. Boateng: No central targets have been set. The considered assessment is that the numbers of Probation Service officers, and kindred grades, will need almost to double, from 2,400 to 4,660, by the year 2003–04. This is part of the overall probation staff increase from 12,835 to 17,250 (including an increase from 4,964 to 5,770 in main grade probation officers—about 16.5 per cent.) in the same period to deliver accredited programmes under the "What Works" initiative. (All figures are full-time equivalents).

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the real-terms change in *(a)* central funding and *(b)* total spending was (i) in each probation service and (ii) for the probation service in total between (A) 1992 and 1997 and (B) 1997 and the latest date for which figures are available; what the estimated real terms changes are in total funding in the next three years; and if he will make a statement. [148569]

Mr. Boateng: The detailed information relating to each probation service for 1992–93 to 1997–98 and 1997–98 to 2001–02 is set out in the table. In total, probation service funding is projected to increase from £542 million in 2000–01 to £713 million in 2003–04, an increase of 31.5 per cent., equivalent to a real-terms increase of 22 per cent. over the three years covered by the spending review 2000 period.

Increases in financial support to local probation areas

	Expenditure implied by cash limit		*Percentage increase*			*Expenditure implied by cash limit*	*Percentage increase*		
	1992–93 (£ million)	*1997–98 (£ million)*	*Actual*	*Real*	*Annual real*	*2001–02 (£ million)*	*Actual*	*Real*	*Annual real*
Avon and Somerset	9.267	10.961	18.3	4.1	0.8	13.48	23.0	11.7	2.9
Bedfordshire	3.233	3.748	15.9	2.0	0.4	5.135	37.0	24.5	6.1
Cambridgeshire	3.435	4.243	23.5	8.7	1.7	5.545	30.7	18.7	4.7
Cheshire	5.053	6.389	26.4	11.2	2.2	9.216	44.2	31.1	7.8
Cumbria	3.667	4.231	15.4	1.5	0.3	5.151	21.7	10.6	2.7
Derbyshire	4.512	5.696	26.2	11.1	2.2	8.601	51.0	37.2	9.3
Devon and Cornwall	8.523	10.294	20.8	6.3	1.3	13.071	27.0	15.4	3.8
Dorset	3.851	4.493	16.7	2.6	0.5	5.475	21.9	10.7	2.7
Durham	3.94	4.503	14.3	0.5	0.1	6.357	41.2	28.3	7.1
Essex	7.886	9.268	17.5	3.4	0.7	13.068	41.0	28.1	7.0
Gloucestershire	3.303	4.004	21.2	6.6	1.3	4.863	21.5	10.3	2.6
Hampshire	7.962	9.755	22.5	7.8	1.6	14.647	50.1	36.4	9.1
Hertfordshire	5.08	5.918	16.5	2.5	0.5	7.306	23.5	12.2	3.0
Humberside	5.469	6.574	20.2	5.8	1.2	9.37	42.5	29.5	7.4
Kent	8.389	10.385	23.8	8.9	1.8	14.415	38.8	26.1	6.5
Lancashire	7.88	9.916	25.8	10.7	2.1	15.49	56.2	41.9	10.5
Leicestershire	4.744	5.723	20.6	6.1	1.2	8.608	50.4	36.6	9.2
Lincolnshire	3.404	4.049	18.9	4.6	0.9	5.629	39.0	26.3	6.6
Norfolk	3.469	4.395	26.7	11.5	2.3	6.627	50.8	37.0	9.2
Northamptonshire	2.913	3.576	22.8	8.0	1.6	5.07	41.8	28.8	7.2
North Yorkshire	2.707	3.705	36.9	20.4	4.1	5.835	57.5	43.1	10.8
Nottinghamshire	7.709	8.908	15.6	1.7	0.3	11.281	26.6	15.1	3.8
Staffordshire	6.799	7.558	11.2	−2.2	−0.4	9.201	21.7	10.6	2.7
Suffolk	3.165	3.805	20.2	5.8	1.2	5.31	39.6	26.8	6.7
Surrey	4.837	5.85	20.9	6.4	1.3	6.996	19.6	8.6	2.2
Sussex	6.316	7.873	24.7	9.7	1.9	10.95	39.1	26.4	6.6
Teesside	4.399	5.455	24.0	9.1	1.8	7.957	45.9	32.5	8.1
Thames Valley	11.995	13.73	14.5	0.7	0.1	16.729	21.8	10.7	2.7

Increases in financial support to local probation areas

	Expenditure implied by cash limit		Percentage increase			Expenditure implied by cash limit	Percentage increase		
	1992–93 (£ million)	1997–98 (£ million)	Actual	Real	Annual real	2001–02 (£ million)	Actual	Real	Annual real
Warwickshire	3.06	3.523	15.1	1.3	0.3	4.212	19.6	8.6	2.2
West Mercia	6.242	7.133	14.3	0.5	0.1	9.258	29.8	17.9	4.5
Wiltshire	2.946	3.515	19.3	5.0	1.0	4.959	41.1	28.2	7.0
Greater Manchester	21.129	25.528	20.8	6.3	1.3	32.058	25.6	14.1	3.5
Merseyside	14.096	15.733	11.6	−1.8	−0.4	19.329	22.9	11.6	2.9
Northumbria	10.784	12.631	17.1	3.0	0.6	17.587	39.2	26.5	6.6
South Yorkshire	10.763	12.465	15.8	1.9	0.4	15.657	25.6	14.1	3.5
West Midlands	22.217	26.155	17.7	3.6	0.7	32.532	24.4	13.0	3.3
West Yorkshire	16.827	19.981	18.7	4.5	0.9	24.978	25.0	13.6	3.4
Greater London	65.721	77.819	18.4	4.2	0.8	94.147	21.0	9.9	2.5
Dyfed-Powys	2.307	3.01	30.5	14.8	3.0	4.687	55.7	41.5	10.4
Gwent[1]	2.343	3.771	60.9	41.6	8.3	5.852	55.2	41.0	10.2
North Wales	3.009	3.921	30.3	14.6	2.9	6.229	58.9	44.3	11.1
South Wales[1]	9.76	10.943	12.1	−1.4	−0.3	15.13	38.3	25.6	6.4
Total	345.111	411.133	19.1	4.8	1.0	537.998	30.9	18.9	4.7

[1] The figures for Gwent and South Wales are affected by a substantial boundary change

Notes:

1. Before 2001–02, funding for local probation services was 80 per cent. by Home Office grant and 20 per cent. by local authority contribution. From 2001–02 funding will be 100 per cent. Home Office grant.
2. Figures are provided for the probation boards that will be in existence in 2001–02. Where amalgamations have taken place, previous years figures have been amalgamated for the local probation areas concerned.
3. In order to provide a realistic comparison, the 2001–02 figures include provision for the Family Court Welfare Service which transfers to the Lord Chancellor's Department from April 2001.

Asylum Seekers (Homes)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of homes allocated to asylum seekers by *(a)* NASS and *(b)* local authorities have been inspected in the last 12 months. [148718]

Mrs. Roche: Inspections have been carried out on 100 per cent. of properties provided by the private sector and included on the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) database at 1 October 2000. Inspections have been carried out on 55 per cent. of properties provided by the private sector and included on the NASS database since 1 October. Inspections have been carried out on 5 per cent. of public sector accommodation included on the NASS database since 1 October 2000.

Youth Inclusion Projects

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the areas where youth inclusion projects will be operational by March; and what resources will be allocated to each. [148559]

Mr. Boateng: The Youth Justice Board managed youth inclusion programme aims to provide funding for 70 projects, of which 59 are now operational and another seven are expected to go live by March 2001.

Each project receives annually £75,000 from local partnerships and £75,000 from the Youth Justice Board.

The areas where youth inclusion projects will be operational by March 2001 are listed in the table.

Areas in which youth inclusion projects will be operational by March 2001

Neighbourhood	Area
Projects currently operational	
Wyrley Birch	Birmingham
Central, Barrow Island and Walney North	Barrow-in-Furness
Whitebirk	Blackburn
Mill Hill	Blackburn
Gascoigne and Barking Roding Valley	Barking and Dagenham
Shard End	Birmingham
Washwood Heath	Birmingham
Kingstanding	Birmingham
Farnworth SRB area	Bolton
Horton	Bradford
Newlands	Bradford
Church End Estate	Brent
Barton Hill	Bristol
Mixenden and Ovenden	Calderdale
Cattlehaven	Camden
Llanrumney Ward	Cardiff
Wood End	Coventry
Osmaston Estate	Derby
Trafalgar Estate	Doncaster
Acre Rigg, Dene House and Dene Hill Wards in Peterlee	Easington
Beacon Lough East, Springwell, Leam Lane	Gateshead
Page Estate	Greenwich
Woodbury Down	Hackney
Preston Road	Hull
North Fulham neighbourhood	Hammersmith and Fulham
Tottenham and Wood Green	Haringey
Holloway and Tollington	Islington
Dalgarno	Kensington and Chelsea
Dewsbury Moor	Kirklees
Clapham Park Estate	Lambeth
Middleton	Leeds City (South)
Sandford-Ganners area of Bramley	Leeds West
Bury Park	Luton
Beswick	Manchester
Gurnos and Galon Uchaf Estates	Merthyr Tydfil

Areas in which youth inclusion projects will be operational by March 2001

Neighbourhood	*Area*
West Middlesbrough NDC area	Middlesbrough
Sandfields	Neath Port Talbot
Scotswood	Newcastle
Forest Gate	Newham
Radford and Lenton NDC area	Nottingham
Hathershaw and Fitton Hill	Oldham
Avenham Ward	Preston
Barne Barton	Plymouth
Gladstone	Peterborough
Portsea	Portsmouth
Langley Estate	Rochdale
Langworthy/Seedley	Salford
Shirecliffe	Sheffield
Lawson, Rokingham, Heygate and Draper	Southwark
West Itchen	Southampton
Biddick Hall	South Tyneside
Newtown	Stockton-on-Tees
North Washington	Sunderland
Dunkinfield	Tameside
Blakenall Ward	Walsall
Alton Estate	Wandsworth
Woodhouse Close Estate and St. Helen Auckland Estate	Wear Valley
Bushbury/Lowhill	Wolverhampton
Caia Park Estate	Wrexham
Projects expected to be operational by March 2001	
East Brighton	Brighton and Hove
Fincham, Woolfall Heath and Hillside areas of Huyton	Knowsley
Kensington	Liverpool
Maltby	Rotherham
Pendle/Barkdaley	Sefton
Stansfield Estate, Burslem	Stoke-on-Trent
Birkenhead North	Wirral

Soft-tipped Bullets

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the advice of the Police Scientific Development Branch on the use of soft-tipped bullets by the police. [148859]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Soft-point ammunition in use by the police service is designed to transfer the maximum energy or "stopping power" to the target. It is less likely to endanger others by passing through the immediate target, or ricocheting from a hard surface. It is not intended to cause unnecessary injury.

It is not in the public interest to publish technical advice on the performance of ammunition suitable for police use. It contains information which could put both police officers and members of the public at risk and undermine the operational effectiveness of the police service.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many anti-social behaviour orders have been made in *(a)* Northumbria, *(b)* South Yorkshire, *(c)* West Yorkshire, *(d)* Merseyside, *(e)* the West Midlands and *(f)* Greater Manchester. [148611]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The number of orders made in each area by the end of September, the latest date for which figures are available, can be found in the table.

Area	*Number*
Northumbria	8
South Yorkshire	3
West Yorkshire	5
Merseyside	8
West Midlands	15
Greater Manchester	12

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many anti-social behaviour orders have been made in each police authority area in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* England. [148667]

Mr. Charles Clarke: By the end of September, the latest date for which figures are available, orders were made in the following areas:

Area	*Number*
Avon and Somerset	11
Cambridgeshire	5
Cleveland	4
Cumbria	1
Derbyshire	4
Devon and Cornwall	1
Dorset	2
Durham	2
Greater Manchester	12
Hampshire	1
Hertfordshire	1
Humberside	2
Lancashire	7
Leicestershire	1
Met. Police area	18
Merseyside	8
Norfolk	6
North Wales	1
North Yorkshire	4
Northumbria	8
Nottinghamshire	5
South Wales	1
South Yorkshire	3
Suffolk	3
Surrey	1
Sussex	3
Thames Valley	1
Warwickshire	1
West Mercia	10
West Midlands	15
West Yorkshire	5

The figures for the period 1 April 1999 to 31 May 2000 were provided by police forces. Figures for the period 1 June 2000 to 31 September 2000, provided by magistrates courts committees.

Cigarette Sales (Children)

Siobhain McDonagh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average fine levied on those found guilty of selling cigarettes to children aged under 16 years in 1999–2000. [148854]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The available information has been taken from the Home Office's Court Proceedings Database. Ninety persons were fined after being found guilty of selling tobacco based products (including cigarettes) under section 7 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933, as amended by Section 1 of the

Children (Protection From Tobacco) Act 1991, to children aged under 16 years in 1999. The average fine levied was £237.

Two persons were fined after being found guilty under section 3 of the Children (Protection From Tobacco) Act 1991 for selling unpackaged cigarettes to children under 16 in 1999. The average fine was £200.

Shotguns

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representatives he has received on the length of time taken to process shotgun certificate renewal; what the average length of time taken to process shotgun certificate renewals in *(a)* England, *(b)* Wales and *(c)* North Yorkshire was in (i) 1996 and (ii) 2000; and how frequently local authority firearm consultative committees should meet. [148645]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office has received a number of representations about the time taken to renew shotgun certificates from a range of shooters and shooting bodies.

Figures for average renewal times are not collected centrally and were not so collected in 1996. We understand from information as is immediately available that the average time taken to renew a shotgun certificate is as follows, the 1996 figure being an estimate.

Average renewal time in weeks	*1996*	*2000*
England	4	7
Wales	2	9
North Yorkshire	3	8

The main reason for this increase in most forces is that following Lord Cullen's report into the Dunblane tragedy, most forces have moved from renewing shotgun certificates by post to visiting applicants personally prior to renewal.

The Home Office has not issued advice on how often local firearms consultative bodies should meet; nor have we received any representations on this issue in recent years. We understand that those forces that do hold such consultative meetings do so between two and four times a year.

Violent Crime (Wales)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consultations he has held on measures to reduce violent crimes against the person and street crimes in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [148648]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have held no specific consultations on measures to reduce violent crimes against the person and street crimes in Wales alone. The measures which the Government are taking to tackle violent crime across England and Wales are set out in "Fighting violent crime together: an action plan", published in January, based on a wide range of consultation and partnership working across the country. Our strategy is based on improving support for victims, better policing, more effective punishment and tackling the causes of crime.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he intends to take to reduce violent crimes against the person and street crimes in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [148647]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government are committed to reducing violent crime and the fear of violent crime and to ensuring that individuals and communities are protected and feel safe. We are working in partnership with the police and other agencies, both in England and Wales, on a wide range of ways of tackling violent crime, underpinned by our overall strategy, "Fighting violent crime together: an action plan", published in January.

The Government are putting in place the investment to make sure that the police have the resources they need. Under the crime fighting fund, the Welsh police forces have been allocated 422 additional recruits over and above previous plans, over a three-year period from 2000 to 2003.

Under the Government's Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, the Welsh police forces are working with other agencies to put in place a number of initiatives to tackle violent crime, notably alcohol-related violence.

Last year, the Home Office awarded the South Wales Constabulary a grant of £498,000 to the Cardiff street violence reduction project, with the aim of reducing alcohol-related violence. This will involve collecting more comprehensive and better quality information as to the essence of street violence in Cardiff gathered from a variety of agencies including the accident and emergency department at the hospital; acting on information either co-operatively or punitively so as to control environments; establishing a licensees' forum; establishing an awareness campaign; and providing victims with referral to community health care services and victim support.

Sussex Police

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the actual strength was of the Sussex Police for each quarter since 1995. [148355]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 2 February 2001]:* Information on police numbers for England and Wales are collected on a six-monthly basis (March and September). Six-monthly strength figures for the Sussex Police are set out in the table.

Sussex Police—numbers since March 1995

Year	*31 March*	*30 September*
1995	2,931	3,020
1996	3,074	3,097
1997	3,085	3,040
1998	2,996	2,924
1999	2,847	2,909
2000	2,822	2,812

Part of the reduction in police numbers since 1997 was a consequence of the Chief Constable's decision to civilianise a significant number of police posts. Between 31 March 1997 and 30 September 2000 the number of civilian support staff in the Sussex Police increased by 256 to 1,405.

Crime Statistics, (South Gloucester)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what statistics he collates on levels and types of crime and over what period for the area covered by the South Gloucestershire Unitary Authority since 1979. [148741]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office has been collecting and publishing data relating to Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships and Police Basic Command Units, which include South Gloucestershire, for the period since 1 April 1999. The data include the number of offences and the rates per 1,000 population for the six subject areas of violence against the person, sexual offences, robbery, burglary of a dwelling, theft of vehicles and theft from vehicles. Also included is the number of burglaries of a dwelling per 1,000 households, and the number and proportion of the above offences which are cleared up in each Basic Command Unit. The most recently available information was published on 16 January 2001 in the Home Office Statistical Bulletin number 1–01, "Recorded Crime, England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000", which is available in the Library.

Cemeteries

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cemeteries there are in England; how many are full; if he intends more land to be made over to this use; and if he will make a statement. [148399]

Mr. Boateng: Details of the number and remaining capacity of cemeteries in England are not held centrally by the Home Office. I propose to hold a consultation exercise later this year to consider ways of meeting future demands for burial facilities, and will take account of the findings of the current inquiry into cemeteries by the Environment Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs.

Deportation (Prisoners)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent involvement his Department has had with high commissioners and ambassadors based in the UK concerning nationals from their country being held in prison in the UK awaiting deportation; and if he will make a statement. [148894]

Mr. Boateng: A Prison Service seminar for consular and embassy staff, in co-operation with the Foreign Nationals Unit of Middlesex Probation Service, to consider training and other issues of general interest or concern is normally held annually. The last seminar was on 20 June 2000 and the next event will be held on 22 February 2001.

The United Kingdom is a signatory to the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations. This requires the disclosure of information on foreign national prisoners to those countries with which bilateral consular conventions or agreements requiring notification of the arrest and detention of their nationals are in force. However, these arrangements do not apply when it is known that a foreign national is seeking asylum in this country or is detained under the Immigration Act 1971 and is representing on political, religious or ethnic grounds that they should not be deported or removed. In such circumstances no notification should be sent to the consular officer, nor should the foreign national be allowed to communicate with a consular officer until directions have been obtained from the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. It would not be appropriate to disclose details of individual cases of foreign nationals being held in prison awaiting deportation.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the longest period a person currently being held in prison in England and Wales awaiting deportation has been held. [148895]

Mr. Boateng: On 31 December 2000, there were 101 people held in prison in England and Wales who were recorded as awaiting deportation. The longest period any of these persons had been held awaiting deportation was 282 days, having been held since 24 March 2000.

Life Prisoners

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were serving a life prison sentence in prisons in England and Wales on 1 January. [148919]

Mr. Boateng: Provisional information for the 31 December 2000 shows that 4,521 men and 160 women were serving a life prison sentence in prisons in England and Wales at that time.

Prison Education

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what level of expenditure in each prison budget was used for educational purposes *(a)* as a percentage of a prison's overall budget and *(b)* per prisoner; in each year since 1992. [149051]

Mr. Boateng: Information is not available in the form requested. The tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library, set out operational spend for each prison (i.e. excluding any capital expenditure), spend on certain separately identifiable areas of education spend, covering payments to education providers and purchase of education materials, and the figure produced when that spend is divided by the average population for each prison in that year. These cover the financial years 1995–96 to 1999–2000; information for earlier years is not readily available; neither is information on education costs at private sector prisons. It should be noted that the figures for 1999–2000 are on a slightly different basis to those for earlier years due to differences in accounting procedure, in that they do not include VAT refunds.

Misuse of Drugs Act

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will respond to the report on the Police Foundation inquiry into the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. [149425]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I wrote to Viscountess Runciman, Chairman of this Inquiry, today enclosing a memorandum setting out the Government's response. I have written in similar terms to the Home Affairs Committee which had also sought the Government's views on the report. A copy of the response has been placed in the Library. I understand that the Home Affairs

Committee has decided to publish this response today as its second special report HC 226 and this is available on www.parliament.uk/commons/selcom/hmafhome.htm.

Annual Report

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish the criminal justice system annual report. [149617]

Mr. Straw: My right hon. and noble Friends the Attorney-General, the Lord Chancellor and I have today published jointly an annual report for the criminal justice system in England and Wales for 1999–2000.

The annual report is a formal report back on the first Criminal Justice System Strategic and Business Plan, which was published in March 1999.

Copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

SCOTLAND

Liquid Petroleum Gas

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will undertake a study of the costs and benefits of large scale conversion from petrol to liquid petroleum gas in remote regions; and if she will make a statement. [149337]

Mr. Foulkes: Liquid petroleum gas is a cleaner fuel that has significant environmental benefits over the use of petrol and diesel. It is for this reason that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the last Budget held duty on road fuel gases to 15p per kilogram. The extension of the use of liquid petroleum gas by motorists in remote areas can also help address higher fuel costs faced in remote parts of Scotland caused by problems of low turnover of fuel sales and lack of competition.

Responsibility in Scotland for the Powershift scheme, which provides grants for the purchase and conversion of vehicles to alternative fuels including LPG, and for the Rural Transport Fund, which provides grants for the installation of LPG tanks in rural petrol stations, lies with the Scottish Executive. From the next financial year the Scottish Executive will provide £990,000 per year for Powershift. Measures to promote LPG supplies in rural areas are funded from the Scottish Executive Rural Transport Fund. Further details of that funding are expected soon. I understand that the Scottish Executive has no plans at this stage to carry out a cost-benefit analysis of large-scale conversion to LPG in remote areas.

Employment (Glasgow)

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many people were in *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time employment in (i) the constituency of Glasgow, Pollok and (ii) in Glasgow (A) in May 1997 and (B) on 29 January; and what the percentage change was in each case. [148127]

Mr. Foulkes: The number of people who were in *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time employment in Glasgow City unitary authority in Spring (March to May) 1997 and Autumn (September to November) 2000 are shown in the table. No equivalent figures, showing numbers of people, for the parliamentary constituency of Glasgow, Pollok are available.

	Glasgow City
Full-time employment:	
Spring 1997	168,000
Autumn 2000	188,000
Percentage change	+12
Part-time employment:	
Spring 1997	47,000
Autumn 2000	61,000
Percentage change	+30

Source:
Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics

A75

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much Trans-European Network funding has been paid to assist in the upgrading of the A75; how many separate grants have been made; in which year; and for which projects. [148134]

Mr. Foulkes: The Scottish Executive is responsible for trunk roads within Scotland. To be considered for funding under the Trans-European Network (TEN) Multi-annual Indicative Programme (MIP), schemes must be submitted to the Commission as part of an overall UK bid. Trans-European Network (TEN) funding of some £350,000 was received in 1997 as a contribution to the improvement of the A75 at The Glen. The project has since been completed and a further claim for the outstanding amount of £780,000 is being prepared. No other TEN funding has been received for upgrading the A75.

TREASURY

Manufacturing (Job Losses)

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many manufacturing jobs have been lost in *(a)* the Northern Region and *(b)* the Jarrow constituency, since 1997; and how many manufacturing jobs have been created in *(a)* the Northern Region and *(b)* the Jarrow constituency, since 1997. [148610]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Stephen Hepburn, dated 7 February 2001:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question about the number of manufacturing jobs that have been lost and created in the Northern Region and Jarrow since 1997 (148610).

Information is not available separately for job losses and job gains, but the net effect is measured in the Annual Employment Survey (AES) in September of each year. Between September 1997 and September 1998 (the latest year for which figures are available), the AES shows net increases in the number of employee jobs in manufacturing of 5,200 in the Northern Region and 1,800 in the Jarrow Constituency.

Tax Returns

Mr. Willis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how income received as a result of fines levied on individuals for non-completion of tax returns is *(a)* accounted for and *(b)* allocated. [148985]

Dawn Primarolo: Taxpayers who do not complete tax returns under the self-assessment system render themselves liable for penalties. When penalties are paid they are allocated to the taxpayer's account, and brought to account as SA penalties. The income received from such penalty receipts is paid over as a CFER (consolidated fund extra receipt). These receipts are paid over to the Treasury and are reported within the Appropriation Account (Class XVI Vote 4).

Capital Gains Tax

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of beneficiaries of *(a)* taper relief and *(b)* exemption from capital gains accrued but unrealised at death in (i) 2000–01 and (ii) 2001–02; and if he will make a statement. [146042]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 18 January 2001]:* About 90 per cent. of the 190,000 CGT taxpayers for 2000–01 are expected to realise some gains to which the applicable taper rate will be less than 100 per cent.

It is estimated that, for 2000–01, 55,000 estates might benefit from the exemption for capital gains accrued but unrealised at death.

Corresponding information for 2001–02 is not available.

Departmental Policies (Staffordshire, Moorlands)

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out with statistical information relating as directly as possible to Staffordshire, Moorlands constituency, the effects on Staffordshire, Moorlands of his Department's policies and actions *(a)* since 2 May 1997 and *(b)* in the 12 months ending on 1 May 1997. [149137]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Staffordshire, Moorlands constituency, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. In April 1997, claimant unemployment in the constituency stood at 1,385. By December 2000 it had fallen 41 per cent. to 822. Over the same period, youth unemployment in Staffordshire, Moorlands has fallen by 90 per cent., and long-term unemployment has dropped by 73 per cent.

Macroeconomic stability is being complemented at the microeconomic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of November 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 454 young people in Staffordshire, Moorlands gain valuable skills and experience—254 (56 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 1,800 families in Staffordshire, Moorlands constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to developing policies which enable all pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. As a result of the recent pre-Budget report, all pensioners, including 17,300 in Staffordshire, Moorlands constituency, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 10,500 in Staffordshire, Moorlands.

Departmental Policies (Morecambe and Lunesdale)

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency, the effects of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [149088]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Morecambe and Lunesdale, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 935, or 33 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 88 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 66 per cent.

Macroeconomic stability is being complemented at the microeconomic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of November 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 1,080 young people in Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency gain valuable skills and experience—564 (52 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 2,100 families in the constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to developing policies which enable all pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. As a result of the recent pre-Budget report, all pensioners, including 18,600 in Morecambe and Lunesdale, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 12,000 in Morecambe and Lunesdale.

Lump Sum Payments

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the amount of tax not collected as a result of the concession on lump sums paid on retirement in the most recent year for which figures are available. [148638]

Dawn Primarolo: The information can be found in the footnotes to table 7.7 of Inland Revenue Statistics 2000, a copy of which is in the Library.

Children's Tax Credit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people have contacted their local tax office to request a children's tax credit form. [146356]

Dawn Primarolo: Over 100,000 people have contacted an Inland Revenue tax office to request a children's tax credit form.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many children's tax credit forms have been returned since 20 October 2000. [146357]

Dawn Primarolo: To date, around 2.9 million children's tax credit claim forms have been returned.

Euro

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the requirements, in respect of the operation and management of the euro by *(a)* the European Community and *(b)* the European Central Bank, concerning the need for (i) alignment and (ii) further harmonisation of tax rates and policies on income arising from commercial transactions, capital gains, non-occupational personal income from sources (A) inside and (B) outside the European Union, indirect taxation and taxes other than personal occupational income tax. [149184]

Miss Melanie Johnson: There are no such requirements.

Revenue Yield

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the revenue yield of *(a)* cutting age-related personal allowances to the level of the basic personal allowance and *(b)* increasing class IV national insurance payments to a rate of 22.2 per cent. [146251]

Dawn Primarolo: The full-year yield from cutting the age-related personal allowances to the basic personal allowance is £950 million for 2000–01. The effect of making a change to the class 4 rate is given in table 1.6 of Inland Revenue Statistics 2000.

These estimates are based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and are consistent with the November 2000 pre-Budget Report.

Childcare Tax Credit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the childcare tax credit will continue when the integrated child credit is introduced. [148494]

Dawn Primarolo: The child care tax credit in Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) currently delivers help with child care costs to over 124,000 families, compared with under 50,000 families who benefited from the child care disregard in family credit. The child care tax credit helps families to overcome the barrier that child care costs present when moving into work. The new tax credits, which will be introduced from 2003 and replace WFTC, will build on the success of WFTC and continue to provide support for families.

Church Repairs (VAT)

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects to introduce the reduced rate of VAT for listed churches; and if this proposal has been approved by the European Commission. [147750]

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress he has made on his proposal to reduce the VAT rate on repairs, maintenance and conservation work for churches and chapels. [147405]

Mr. Spring: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what indication he has received about the timetable for European Commission proposals to include repairs, maintenance and improvements to places of worship listed in Annex H of the 6 VAT Directive, to make it possible for member states to apply a reduced rate of VAT to such services; and what assessment he has made of the likelihood of such a change being agreed. [149449]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* The Government are continuing their discussions with the European Commission on a reduced VAT rate for listed places of worship. A preliminary reply has indicated that this will be considered by the Commission in their general review of reduced rates that will take place in 2003. In the interim period the Government are considering special arrangements to help congregations pay for repairs to listed church buildings.

Stamp Duty Exemption (Brownfield Sites)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the areas he has designated as brownfield sites eligible for exemption from stamp duty. [148846]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government are working closely with the devolved authorities to ensure that the stamp duty relief for deprived communities announced in the pre-Budget report is targeted at the most disadvantaged areas in all parts of the UK. The areas to qualify for the relief will be published in Budget 2001.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 8 February 2001

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Factortame Ruling

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress has been made in meeting the claims arising from the ruling over the Factortame case brought by owners of flag of convenience vessels. [150068]

Mr. Morley: Settlement has now been reached with all the applicants involved in the Factortame litigation. Under the terms of the settlement the total sum of damages paid is £55 million, including interest of some £26 million. This includes the earlier settlement of £10 million reached in 2000 but excludes the legal costs of the applicants, liability for which was accepted as part of the settlement agreements, but which have yet to be assessed. The claims submitted by the applicants totalled £285 million before interest.

Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries Review Group

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the Government will publish its formal response to the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries Review Group report. [149833]

Mr. Morley: I am pleased to announce that copies of the formal Government response have today been placed in the House of Commons Library. A copy of the Government response is being sent to all those who responded to the report.

Official Publications

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list (1) his Department's spending on official publications for *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99, *(d)* 1999–2000 and *(e)* 2000–01 and the planned expenditure for 2001–02; [141447]

(2) if he will list each new publication issued by his Department since 1997 and the total cost to the Department of each publication. [141464]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 11 December 2000]:* A list of publications and printing costs, produced by my Department for the financial years since 1996–97, is available in the Libraries of the House.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire of 24 May on behalf of his constituent, Mrs. Brown. [143934]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* A reply was originally sent to the right hon. Member on 16 June 2000, but, I understand, was not received. A re-drafted response was sent on 7 February 2001.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his holding answer (UIN 135790), when he will reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire of 13 July 2000 on behalf of his constituent Mr. Russell. [149210]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 6 February 2001]:* A reply was originally sent to the right hon. Member on 22 August 2000, but, I understand, was not received. A re-drafted response was sent on 7 February 2001.

Sugar

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what area of land is used to grow sugar beet in each EU member state, together with the percentage of that area that would be eligible for IACS payments if alternative crops were grown. [146411]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* Sugar beet is grown on about 1.5 per cent. of the EU agricultural area, and the breakdown by member state is as follows. So long as this land met the requirements of Council Regulation (EC) No. 1251/1999 (effectively meaning that it had been used for sugar beet or other arable production at some time during the five years to 31 December 1991), it would generally all be eligible for payments under the Arable Area Payments Scheme if eligible crops such as cereals and oilseeds were grown on it.

Thousand ha

Member state	*Beet area 2000–01*
Austria	43
Belgium/Luxembourg	95
Denmark	58
Finland	33
France	361
Germany	452
Greece	50
Ireland	33
Italy	240
Netherlands	112
Portugal	8
Spain	130
Sweden	56
UK	150
Total EU 15	1,821

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how much sugar by weight and value was exported from each Association of Caribbean Producers nation covered by the Sugar Protocol to *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* the European Union; [146413]

(2) if he will state the latest intervention price for *(a)* beet sugar under the EU sugar regime, *(b)* cane sugar imported from the Association of Caribbean Producers countries under the EU sugar regime, *(c)* world prices for beet sugar and *(d)* world prices for cane sugar. [146412]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* The relevant information is set out in the tables.

Table 1: Exports to UK and EU (October 1999 to September 2000)

	UK imports (thousand tonnes white sugar equivalent)	*Value (£ million)*	*Other EU Imports (thousand tonnes white sugar equivalent)*	*Value (£ million)*
Barbados	48	16	0	0
Belize	50	15	12	4
Guyana	174	59	36	12
Jamaica	133	44	33	11
St. Kitts	16	5	0	0
Trinidad and Tobago	43	12	9	3
Total	464	151	90	30

Note:
UK imports based on EU and C&E data (provisional). Other EU imports data from European Commission, with value derived using statutory minimum prices.

Table 2: Prices

	euro/tonne	*£/tonne*
White sugar intervention price (UK)	646.5	414.21
Raw sugar intervention price	523.7	335.53
Sugar Protocol guaranteed price (white)	646.5	414.21
Sugar Protocol guaranteed price (raw)	523.7	335.53
Special Preferential Sugar price (raw)	496.8	318.30
World price[1] (white)	263.7	168.95
World price[1] (raw)	264.2	169.27

[1] World prices based on London spot prices for 18 January 2001
Note:
Exchange rate: euro/£ = 0.6407

Mr. Hugh Leman

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 16 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 141W, what representations *(a)* his Department and *(b)* other statutory bodies have received from Mr. Hugh Leman. [147974]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* Pursuant to my answer of 16 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 141W, I am not aware of any representations from Mr. Hugh Leman.

Pollution

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received on the implementation of the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations. [148867]

Mr. Morley: MAFF has received representations from the NFU and other trade organisations, as well as ministerial correspondence, on the implementation of the Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations in the pig and poultry sectors. These have covered a range of issues specific to the pig and poultry sectors and also the Environment Agency's interim charging scheme. As part of the Action Plan for Farming, the Government dealt with two issues of particular importance to the industry: we deferred implementation of IPPC for existing pig and poultry installations until 2007 and have agreed an Environment Agency charge for permits based on General Binding Rules of £2,950, rather than the £12,000-£18,000 it originally proposed. The Environment Agency, along with officials from MAFF, is continuing to work with the industry to ensure the rules implementing the IPPC Regulations are as unbureaucratic and non-burdensome as possible while meeting the environmental requirements of the Regulations.

Countryside Stewardship Scheme

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the relationship between the countryside stewardship scheme and rural development funds from *(a)* a national and *(b)* a European source; and if he will make a statement. [148949]

Mr. Morley: Funding for the Countryside Stewardship Scheme is allocated through the seven-year England Rural Development Programme. Some £480 million of the total programme budget of £1.6 billion is assigned to Countryside Stewardship. Of this, £295 million is nationally funded. £185 million derives from European funds, of which 27 per cent. is sourced from the Community's allocation for rural development and 73 per cent. from modulating farmers direct aids.

Veterinary Medicines

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to receive the report from the Independent Review of Dispensing of Prescription Only Medicines for veterinary use; and if he will make a statement. [148155]

Ms Quin: The Independent Review of Dispensing, which is being led by Professor Sir John Marsh CBE, is due to report to my right hon. Friend the Minister by 31 March 2001.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Comitology

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many comitology committees of the EU were in existence on the most recent date for which figures are available. [147319]

Mr. Vaz: The Commission's latest list was printed in the *Official Journal of the European Communities* last year (C225 Volume 43, 8 August 2000). This is available in the Library of the House.

IRA (Sweden)

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Swedish Government to ensure that IRA fund-raising activities do not take place in Sweden through IRA-linked business operations; and if he will make a statement. [149118]

Mr. Vaz: The Government are aware of recent Swedish newspaper allegations concerning IRA fund-raising in Sweden, but has no evidence to support them. Any allegations of fund-raising for the purposes of terrorism are examined carefully, and if necessary the UK authorities take action in co-operation with their counterparts in other countries.

Departmental Policies (Morecambe and Lunesdale)

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will set out, including statistical information, the effect on the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [149126]

Mr. Vaz: We hold no information of the kind sought by my hon. Friend. The mission of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is to promote the national interests of the United Kingdom and to contribute to a strong world community. For details of the Government's achievements in meeting their foreign policy targets, the following page of the FCO website may be helpful: http://www/fco.gov.uk/directory/dynpage.asp?page=108

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Retail Petrol Industry

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his policy towards the independent retail petrol industry. [147047]

Mr. Hain: The Government are committed to ensuring that a free and open market operates within the UK petrol retail sector to the benefit of consumers, not least those who use small independent retailers.

Alternative Energy Sources

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reasons he intends to exclude energy from waste from renewables obligations; what measures he intends to introduce to promote energy from waste; and what assessment he has made of the environmental benefits of energy from waste. [149325]

Mr. Hain: No final decisions have been made as to which renewables will be included within the renewables obligation.

The Government's consultation document on the obligation proposed that large-scale hydro and energy from waste should be excluded on the grounds that they are already commercially viable, well established in the market, and able to compete with electricity from fossil fuels. This view took into account the indirect support provided to energy from waste by the landfill tax. The many responses received to this and other proposals in the consultation document are under consideration.

DTI does not have a promotional campaign on energy from waste. We do, however, support research and development on energy from waste and other forms of renewable energy under the Department's new and renewable energy programme.

The Government's policy is first to minimise waste, then to maximise re-use, recycling and composting where this is the most appropriate action. However, where the creation of waste is unavoidable, burning it to generate energy saves fossil fuels, reduces emissions, contributes towards our Kyoto targets and avoids having to landfill such waste.

The Government set out their aims and objectives for waste management in "Waste Strategy 2000". The choice of waste facilities is a matter for local councils to take in consultation with local communities, and councils should consider the best practical environmental option for each waste stream. The Government recognise that the recovery of energy from waste, through using it as fuel, may have a role to play, alongside recycling and composting, in a system of sustainable waste management.

An assessment of the environmental and other advantages and disadvantages of various household waste management options including energy from waste is included in the publication "An Introduction to Household Waste Management" published in March 1998 which was sponsored by my Department. Copies are being placed in the Library of the House.

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the environmental impact of the process of removing redundant offshore wind platforms. [149483]

Mr. Hain: A report was produced last year under DTI's new and renewable energy programme by Metoc plc, "An assessment of the environmental effects of offshore wind farms", which included wind farm decommissioning. Copies of the report are being placed in the Library of the House.

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what his most recent estimate is of the cost per kilowatt hour of electricity generated from *(a)* offshore wind and *(b)* onshore wind, using a standard 6 per cent. discount rate. [149482]

Mr. Hain: The cost of generation from offshore and onshore wind will vary considerably depending on the location of the project. Costs can also be expected to fall over time as experience with the technology grows, and as economies of scale in plant manufacture and project development are exploited.

Cost estimates were published by DTI in the March 1999 document "New and Renewable Energy: Prospects in the UK for the 21st Century—Supporting Analysis". These showed that by year 2010, and with an 8 per cent. discount rate, the bulk of the UK's onshore wind potential could be developed at costs ranging from 2½–3½p per kilowatt hour. With a 15 per cent. discount rate, the cost range rises to 3½–5p per kilowatt hour. The cost ranges for offshore wind were very similar, although the potential resource is much greater.

Commercial developers of wind projects can be expected to seek returns in excess of 6 per cent., with the scale of required returns depending on the technical and commercial risks associated with the projects. At present, these risks are greater for offshore wind whose development is at a very early stage and the prices required by generators for the first generation of offshore wind projects in the UK could well be in excess of the cost ranges quoted.

Ultra-low Sulphur Fuel

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many and what percentage of garages sell low sulphur fuel *(a)* nationally, *(b)* in the North West and *(c)* in Wales. [149565]

Mr. Hain: Ultra-low sulphur diesel is available at virtually every petrol retail outlet in the UK.

Regarding ultra-low sulphur petrol (ULSP), according to HM Customs and Excise's "Hydrocarbons Oils Bulletin", in mid-January 2001 (latest available data), ULSP constituted around half of petrol released for consumption in the UK. The equivalent figure for November 2000 was around one third. HM Customs and Excise collects data on a company by company, rather than a regional, basis. There are no separate figures for the North West of England or Wales.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many outlets sell ultra-low sulphur petrol in *(a)* the UK, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* the Highlands; and how many outlets have begun to sell ultra-low sulphur petrol since 8 November 2000. [149336]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* According to HM Customs and Excise's "Hydrocarbons Oils Bulletin", in mid-January 2001 (latest available data), ULSP constituted around half of petrol released for consumption in the UK. The equivalent figure for November 2000 was around one third. HM Customs and Excise collects data on a company by company, rather than a regional, basis. There are no separate figures for Scotland or the Highlands.

Energy Research and Development

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment his Department has made of the report 'The Future of Research and Development in the Gas Industry' by Professor Gordon Mackennon and Steve Thomas; and if he will make a statement. [149303]

Mr. Hain: My officials are studying the report and are meeting the Institution of Gas Engineers next week (12 February) to discuss its content.

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what evaluation his Department has made of the appropriateness to the UK of the US levy model for funding future research and development in the gas industry. [149304]

Mr. Hain: None, but I thank my hon. Friend for bringing it to my attention. The gas industry is firmly in the private sector and investment in R&D is a matter for industry participants. However, safety is a key concern of Government. The Health and Safety Executive, who are responsible for the regulatory regime for the safe conveyance and use of gas are, with DETR, considering the introduction of levy raising powers to ensure that appropriate funding is secured for safety related research. This follows the completion of HSE's Fundamental Review of Gas Safety.

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what timetable has been agreed for progressing the review of research and development in the energy industry announced in the latest UK Energy report. [149302]

Mr. Hain: As indicated in the Energy Report, the DTI has recently undertaken a review of both business and public energy-related R&D funding. The outcome of this review will be a revised strategy for the funding of future energy-related R&D activities. It is expected that a draft will be circulated for consultation during February, leading to an updated strategy being included in the overall DTI Science and Innovation Strategy, to be published spring 2001.

Small Business Service

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place a copy of the Small Business Service targets in the Library. [146505]

Mr. Byers: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) on 11 July 2000, *Official Report, columns 475–76W.*

Post Offices

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* post offices and *(b)* sub-post offices there were in the Vale of York on (i) 1 February 1997, (ii) 1 February 1998, (iii) 1 February 1999, (iv) 1 February 2000 and (v) 1 February 2001. [149187]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that the historic data requested are not available, and that the most recent data available for Vale of York constituency are as set out in the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) on 29 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 22W.

Ministerial Visits

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many ministerial visits to non-European countries involved in the Barcelona Process have been made by Ministers from his Department since 1997; in which years; and to which countries. [147693]

Mr. Byers: Since 2 May 1997, DTI Ministers have undertaken ministerial visits to non-European countries involved in the Barcelona Process as follows:

Country	*Visits*
Morocco	1
Algeria	—
Tunisia	1
Egypt	2
Israel	2
Palestinian Authority	1
Jordan	—
Lebanon	—
Syria	—
Turkey	1
Cyprus	—
Malta	—

Coal Industry Pension Schemes

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to alter the rules on the treatment of surpluses in the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme and the British Coal Staff Superannuation Scheme. [148492]

Mr. Hain: I will carefully consider the present arrangements in the light of the results of detailed actuarial studies which are to be undertaken this year into the coal schemes' assets and liabilities.

DEFENCE

Defence Diversification Agency

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the period of formal consultation with Stakeholders will begin for the Defence Diversification Agency. [149834]

Dr. Moonie: A Consultative Document outlining the options considered for the future of the Defence Diversification Agency and the proposed way forward is now available. Copies have been placed in the Library of both Houses and are being sent to key stakeholders. Additional copies are available on request from:

Deputy Director Equipment Secretariat

Room 2332

MOD Main Building

London SW1A 2HB.

An electronic version of the Consultative Document will also be made available through the MOD website. The period of consultation will end on 23 March 2001.

Tank Fleets

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what the fleet size is of *(a)* Warrior variants, *(b)* Challenger 1, *(c)* Challenger 2, *(d)* Saxon variants, (f) AVF 430 variants, (g) Sabre, (h) Striker, (i) Scimitar, (j) Spartan, (k) Sultan, (l) Samaritan and (m) Samson; how many were (i) allocated to front-line units, (ii) fully operational, (iii) unserviceable–fully operational in 24 hours, (iv) unserviceable–fully operational in seven days and (v) unserviceable–fully operational in more than seven days on 12 December; what percentage of the fleet size this represents for each category; and if he will make a statement; [143192]

(2) what the percentage serviceability target is in 2000–01 for equipment being required to be available within 24 hours for *(a)* RAF aircraft, *(b)* army tanks and *(c)* other battle vehicles; and if he will make a statement. [143194]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 10 January 2001]:* I will write to the right hon. and learned Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Joint Service Defence Council

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason JS DCI 88/00 was cancelled; who authorised its cancellation; what replaced it; and if he will make a statement. [147245]

Mr. Spellar: In October 2000 I authorised the temporary withdrawal of Joint Service Defence Council Instruction 88/00, dealing with the Ministry of Defence's policy towards membership of societies such as Freemasons, while we conducted a review which is currently under way.

Self-mutilation

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many deaths caused by self-inflicted wounds there were among serving armed forces personnel, broken down by *(a)* theatre of operations in which each occurred, *(b)* gender, *(c)* age and *(d)* ethnic group in each year from 1996. [149355]

Dr. Moonie: Between 1 January 1996 and 31 December 2000 there have been 138 self-inflicted deaths among serving members in the armed forces. The tables provide details of these deaths by theatre of operation and age. To ensure that individual service personnel confidentiality is not compromised it has been necessary to group together certain categories in these tables. Of the 138 self-inflicted deaths only three were female. In respect of the breakdown by ethnic groups there have been: 118 deaths in the "white" category; nine deaths recorded in an "unspecified" category, and one Gurkha death. There were an additional 10 deaths for which ethnic origin is not available.

Location	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
(a) Self inflicted deaths by theatre of operations:					
UK Great Britain	20	25	13	24	26
Northern Ireland Germany (BAOR) Other Europe Cyprus Other Far East Army and RAF Other Overseas	12	4	5	2	7
Total	32	29	18	26	33
(b) Self inflicted deaths by age.					
Under 25	13	11	4	10	12
25 to 34	13	10	9	10	14
35 and over	6	8	5	6	7
Total	32	29	18	26	33

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 66W, if he will break down by age those who died of self-inflicted injuries, indicating in each case their length of service. [149211]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

BAE Bids

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will complete his evaluation of the bids by BAE for the construction of Type 45 destroyers. [148672]

Mr. Hoon: The prime contract with BAE Systems Electronics for the Demonstration and First of Class (DFM) phase of the Type 45 programme (covering the design and build of the first three ships) was placed on 20 December 2000. The procurement strategy remains as I announced it on 11 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 701.

Our evaluation of the unsolicited proposal from BAE Systems Marine for an alternative procurement strategy for this Programme is progressing separately and will include consultation with other interested Government Departments. We will reach a decision on this as soon as possible.

Malaria

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the companies and regiments of the Army and Royal Marines which have been deployed to Sierra Leone since 1 May 2000, indicating in each case *(a)* the number of personnel in each company and regiment, *(b)* the date and duration of deployment, *(c)* where the company and regiment were deployed in Sierra Leone, *(d)* how many members of each company and regiment were administered with anti-malarial treatment before deployment, *(e)* how long before deployment treatment was administered and *(f)* how many members of each company and regiment were routinely screened for malaria on return; and if he will make a statement. [149177]

Mr. Hoon: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Planning

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the projects promoted by his Department subject to the 18/84 planning procedure. [149352]

Dr. Moonie: My Department has put forward a large number of planning proposals under the 18/84 procedure in the years since it came into force, ranging from major developments to relatively minor works. This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Globemaster Aircraft

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the cost to his Department is of leasing the four C-17 Globemaster aircraft from the US; and what estimate he has made of the cost of purchasing the aircraft. [149595]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Short Money

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the President of the Council what evidence has been *(a)* sought from and *(b)* produced by the Conservative party and its auditors to show that the Short money which they have received has been used exclusively for its prescribed purpose. [147801]

Mrs. Beckett: Parties in receipt of Short money have to provide an independent auditor's certificate to show that it has been incurred exclusively in relation to the Party's parliamentary business. I understand the Conservative party has submitted such a certificate.

Explanatory Notes (Legislation)

Mr. William Ross: To ask the President of the Council when the explanatory notes for the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000, the Disqualifications Act 2000, and the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 will be available in the Vote Office; and if she will ensure that the explanatory notes will be available with future Acts at the same time that those Acts are published. [144132]

Mrs. Beckett *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* All Departments have been reminded of the importance of ensuring that the Explanatory Notes to Acts are produced at the appropriate time. Because of the need to ensure that these accurately reflect the Act as passed it may, however, not always be possible to ensure that this is simultaneous with the Act. In the case of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, many amendments were made during its final stages and as a consequence it has taken time to ensure that the Explanatory Notes accurately reflect the changes which were made. These will be published shortly. The Explanatory Notes for the Disqualification Act 2000 were published on 29 January 2001, while those for the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 were published on 5 February.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Property Services (Ministers and Civil Servants)

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those Ministers in his Department who *(a)* have interests in the letting of property and *(b)* use the letting and relocation company Cendant to let their properties or purchase other properties; and how many civil servants in his Ministry have used the services of Cendant (i) to relocate and (ii) to be housed. [146280]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* Under the terms of the Ministerial Code, Ministers are required to order their affairs so that no conflict arises or is thought to arise between their private interests and their public duties. Information about the personal interests of a Minister is a matter between him or her and the Department in which he or she works, as is the use of any letting company in relation to any such interests.

The Department has a contract with Cendant as one of its two relocation companies. Sixteen civil servants have used its services to relocate. None have used them to be housed.

Accidents (M5)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the accident rate is on *(a)* all motorways and *(b)* between Strensham and Michael Wood service stations on the M5, broken down per mile of motorway, for the last five years for which figures are available. [147590]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 29 January 2001]*: Based on the most recent information available, the injury-accident rate per 100 million vehicle kilometres on all motorways in England for the period 1995 to 1999 is as follows:

1995—10.6

1996—10.8

1997—11.4

1998—11.2

1999—10.8.

On the M5 motorway, between the Strensham and Michael Wood service areas, the injury-accident rate per 100 million vehicle kilometres for the period 1995 to 1999 is as follows:

1995—9.1

1996—9.1

1997—9.2

1998—8.8

1999—8.8.

I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency to write to you separately providing the more detailed information you require.

Letter from Tim Matthews to Mr. Laurence Robertson, dated 8 February 2001:

Following on from an answer to your recent question in the House of Commons (PQ147590) about accident data on all motorways and also concerning the section of the M5 between the Strensham and Michael Wood Service Areas I have been asked to forward more detailed information.

I enclose a copy of a Spreadsheet that shows the detailed information you require for M5. The columns B to G record the number of accidents for each one mile section for the years 1995 to 1999. The columns Q, R, S, T and U also relate to the years 1999 to 1995 and show the accident rate per 100 million vehicle kilometres (shown on the spreadsheet as 'acc rates per 10^8 veh km'). Rows 1 to 32 represent the individual mile sections of the M5 between the two motorway service areas. The highlighted rows show where junctions occur and where you could reasonably expect more accidents.

If you wish to discuss any aspect of the Spreadsheet and the information it contains I suggest that you contact John Smart in this office (telephone 0207 921 4818) who will be happy to assist with any queries you may have.

	Year									2 Way AADT				
Section	*1999*	*1998*	*1997*	*1996*	*1995*	*Total*	*Junction*	*From*	*To*	*1999*	*1998*	*1997*	*1996*	*1995*
A	3	1	—	1	2	7	—	start	1	59,724	58,081	59,536	55,251	54,322
B	3	1	7	4	5	20	—	1	2	59,724	58,081	59,536	55,251	54,322
C	1	2	—	1	—	4	—	2	3	59,724	58,081	59,536	55,251	54,322
D	1	—	3	1	4	9	—	3	4	59,724	58,081	59,536	55,251	54,322
E	4	2	3	2	—	11	—	4	5	59,724	58,081	59,536	55,251	54,322
F	3	1	1	4	2	11	—	5	6	59,724	58,081	59,536	55,251	54,322
G	1	1	—	1	1	4	—	6	7	59,724	58,081	59,536	55,251	54,322
H	3	4	1	4	2	14	—	7	8	59,724	58,081	59,536	55,251	54,322
I	*4*	*8*	*6*	*4*	*2*	*24*	*13*	*8*	*9*	*65,290*	*63,494*	*44,197*	*41,741*	*40,940*
J	2	1	2	1	—	6	—	9	10	70,855	68,906	28,857	28,230	27,557
K	1	1	1	2	2	7	—	10	11	70,855	68,906	28,857	28,230	27,557
L	*2*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*–*	*11*	*12*	*11*	*12*	*64,082*	*62,319*	*41,006*	*40,227*	*35,477*
M	—	—	1	1	2	4	—	12	13	57,309	55,732	53,154	52,223	43,397
N	1	2	—	1	—	4	—	12	13	57,309	55,732	53,154	52,223	43,397
O	1	1	3	1	2	8	—	14	15	57,309	55,732	53,154	52,223	43,397
P	—	—	2	—	1	3	—	15	16	57,309	55,732	53,154	52,223	43,397
Q	2	4	—	1	1	8	—	16	17	57,309	55,732	53,154	52,223	43,397
R	4	—	1	—	1	6	—	17	18	57,309	55,732	53,154	52,223	43,397
S	*1*	*7*	*4*	*3*	*3*	*18*	*11a*	*18*	*19*	*59,405*	*57,771*	*54,437*	*53,484*	*48,248*
T	2	2	1	3	3	11	—	19	20	61,501	59,809	55,720	54,704	53,099
U	*4*	*6*	*5*	*3*	*6*	*26*	*11*	*20*	*21*	*65,255*	*63,460*	*59,946*	*58,900*	*53,110*
V	2	2	4	2	1	11	—	21	22	69,010	67,111	64,172	63,095	53,120
W	2	—	—	1	2	5	—	22	23	69,010	67,111	64,172	63,095	53,120
X	*1*	*3*	*3*	*1*	*4*	*12*	*10*	*23*	*24*	*72,355*	*71,458*	*68,401*	*65,905*	*59,612*
Y	1	—	1	1	2	5	—	24	25	75,700	75,800	72,630	68,714	66,104
Z	—	1	1	3	1	6	—	25	26	75,700	75,800	72,630	68,714	66,104
AA	1	1	4	5	—	11	—	26	27	75,700	75,800	72,630	68,714	66,104
AB	3	3	3	—	2	11	—	27	28	75,700	75,800	72,630	68,714	66,104
AC	*4*	*3*	*4*	*3*	*3*	*17*	*9*	*28*	*29*	*70,600*	*72,050*	*68,915*	*65,199*	*62,722*
AD	6	1	1	—	1	9	—	29	30	65,500	68,300	65,200	61,685	59,341
AE	1	3	—	—	1	5	—	30	31	65,500	68,300	65,200	61,685	59,341
AF	3	4	1	3	3	14	—	31	32	65,500	68,300	65,200	61,685	59,341
AG	*5*	*3*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*17*	*8*	*32*	*End*	*73,350*	*73,800*	*71,000*	*67,172*	*64,620*
Grand Total	72	72	68	64	63	339								

Note:
Rows highlighted in the original table are italicised.

2 Way AADT Average AADT 95–99	Acc rates per 10^8 veh km 1999	1998	1997	1996	1995	Acc rates per 10^8 veh km Average 99–95
57,383	8.6	2.9	0.0	3.1	6.3	4.2
57,383	8.6	2.9	20.0	12.3	15.7	11.9
57,383	2.9	5.9	0.0	3.1	0.0	2.4
57,383	2.9	0.0	8.6	3.1	12.5	5.4
57,383	11.4	5.9	8.6	6.2	0.0	6.4
57,383	8.6	2.9	2.9	12.3	6.3	6.6
57,383	2.9	2.9	0.0	3.1	3.1	2.4
57,383	8.6	11.7	2.9	12.3	6.3	8.3
51,132	*10.4*	*21.4*	*23.1*	*16.3*	*8.3*	*15.9*
44,881	4.8	2.5	11.8	6.0	0.0	5.0
44,881	2.4	2.5	5.9	12.1	12.4	7.0
48,622	*5.3*	*5.5*	*12.5*	*16.9*	*0.0*	*8.0*
52,363	0.0	0.0	3.2	3.3	7.8	2.9
52,363	3.0	6.1	0.0	3.3	0.0	2.5
52,363	3.0	3.1	9.6	3.3	7.8	5.3
52,363	0.0	0.0	6.4	0.0	3.9	2.1
52,363	5.9	12.2	0.0	3.3	3.9	5.1
52,363	11.9	0.0	3.2	0.0	3.9	3.8
54,665	*2.9*	*20.6*	*12.5*	*9.6*	*10.6*	*11.2*
56,967	5.5	5.7	3.1	9.3	9.6	6.6
60,134	*10.4*	*21.5*	*14.2*	*8.7*	*19.2*	*14.8*
63,302	4.9	5.1	10.6	5.4	3.2	5.8
63,302	4.9	0.0	0.0	2.7	6.4	2.8
67,546	*2.4*	*7.1*	*7.5*	*2.6*	*11.4*	*6.2*
71,790	2.2	0.0	2.3	2.5	5.2	2.4
71,790	0.0	2.2	2.3	7.4	2.6	2.9
71,790	2.2	2.2	9.4	12.4	0.0	5.3
71,790	6.7	6.7	7.0	0.0	5.2	5.1
67,897	*9.6*	*7.1*	*9.9*	*7.8*	*8.1*	*8.5*
64,005	15.6	2.5	2.6	0.0	2.9	4.7
64,005	2.6	7.5	0.0	0.0	2.9	2.6
64,005	7.8	10.0	2.6	8.3	8.6	7.5
69,988	*11.6*	*6.9*	*4.8*	*7.6*	*10.5*	*8.3*
	8.8	8.8	9.2	9.1	9.1	

Note:
Rows highlighted in the original table are italicised.

Minister for the Environment (Financial Interests)

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Minister for the Environment (1) has taken action in accordance with the terms of paragraphs 119 and 120 of the Ministerial Code of Conduct *(a)* to remove a risk of conflict between his financial interests and his ministerial position and *(b)* to avoid involvement in relevant decisions; [148046]

(2) has submitted a minute to the permanent secretary at DETR concerning his financial interests, under the terms of paragraph 123 of the Ministerial Code of Conduct; [148045]

(3) has consulted the Prime Minister concerning his financial interests under the terms of paragraphs 121 and 123 of the Ministerial Code of Conduct. [148047]

Mr. Meacher: I have ensured that there is no risk of a conflict between my ministerial position and conduct and my personal interests. Handling of these issues within Government falls within exemption 2 of part II of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

National Air Transport Services

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library a copy of the contracts of senior management of National Air Transport Services which contain clauses relating to performance-related bonuses. [148136]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: It has always been Government policy not to interfere in the day to day running of the Civil Aviation Authority and its subsidiary, National Air Traffic Services Ltd.

There are over 100 senior managers in NATS whose contracts entitle them to participate in the company's performance-related bonus scheme. The company has the right to vary the terms of the scheme at its sole discretion and without notice. In common with many organisations in the public and private sectors, a significant part of the overall remuneration package of members of the Senior Management Group is provided in the form of a performance bonus scheme. The current scheme operates on the same basis as the Civil Aviation Authority scheme, with performance being assessed against a range of company-wide targets and individual targets. The targets are reviewed annually. For the current financial year there are four company-wide targets against which members of the Senior Management Group are assessed. These are as follows:

1. a safety target, based on the number of risk-bearing Airproxes where NATS contributed to the cause;
2. a delay target, based on the overall level of air traffic delays attributable to NATS;
3. an efficiency target, based on the cost per flight of NATS operations; and
4. a project performance target based on the progress of the Swanwick project.

In addition, individual targets are set for senior managers which vary depending on the role of the individual within the company. There is also a small discretionary element available to reward outstanding performance unrelated to specific targets.

Below the level of the Senior Management Group, there are a number of staff employed on personal contracts with the company. These staff are also entitled to participate in a performance bonus scheme. However, in line with practice in the Civil Aviation Authority, the NATS scheme for this group of staff is based on performance against individual targets agreed between the individual and his line managers. There is also a general, company-wide performance bonus scheme in which all NATS staff participate, except those in the Senior Management Group. This scheme was negotiated and accepted by the trade unions (principally the IPMS and PCS) as part of the annual pay negotiations.

Water and Sewerage

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the average cost was of *(a)* water supply charges and *(b)* sewerage charges for English households in each decile income group; and what percentage of total household income within each decile these charges represent in each of the last five years. [148289]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The average charge for *(a)* water supply and *(b)* sewerage charges for all households in England and Wales since 1996–97 was as follows.

£

Year	Water	Sewerage
2000–01	102.73	115.79
1999–2000	112.64	134.45
1998–99	108.67	128.59
1997–98	105.34	122.40
1996–97	102.15	118.37

Information bearing on the subject of water and sewerage charges and their relation to household income is to be found in three published sources which are in the Library.

First, the Office of Water Services publish the charges of each water and each sewerage undertaker and national averages in an annual series of reports, "Tariff Structure and Charges".

Secondly, my Department commissioned and published a report by Maxwell Stamp, "Incidence Effects of Charging for Domestic Water and Sewerage Services", in July 1998. This includes tables modelling the gains and losses for households in each income decile of alternative water charging arrangements. Third, "Quality of Life Counts" included an indicator showing the percentage of households spending more than 3 per cent. of their net income on water for each of the past four years from 1994–95 to 1997–98.

Both the Maxwell Stamp report and the "Quality of Life Counts" indicator used data from the DSS Family Resources Survey. The production of the information in the form requested will require fresh calculations, and I shall write to my hon. Friend when these are complete.

Unlicensed Vehicles

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many owners of vehicles found in *(a)* Barnsley and *(b)* Doncaster were prosecuted by the DVLA for (i) not registering their vehicle and (ii) not taxing their vehicle in 2000. [148618]

Mr. Hill: Vehicle excise duty and vehicle registration offences detected in the Barnsley and Doncaster areas are all prosecuted by the DVLA local office in Sheffield. It is not possible to split the number of cases into specific areas but during the period January to December 2000, 519 people were prosecuted by the Sheffield office for not registering their vehicle and 4,680 people were prosecuted for not taxing their vehicle. In addition, 492 people settled out of court for failing to register a vehicle and 10,452 for failing to relicense or make a statutory off-road notification.

Registered Social Landlords

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his estimate is of the total number of properties owned by *(a)* registered social landlords and *(b)* each of the 20 largest registered social landlords. [148640]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Registered social landlords in England own an estimated 1,380,000 properties, comprising approximately 1,280,000 units of self-contained stock and approximately 100,000 bedspaces.

The properties owned by the 20 largest registered social landlords are as follows:

Name of RSL	Total self-contained units owned	Total bedspaces owned	Total self-contained + bedspaces owned
North British	36,813	1,986	38,799
Home	26,411	661	27,072
Anchor Trust	23,496	3,322	26,818
Sanctuary	23,600	1,528	25,128

Name of RSL	Total self-contained units owned	Total bedspaces owned	Total self-contained + bedspaces owned
Riverside	20,478	894	21,372
London and Quadrant HT	19,036	1,968	21,004
Guinness Trust	18,051	340	18,391
Peabody Trust	16,358	150	16,508
Northern Counties	15,378	845	16,223
William Sutton Trust	15,651	26	15,677
Orbit	13,217	592	13,809
Hyde	11,398	2,251	13,649
Housing 21	12,519	0	12,519
Wrekin Housing	12,513	0	12,513
Broomleigh	11,891	249	12,140
Metropolitan HT	11,153	931	12,084
Focus	11,009	966	11,975
Bradford and Northern	11,465	358	11,823
Samuel Lewis HT Ltd.	11,080	50	11,130
Notting Hill	10,041	641	10,682

Note:

The figures are as at 31 March 2000 and derive from The Housing Corporation's Regulatory and Statistical return.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effectiveness with which registered *(a)* social landlords and *(b)* housing authorities manage resources. [148639]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: We want to see a step-change in social landlords' performance. Tenants deserve an effective and high quality service. The best value regime will drive continuous improvement in housing management. Its framework of performance indicators and targets will enable a direct comparison of performance between the registered social landlord and local housing authority sectors. The work of the Housing Inspectorate and the Housing Corporation's inspection regime will underpin the effective delivery of best value.

Floods

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on reimbursing local authorities for the costs incurred as a result of the floods in November 2000; and if he will make a statement. [148646]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Between 13 October 2000 and 5 February 2001, a total of 106 local authorities had notified my Department that they had incurred expenditure for which they would consider making a claim under the Bellwin scheme in connection with the adverse weather events between October and December. Application forms have been sent to all these authorities but to date no formal claims have been received. Only 25 authorities have provided an estimate of incurred costs.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Environment Agency will publish its report on the flooding on 15 September in Portsmouth; and if he will make a statement. [148973]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: I understand that the Environment Agency will shortly have a draft report on the incident. The timing of its publication will depend on whether it considers any offence was committed under the Water Resources Act 1991. If the agency considers that no offence has been committed, it expects to be able to publish shortly. If it considers an offence has been committed, publication will await the outcome of any subsequent action.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the operation of the Bellwin scheme, with specific reference to arrangements for budgeting for *(a)* floods in November 2000 and *(b)* future floods. [148951]

Ms Beverley Hughes: On 4 November the Deputy Prime Minister announced several changes to the Bellwin scheme for this year in response to the very severe and widespread occurrence of bad weather in October and November. Among these changes, support above the threshold will be increased from 85 per cent. to 100 per cent. and valid claims will be settled within 15 working days of receipt. Arrangements for the future operation of the scheme will be considered in the forthcoming review of the Bellwin scheme by the Department and the Local Government Association.

Duty of Care

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many commercial premises in *(a)* Lewisham and *(b)* London have been prosecuted in the last 12 months for not complying with the duty of care, as defined in section 34 of the Environment Protection Act 1990. [148722]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The number of commercial premises prosecuted by the Environment Agency under section 34 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 in the last 12 months is *(a)* nil in Lewisham and *(b)* four in London.

Waste Regulation

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has to improve the law in respect of the regulation of waste; [148720]

(2) which bodies are responsible for ensuring compliance with sections 33 and 34 of the Environment Protection Act 1990; [148873]

(3) what plans he has to take steps to ensure better compliance with sections 33 and 34 of the Environment Protection Act 1990; and if he will make a statement; [148724]

(4) what arrangements are made by the Environment Agency for checking that commercial premises comply with section 34 of the Environment Protection Act 1990. [148727]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Waste Framework Directive (75/442/EEC as amended) requires member states to ensure that waste is recovered or disposed of without endangering human health or harming the environment; and to take the necessary measures to prohibit the abandonment, dumping or uncontrolled disposal of waste. The Government have put strict controls in place to comply with these requirements and are satisfied that they fulfil the UK's obligations under the directive.

The Environment Agency is a "competent authority" for the purposes of the directive and is responsible for the enforcement of most waste management controls—including section 33 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. Action to ensure compliance is taken by the agency in line with its national enforcement policy—as published on its website http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/epns/epp.htm.

The duty of care imposed by section 34 of the 1990 Act is an essentially self-regulating system and no authority has a duty to enforce it—in relation to waste from commercial or other types of premises. However, the Environment Agency has a right of access to duty of care records under regulation 4 of the Environmental Protection (Duty of Care) Regulations 1991. The following advice on enforcement action is provided in DOE Circular 19/91:

"35. It is envisaged that [the Environment Agency] will pursue breaches of section 34 and seek access to holders' records when they suspect either that waste has not been transferred to an authorised person (or a person for authorised transport purposes) or an actual or potential breach of section 33."

We have no plans to transfer waste regulation functions from the Environment Agency to local authorities or to prescribe local authorities as "competent authorities" under the framework directive. We will consider on its merits any case made to us, on a national basis, for an amendment to the 1991 regulations to allow local authorities a right of access to duty of care records as waste collection authorities or principal litter authorities.

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the estimated percentage is of waste carriers who do not have bona fide waste transfer notes. [148725]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Environment Agency has no estimate of the percentage of waste carriers who may be failing to comply with the requirements of the Environmental Protection (Duty of Care) Regulations 1991.

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many waste carriers in London have been prosecuted for failure to provide waste transfer notes in the last six years; [148726]

(2) how many prosecutions brought by the Environment Agency in the past six years have involved authorised waste carriers *(a)* in Lewisham and *(b)* in London. [148729]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The records held by the Environment Agency do not separately identify waste carriers involved in prosecutions brought for contravention of waste management controls other than section 1 of the Control of Pollution (Amendment) Act 1989 (offence of transporting controlled waste without registering).

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the percentage is of commercial premises in London which the Environment Agency estimates *(a)* do not have trade waste agreements under section 34 of the Environment Protection Act 1990 and *(b)* do not have adequate trade waste agreements. [148719]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Section 34 of the 1990 Act makes no provision for trade waste agreements. However, section 45 of the 1990 Act imposes a duty on waste collection authorities to arrange for the collection of commercial waste if requested to do so by the occupier of premises in its area. No information on these matters is held by the Environment Agency because the arrangements made under section 45 are a matter for each waste collection authority.

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many prosecutions brought by the Environment Agency for fly tipping in *(a)* Lewisham and *(b)* London resulted in waste licences being revoked. [148731]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The term "fly-tipping" is not legally defined but is generally used to refer to the illegal disposal of waste on a site without either a waste management licence or a registered licensing exemption. In such circumstances the Environment Agency may prosecute under section 33 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, but there is no licence in force for the land subject to fly-tipping, which the agency can revoke. The circumstances in which the agency may revoke a licence are set out in section 38 of the 1990 Act and section 41(6) of the Environment Act 1995.

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what arrangements the Environment Agency has in place for checking that waste carriers are authorised in accordance with section 52 of the Control of Pollution (Amendment) Act 1989. [148734]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The arrangements made for checking that waste carriers are properly authorised are set out in section 5 of the 1989 Act (duty to produce authority to transport controlled waste) and guidance on the use of these provisions by the Environment Agency is provided in DOE Circular 11–91 (paragraphs 1.82–1.89).

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many vehicles have been seized and crushed as a result of being involved with fly tipping in the last six years in *(a)* Lewisham and *(b)* London. [148732]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Environment Agency may seize and dispose of vehicles under the terms of section 6 of the Control of Pollution (Amendment) Act 1989 and the Controlled Waste (Registration of Carriers and Seizure of Vehicles) Regulations 1991. Since its establishment in April 1996, the agency has used these powers as follows:

"(a) One vehicle has been seized in Lewisham and was sold under regulation 23 of the 1991 Regulations; and

(b) Six vehicles have been seized in London. Four of these vehicles were returned under regulation 22 of the 1991 Regulations; and one vehicle was crushed and one was sold under regulation 23 of the Regulations.

Figures for the period before April 1996 are not held centrally by the Environment Agency.

East Coast Mainline

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what rail

inspection and repairs have been undertaken on the east coast mainline at the speed restricted stretch of line passing Bawtry, South Yorkshire. [149053]

Mr. Hill: 2,112 yards were re-railed on the up-fast line at Bawtry on 15 December. Similarly 2,112 yards were re-railed on the down-fast line at Bawtry on 17 December. 'De-stressing' works, to enable the continuous rail to expand in summer and contract in winter, were completed on 28 January. The temporary speed restriction has now been lifted.

City Challenge

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps the Government are taking to improve the outcomes of and to learn from SRB and City Challenge-funded projects which have concluded or are near their conclusion. [149050]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The national evaluation of the Single Regeneration Budget rounds 1 and 2, based on 20 case studies, is due to complete in 2003–04. The evaluation has strong reporting and dissemination requirements to ensure that lessons are fed into policy and practice in a quick and open manner.

We fund the dissemination of good practice and the exchange of information to support SRB and other regeneration partnerships. In 2000–01, these included conferences, exhibition displays and seminars, and the production of complementary topic papers. We produce a quarterly colour newsletter, "Update", and make both local and electronic networking possible, the latter via Regen.net. At the regional level, the Regional Development Agencies undertake a range of activities for disseminating good practice to SRB partnerships. These include relaying key messages from scheme evaluations to partnerships at quarterly network meetings, employing dedicated best practice co-ordinators to develop networks and links between partnerships, and encouraging SRB schemes to transfer to community ownership during their lifetime.

The City Challenge programme ended in 1998 and the final evaluation was published in 2000. It identified the achievements and good practice lessons that are transferable to other urban regeneration initiatives, including the need to involve the community, to spend time getting the right projects and project mix and the importance of the calibre and experience of key individuals on the executive team and board.

Local Government Finance (Doncaster)

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the value was of the Government's local government financial settlement for Doncaster borough for each year from 1978–79 to 2000–01; and what the percentage increase was on the previous year. [149068]

Ms Beverley Hughes: There have been three systems in operation during the period 1978–79 to 2001–02. These are not comparable, and the data prior to 1990–91 could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. The latest system, using Standard Spending Assessments to assess the Revenue Support Grant entitlements, was introduced in 1990–91. The data for 1990–91 to 2001–02 for Doncaster are given in the table. These data include only the figures for Revenue Support Grant and not any additional ring-fenced grant also allocated at the time of the settlement.

Year	*Revenue Support Grant (£ million)*	*Income from National Non-domestic Rates (£ million)*	*Total (£ million)*	*Percentage increase on the previous year*
1990–91	49.342	63.957	113.298	—
1991–92	49.422	76.396	125.819	11.1
1992–93	93.534	75.321	168.856	34.2
1993–94[1]	103.146	62.466	165.612	-1.9
1994–95	118.287	57.358	175.645	6.1
1995–96	116.225	60.796	177.021	0.8
1996–97	119.459	68.060	187.519	5.9
1997–98[2]	117.121	63.941	181.062	-3.4
1998–99[2]	124.986	66.425	191.411	5.7
1999–2000	131.060	71.946	203.006	6.1
2000–01	129.066	80.861	209.927	3.4
2001–02	137.215	78.797	216.012	2.9

[1] Prior to 1993–94 the Revenue Support Grant and income from National Non-Domestic Rates were all paid to the billing authority; from 1993–94 onwards these grants are paid to both billing and precepting authorities. For Doncaster this means that the figures between 1992–93 and 1993–94 are not comparable.

[2] These years were subject to Amending Reports. The figures supplied are those relating to the Amending Report.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many responses to the local government finance Green Paper raised the issue of perverse incentives surrounding the fire service standard spending assessment. [148909]

Ms Beverley Hughes: A full analysis of the responses to the local government finance Green Paper is currently being finalised. It will be published on the DETR website by the beginning of March.

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when his Department will respond to the recent Green Paper on local government finance. [148890]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We will announce our decisions on the reform of the local government finance system in a White Paper later this year.

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what financial recognition is given to deprivation in the current Standard Spending Assessment formula, as applied to all local authorities in the west midlands region; [148888]

(2) how deprivation is calculated in the methodolgy used in the Standard Spending Assessment formula. [148913]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) methodology is sub-divided into seven blocks. These are Education, Personal Social Services, Fire, Police, Highway Maintenance, Environmental, Protective and Cultural Services (EPCS), and Capital Finance. The first six of these allocate the majority of the SSA on the basis of a 'client group'. For Education the client group is the number of pupils in a given age group; for EPCS it is the relevant population in each authority.

In addition to the client group allocation, each of the six blocks includes a factor that reflects the higher cost of service provision in London and the South East. This is known as the Area Cost Adjustment.

Lastly, each of the blocks includes factors that provide additional funding to those authorities that are assessed as having a higher need to spend. These additional factors can be loosely termed as 'deprivation' indicators. For example, the Education block includes indicators that show for each authority the proportion of children of lone parents, the proportion of children of Income Support/ income based Jobseeker's Allowance claimants, and an ethnicity indicator. The Education SSA methodology also makes an allowance for population sparsity to reflect higher costs in rural areas.

Full details of all the indicators used in SSAs can be found in 'The Local Government Finance Report (England) 2001–02', a copy of which can be found in the Libraries of the House.

Water (Investment)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers he has to control the way in which the investment in plant and machinery is carried out by the various water companies and water authorities; and if he will make a statement. [149084]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: It is for the water and sewerage companies to invest as and when necessary to meet their obligations. Water and sewerage undertakers must carry out their statutory duties in accordance with the terms of their licences and must comply with quality standards set and enforced by the Environment Agency and the Drinking Water Inspectorate. The economic regulator, Ofwat, has the function of ensuring that undertakers are able to finance their duties.

Severn Trent Water

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of water was lost by leakage by Severn Trent Water in each of the last five years. [148974]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Leakage is divided between water lost from the company's distribution system and water lost from customers' own supply pipes. Total leakage within the Severn Trent area and for these two components is as follows:

Percentage

		Leakage from:	
Year	*Total leakage*	*Company's distribution system*	*Customers' supply pipes*
1995–96	33.7	25.0	8.7
1996–97	25.5	17.3	8.2
1997–98	21.2	14.9	6.3
1998–99	18.3	12.2	6.1
1999–2000	18.1	12.0	6.1

The percentage figures are calculated using 1999–2000 figure for water put into supply as a constant, to ensure that the figures are not distorted by other factors which would influence the percentage figure, such as increased demand from new customers.

Sub-regions (South-West Region)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the sub-regions of the south-west region and the criteria used to determine them; and what consultations were carried out before they were established. [149224]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 February 2001]:* The Secretary of State's proposed changes to draft Regional Planning Guidance for the South West propose a spatial planning strategy based upon four broadly defined sub-regions, Northern, South Eastern, Central and Western. The proposed sub-regions reflect the different underlying economic realities, not political boundaries. The South West Regional Development Agency supports the sub-regional analysis in the Regional Planning Guidance as reflecting the RDA's own analysis on sub-regional economic zones. The concept of sub-regions was first identified in the draft prepared by the South West Regional Planning Conference in 1999, on which consultation was carried out in the autumn of 1999. The concept was discussed at the public examination held in March 2000 and developed in more detail in the panel's report. The Secretary of State's proposed changes to draft Regional Planning Guidance were published for public consultation on 20 December 2000. The consultation period ends on 14 March and all responses will be considered before the final guidance is published.

Mineral Planning Guidance Note 11

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will re-open the consultative period on the proposed extended Mineral Planning Guidance Note 11, to allow environmental groups and other relevant interests who were not contacted as potential consultees to have their submissions considered; and if he will make a statement on the progress of his review. [149117]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The consultation document was published on 8 May 2000, with comments requested by 31 July 2000. It was circulated to a wide range of interests and notified to the relevant planning and minerals press and the consultation document was accessible on the internet. There were also a number of articles in the national press that referred to the consultation on MPG 11. However, although the consultation period has formally ended, the Government will consider any submissions made to it in respect of this consultation document until such time as it goes to press for publication of the revised MPG 11. The consultation draft of MPG 11 received markedly different reactions from a number of parties. In the light of these my officials will be arranging to discuss the way forward with the major interests from the minerals industry, minerals planning authorities and the environmental sector in the next few weeks. We will then proceed towards finalising the MPG for publication.

Meanwhile, we remain open to representations from any interested parties in respect of MPG 11. It can be found on the internet at www.planning.detr.gov.uk/consult.

Correspondence

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale of 6 October 2000 to the Minister for Local Government and the Regions, regarding a constituent, Mr. J. Hooson. [148626]

Mr. Raynsford: I replied on 19 January 2001.

Press Releases

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many press releases were issued by his Department in the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000; how many have been issued in the current financial year; and what his estimate is of the total number for the current financial year. [149250]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The total number of press releases issued by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (central) and the former Departments of the Environment and Transport (excluding agencies) in the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99, and *(d)* 1999–2000, together with the total issued in 2000–01, is as follows:

	Financial year	*Number of press releases*
DoT/DoE	1996–97	994
DoT/DoE/DETR(c)	1997–98	855
DETR(c)	1998–99	1,217
DETR(c)	1999–2000	1,153
DETR(c)	2000–01	569

' Ten months to 31 January

The estimate for the total number of press releases for the current financial year, based on an extrapolation of releases already issued, is 680.

Planning

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will issue guidance on the rights of objectors to attend planning committee site visits in residential planning applications; [149055]

(2) if he will issue guidance to make it easier for objectors to speak at local authority planning committee meetings. [149054]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have no current plans to do so. The Government endorse the Local Government Association's good practice guide "Public Involvement in Development Control Process". This includes advice to local authorities on setting clear guidelines for public speaking and attendance at committee meetings.

GLA Grant

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what level of general GLA grant he intends to set for 2001–02. [149747]

Mr. Hill: General GLA grant is determined annually after consultation with the Mayor of London under section 100 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999. The Secretary of State has today determined the level of grant for 2001–02 at £23.4 million.

HEALTH

Best Value

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to publish his proposals for implementing a system of best value in the NHS. [145730]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 17 January 2001]:* The NHS Plan commits us to introducing a best value regime which will require each NHS organisation to review at least one major service, including clinical services, each year. Further announcements will be made in due course.

Adoption

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what the formal procedures are for adopting children from abroad; and if he will publish them; [147386]

(2) if he will make a statement on the international laws governing the adoption of children; and if he will list them. [147415]

Mr. Hutton: Inter-country adoption is underpinned by a number of international agreements to which the United Kingdom is party. In particular, the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-Operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption aims to:

Establish safeguards to ensure that inter-country adoptions take place in the best interests of the child and with respect for his or her fundamental rights as recognised in international law.

Establish a system of co-operation among those who have ratified the Hague convention to ensure that those safeguards are respected and thereby prevent the abduction, the sale of, or traffic in children.

Secure recognition in countries who have ratified the convention of adoptions made in accordance with the convention.

The Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 will be implemented in full later this year and, together with relevant Northern Ireland legislation, will enable the United Kingdom to ratify the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-Operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption.

Other relevant agreements are:

1986 United Nations Declaration on Social Legal Principles relating to the Protection and Welfare of Children;

1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child;

1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction.

Where people habitually resident in England and Wales wish to adopt a child from overseas they should go through the same assessment and approval process as a prospective adopter of a child in the UK. Once completed, their papers are usually submitted to the Department, and if in order, the Department will issue a certificate of eligibility. The procedures that follow vary from country to country. They are contained within information sheets on various

countries issued free of charge by the Department. The most popular ones can be found on the Department of Health website at www.doh.gov.uk/ adoption.

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children are in national care waiting to be adopted; and how many are awaiting adoption in *(a)* Tyne and Wear and *(b)* South Tyneside. [148416]

Mr. Hutton: Information on the number of children in national care for whom adoption is the plan is not held centrally. However, the Department does hold figures on the number of children who have been placed with families who intend to adopt them.

The estimated number of children who were being looked after by local authorities in England and who were reported as being placed for adoption at 31 March 2000 are as follows:

	Number
England	3,140
Tyne and Wear Metropolitan County	130
South Tyneside Metropolitan District	20

Note:
Figures have been rounded to the nearest 10.

The table excludes children looked after under a series of short term placements.

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many couples are on the *(a)* national, *(b)* Tyne and Wear and *(c)* South Tyneside child adoption register. [148417]

Mr. Hutton: There is no central register of people approved to adopt but yet to be matched with a child. However, a 1999 survey by the Department's social services inspectorate revealed that at that time nationally 1,297 adopters had been recruited but had no children placed with them. We are currently collecting information on the approved adopters yet to be matched with a child in each local authority. In the future we expect this information to be held on the adoption register for England and Wales.

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures are being taken to improve the efficiency of the child adoption service. [148414]

Mr. Hutton: On 21 December 2000 we published the White Paper "Adoption: a new approach", together with draft national standards on adoption. Together they set out plans for a faster, fairer adoption service and the most radical overhaul of adoption legislation for 25 years. To make sure that these changes happen we have set a new target to increase the number of adoptions by 2004–05 by 40 per cent. (and if possible 50 per cent.), provided investment of £66.5 million over three years, set up the adoption and permanence task force, and are setting up an adoption register to match children with adoptive parents across the country.

Orthodontists

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many orthodontists are employed by the *(a)* Gateshead and South Tyneside Health Authority and *(b)* NHS; and what the equivalent figure was (i) five, (ii) 10 and (iii) 15 years ago. [148397]

Mr. Hutton: The number of General Dental Service dentists with more than 100 orthodontic claims in a year is shown in the table for the years 1999–2000, 1995–96 and 1992–93 for Gateshead and South Tyneside Health Authority and for England.

General Dental Service: Number of orthodontists

	Gateshead and South Tyneside Health Authority	*England*
1992–93	0	466
1995–96	2	647
1999–2000	1	825

Notes:
1. An orthodontist is defined here as a principal dentist who submitted a hundred or more orthodontic claims in a year.
2. Some dentists may be included in both the General Dental Service and the Hospital and community health service figures.

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he is taking to improve the National Orthodontal Service *(a)* within the NHS and *(b)* in the Gateshead and South Tyneside Health Authority. [148415]

Mr. Hutton: We are taking steps to ensure that dentists throughout the country can identify the appropriate cases for treatment, use the most clinically effective and cost-effective approach and maintain high standards of probity in providing orthodontic services. This will concentrate National Health Service resources more on the cases of true clinical need and less on minor cosmetic work.

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the waiting times are for orthodontal treatment in the Gateshead and South Tyneside health authority. [148418]

Mr. Hutton: Orthodontic services in the Gateshead and South Tyneside health authority area are provided by the Community Dental Service of the South Tyneside health care national health service trust. The waiting time for a first appointment is currently 11 weeks.

Heart By-pass Surgery

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average waiting time is for NHS heart by-pass surgery in Tyneside. [148747]

Mr. Denham: Based on performance over the last six months, the average waiting time for an NHS coronary artery by-pass graft in Tyneside is 188 days. A new initiative to provide coronary artery by-pass grafts at the Royal Victoria Infirmary, Newcastle, as well as the Freeman Hospital, commencing on 6 February 2001, will provide a further 25 coronary artery by-pass graft operations in this financial year. This will rise to over 200 additional operations in 2001–02 and then 400 additional operations from 2002–03 onwards.

Elderly People (Free Personal Care)

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce free personal care for the elderly in the rest of the United Kingdom in line with the proposal being put to the Scottish Parliament. [148609]

Mr. Hutton: I refer my hon. Friend to what I said in the House on 5 February 2001, *Official Report*, columns 725–35.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when funding for beta interferon for newly diagnosed patients with multiple sclerosis ceased in all areas. [148664]

Mr. Denham: The Department issued guidance (in Executive Letter (95)97) to the National Health Service in 1995 about the prescribing of beta interferon. It recommends that health authorities should have in place arrangements for hospital specialists to initiate treatment in the light of medical evidence and local priorities. This guidance continues to apply until the National Institute for Clinical Excellence publishes its guidance on beta interferon later this year.

Funding for the treatment of newly diagnosed patients has not ceased. General allocations to health authorities will rise on average by 8.9 per cent. for 2001–02.

Elderly Patients (Medication)

Siobhain McDonagh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he gives regarding the prevention of abuse of older people in hospitals and care homes through the over-use of sedative and anti-psychotic medication. [148853]

Mr. Hutton: All prescribing for older people in hospital, residential and nursing home care should be undertaken and monitored carefully by the doctor who has clinical responsibility for that particular aspect of a patient's care.

In 1998 the Department published a joint report with the National Prescribing Centre on general practitioner prescribing support. This document provides many examples of good practice, including advice and support on prescribing in residential and nursing homes. Age Concern also published a report in 1998 'Drugs and Dementia' which provides a guide to good practice in this area. In particular, it recommends regular reviews of prescriptions and that attempts should be made to reduce dosages of neuroleptics at least every six months.

It is intended that national minimum standards will require care homes to have a policy, and staff to adhere to procedures, for the receipt, recording, storage, handling, administration and disposal of medicines.

The Controls Assurance Initiative, launched in November 1999, sets out the organisational controls expected to be in place in hospitals across a range of areas. In March 2000, a revised controls assurance standard was issued on Safe and Secure Handling of Medicines (Medicines Management). This standard requires an auditable trail to be established for the supply, administration and disposal of medicines.

The National Service Framework (NSF) for Older People will set national standards and define service models for older people's health and social care. The NSF will also emphasise the importance of this area of clinical practice.

Waterhouse Report

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made to implement the recommendations of the Waterhouse report; and if he will make a statement. [148601]

Mr. Hutton: Sir Ronald Waterhouse's report "Lost in Care" was published on 15 February 2000 and made a total of 72 recommendations. Nine of these recommendations were primarily matters for the National Assembly for Wales to consider. Our response to "Lost in Care", published on 29 June 2000, set out the range of action being taken in respect of the remaining 63 recommendations applying directly to England. We accepted the spirit of all 63 recommendations that applied directly to England.

The vast majority of the recommendations in "Lost in Care" were consistent with our objectives for children's social services. Many of the recommendations are being implemented through legislation including the Care Standards Act 2000, the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and the Protection of Children Act 1999. The remainder are being addressed through major policy initiatives such as the Quality Protects programme, the review of social services complaints procedures and the development of new inter-agency guidance on the handling of complex abuse investigations.

Sexual Abuse

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures are in place to reduce the number of adult victims of sexual abuse being admitted to mental hospitals; and if he will make a statement. [148594]

Mr. Hutton: Sexual abuse does not have a diagnostic classification of its own, but may be part of other diagnoses under the International Classification of Diseases and related health problems (ICD). Therefore, adults who have been victims of sexual abuse may be admitted to hospital with another condition, but we are not able to separate such cases from the data. We are well aware of the impact which sexual abuse during childhood may have on mental health in later life, a point which is elaborated in the National Service Framework for mental health. The NSF sets out how people should be able to get quicker access to more effective treatments in and through primary care, with support from specialised services where necessary.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will establish a national network of organisations to support adult victims of sexual abuse; and if he will make a statement. [148602]

Mr. Hutton: We have no plans to establish a national network of organisations to support adult victims of sexual abuse. A variety of systems exist to ensure that there is scope for provision of a range of health and social care provision, including specialised services in the charitable and voluntary sector.

We have set out clear national standards in the National Service Framework for mental health. It describes how people should be able to get quicker access to more effective treatments in and through primary care, with support from specialised services where necessary.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost of treating adult victims of sexual abuse in mental health hospitals is for each health authority in the last year for which figures are available. [148593]

Mr. Hutton: Sexual abuse does not have a diagnostic classification of its own, but may be part of other diagnoses under the International Classification of Diseases and related health problems (ICD). Therefore, adults who have been victims of sexual abuse may be admitted to hospital with another condition, but we are not able to separate such cases from the data. However, we are well aware of the impact which sexual abuse during childhood may have on mental health in later life, a point which is elaborated in the National Service Framework for mental health.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many adults have *(a)* disclosed that they have suffered sexual abuse and *(b)* are known to be suffering the effects of sexual abuse in each of the last 10 years. [148599]

Mr. Hutton: Central records are not kept of the number who disclose that they have been abused. However, we are aware that people who have suffered child sexual abuse are among those who are especially vulnerable. The National Service Framework for mental health reflects this.

Medical Negligence

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what guidance he issues to GPs on the use of deputising services in respect of liability insurance for medical negligence; [149094]

(2) in the last 10 years how many GPs found guilty of medical negligence have not held medical insurance; [149098]

(3) what statutory provisions govern the employment by GPs of deputising services; [149095]

(4) since which date GP deputising services have been required to ensure that the GPs they employ hold medical insurance; [149097]

Ms Stuart: The statutory provisions governing the employment by general practitioners of deputising services can be found in Schedule 2 of the General Medical Services (NHS) regulations 1992 (as amended). These require that a doctor shall take all reasonable steps to satisfy themselves that the service provided by the deputising organisation is adequate and appropriate and that the doctors it supplies are suitably experienced and are not subject to disciplinary action.

However, no specific guidance has been issued to GPs on the use of deputising services in respect of liability insurance for medical negligence or medical insurance. It would be considered good practice for all providers of services to the National Health Service to ensure that all doctors they employ have adequate indemnity.

Information on the numbers of GPs found guilty of medical negligence who did not hold medical insurance is not held centrally.

Following the independent review of GP out-of-hours services published in October 2000, all out-of-hours providers are to be required to meet new quality standards. Only organisations (such as co-ops and those providing deputising services) that demonstrate they can meet and maintain the quality standards will be accredited to provide out-of-hours services. One of the quality standards is for accredited organisations to hold indemnity cover.

The legislation necessary to give health authorities the power to accredit out-of-hours organisations is currently being considered by parliament as part of the Health and Social Care Bill.

Hospital Mortuary Facilities

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list in respect of each hospital in the NHS *(a)* the number of beds in the hospital, *(b)* the number of permanent mortuary spaces available, *(c)* the number of temporary mortuary spaces available, *(d)* the proportion of temporary and permanent mortuary spaces which comply with (i) health and safety requirements, (ii) health service standards and (iii) designated staffing levels, *(e)* if its mortuary facilities are CPA accredited and *(f)* if it used non-refrigerated and non-compliant temporary facilities in the past two years. [149279]

Mr. Denham: I have placed information on the number of beds in each National Health Service hospital in England in the Library. Hospital mortuaries are accredited as part of National Health Service pathology services; it is not, therefore, possible to identify separately those hospital mortuaries which do not meet accreditation standards. Information is not held centrally on the number of permanent or temporary mortuary facilities, the standards they comply with, or the use of non-refrigerated or non-compliant temporary facilities.

Deceased Patients

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish *(a)* the verbatim guidelines about how dignity and respect for deceased patients should be ensured, as issued by his Department in May 2000, and *(b)* the letter written by the NHS Chief Executive to all trusts on this subject on Monday 15 January. [149278]

Mr. Denham: The joint Health Service/Local Authority Circular "Winter 2000–01: Capacity Planning for Health and Social Care" (HSC 2000/016: LAC 2000–14) issued on 23 May 2000 stated:

> NHS organisations should work with local councils to ensure that all services involved in the disposal of bodies: medical certification, registration, coroners, funeral directors and burial or cremation services are in place and that adequate out-of-hours services are available.
>
> NHS trusts should ensure that mortuary capacity is adequate to meet peaks in winter deaths and take steps to provide additional facilities where this is likely to be required. Temporary mortuary facilities must meet minimum standards to respect patients' dignity. Refrigerated vehicles and trailers must not be used.

Copies of HSC 2000/016: LAC 2000–14 are available in the Library.

The letter written by the National Health Service chief executive to all trusts on this subject on Monday 15 January has been placed in the Library.

Bedford Hospital

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his oral statement of 16 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 201, on Bedford Hospital, if he will place in the Library the parts of the final report as delivered to his Department which were left out of the version which is in the Library. [149277]

Mr. Denham: The investigation was carried out by civil servants from the Eastern Regional Office of the National Health Service Executive, which is part of the Department. The report was therefore written within the Department and copies of the final report have been placed in the Library.

Non-residential Services

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects the statutory guidance to be issued on charges for non-residential services. [149365]

Mr. Hutton: We plan to issue the statutory guidance on charges for home care and other non-residential social services in the spring.

Health Expenditure

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for *(a)* Great Britain and *(b)* each health authority area, the expenditure on health by weighted head of population, expressed in real terms, for each year since 1997 for which figures are available. [149436]

Mr. Denham: Expenditure on health per weighted head of population for England, and for each health authority area in England, from 1997–98 to 1999–2000, expressed in real terms, is shown in the tables. Information relating to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is a matter for the devolved Administrations.

Table 1: Health authority areas in England—Expenditure on health by weighted head of population expressed in real terms

£

Health authority	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Avon	628.25	672.11	734.18
Barking and Havering	615.71	629.88	688.34
Barnet	662.90	662.54	754.50
Barnsley	554.70	563.09	667.48
Bedfordshire	588.29	627.71	684.27
Berkshire	602.56	644.72	705.53
Bexley and Greenwich	637.24	671.78	779.62
Birmingham	659.76	680.35	735.67
Bradford	617.48	610.13	711.26
Brent and Harrow	666.18	706.54	808.67
Bromley	585.54	612.85	779.25
Buckinghamshire	613.23	641.72	673.09
Bury and Rochdale	615.68	606.15	694.75
Calderdale and Kirklees	576.59	587.33	679.51
Cambridge and Huntingdon	618.53	671.24	n/a
Cambridgeshire	n/a	n/a	690.15
Camden and Islington	660.51	732.56	820.03
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	612.24	627.43	737.93
County Durham	579.40	598.55	663.12
Coventry	585.12	589.73	664.57
Croydon	593.42	642.30	699.57
Doncaster	606.93	609.76	698.34
Dorset	599.24	638.20	730.63
Dudley	584.12	614.52	672.50
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	650.43	665.43	734.29
East and North Hertfordshire	650.03	693.09	695.36
East Kent	584.52	626.59	691.32
East Lancashire	615.45	620.45	707.35
East London and The City	632.23	627.09	775.69
East Norfolk	629.44	654.71	n/a
East Riding	610.66	626.47	703.75
East Surrey	705.09	757.55	822.98
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	595.70	612.28	766.71
Enfield and Haringey	587.37	616.10	704.50
Gateshead and South Tyneside	605.30	602.89	665.14
Gloucestershire	636.99	648.55	731.94
Herefordshire	676.36	664.20	810.80
Hillingdon	603.01	638.21	706.58
Isle of Wight	670.04	696.84	759.94
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	680.79	694.96	781.73
Kingston and Richmond	689.77	726.65	755.41
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	630.30	657.10	790.36
Leeds	640.82	635.87	742.03
Leicestershire	632.75	636.14	726.44
Lincolnshire	672.44	646.32	712.79
Liverpool	618.84	629.55	736.12
Manchester	649.62	681.38	773.81
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	649.78	687.66	824.05
Morecambe Bay	670.22	689.93	772.59
Newcastle and North Tyneside	624.79	653.43	773.22
Norfolk	n/a	n/a	727.33
North and East Devon	640.54	653.01	711.52
North and Mid Hampshire	642.94	674.81	722.86
North Cheshire	615.75	630.42	708.50
North Cumbria	615.80	643.41	691.46
North Derbyshire	628.98	654.02	671.99
North Essex	614.13	637.00	727.57
North Nottinghamshire	595.14	602.52	702.30
North Staffordshire	596.62	600.04	675.34
North West Anglia	597.96	619.18	n/a
North West Lancashire	589.71	591.78	708.74
North Yorkshire	646.95	691.99	709.98
Northamptonshire	593.74	624.51	701.12
Northumberland	653.70	666.35	739.16
Nottingham	588.99	681.71	711.04
Oxfordshire	604.71	629.19	720.49
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	558.80	621.27	669.89
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	641.11	687.54	734.70
Rotherham	564.93	578.53	689.59
Salford and Trafford	598.73	619.99	727.00
Sandwell	615.45	640.76	697.32
Sefton	610.43	628.57	706.28
Sheffield	629.42	634.38	758.19
Shropshire	607.13	625.92	716.70
Solihull	669.36	692.42	687.80
Somerset	623.37	651.44	696.84
South and West Devon	609.64	624.33	713.39
South Cheshire	623.12	662.60	696.43
South Derbyshire	633.25	637.44	676.50
South Essex	582.43	604.13	661.43
South Humber	664.56	701.25	770.67
South Lancashire	634.53	672.47	735.17
South Staffordshire	612.95	622.09	687.05
Southampton and South West Hampshire	622.67	663.45	725.27
St. Helens and Knowsley	596.20	610.09	658.59
Stockport	595.80	616.09	715.47
Suffolk	618.63	656.58	704.43
Sunderland	588.13	581.22	675.94
Tees	970.50	597.88	722.07
Wakefield	699.99	703.51	701.04
Walsall	587.47	623.29	713.64
Warwickshire	678.35	679.59	728.05
West Hertfordshire	649.63	675.16	712.99
West Kent	614.46	645.07	757.65
West Pennine	559.03	568.58	662.19
West Surrey	652.88	686.74	767.80
West Sussex	596.55	642.22	682.60
Wigan and Bolton	563.05	577.53	649.06
Wiltshire	642.19	679.56	762.38
Wirral	573.43	628.90	704.52
Wolverhampton	586.47	606.79	685.66
Worcestershire	677.17	695.99	718.87

Notes:
1. Figures for 1997–98 and 1998–99 have been shown in real terms, with 1999–2000 as the baseline, using the GDP deflator.
2. Expenditure is taken from Health Authority Annual Accounts or Summarisation Forms which are prepared on a resource basis and therefore differ from cash allocations in each year. The expenditure is the total spent on the purchase of healthcare by the Health Authority. The majority of General Dental Services for all three years and an element of drugs expenditure for 1997–98 and 1998–99 is not included in the health authority accounts and is separately accounted for. All drugs expenditure is included in the 1999–2000 figures.
3. Figures differ from those provided at *Official Report*, vol.352, columns 358–60W, as pharmaceutical services expenditure was excluded in the former answer to assist comparability. Comparability is not possible in this answer owing to the difference in reporting resulting from the formation of primary care groups. The GDP deflator and base years are also different between the answers.
4. Where N/A appears in the table, this refers to the result of the mergers of Cambridge and Huntingdon, East Norfolk and North West Anglia Health Authorities to give Cambridgeshire and Norfolk Health Authorities on 1 April 1999.
Sources:
Health Authority audited accounts for 1997–98 and 1998–99.
Health Authority audited summarisation forms for 1999–2000.
Weighted population estimates for 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000.
General Domestic Product (GDP) Deflator for 1997 to June 2000 calculated from Office for National Statistics data for GDP.

Table 2: England—Expenditure on health by weighted head of population expressed in real terms

	£
1997–98	691.22
1998–99	707.89
1999–2000	757.22

Notes:
1. Figures for 1997–98 and 1998–99 have been shown in real terms, with 1999–2000 as the baseline, using the GDP deflator.
2. Expenditure is taken from the health authority summarised accounts which are prepared on a resource basis and therefore differ from cash allocations in each year, and from the accounts of the Dental Practice Board for General Dental Services and the Prescription Pricing Authority for Pharmaceutical Services.
3. Figures differ from those provided at *Official Report*, vol.352, columns 358–60W, owing to the use of the GDP deflator and different base years.
Sources:
Summarised account of the health authorities 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000.
Weighted population estimates for 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000.
General Domestic Product (GDP) Deflator for 1997 to June 2000 calculated from Office for National Statistics data for GDP.

Northampton Community Healthcare and Rockingham Forest NHS Trust

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to lay an establishment order for the proposed merger of Northampton Community Healthcare and Rockingham Forest NHS Trust. [149475]

Mr. Denham: The establishment order for the new National Health Service Trust was made on 5 February and will come into force on 16 February.

Marshall Case

Mr. Brazier: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he has held discussions with Nottinghamshire Social Services concerning their handling of the case of the Marshall daughters in Kirkby-in-Ashfield. [149225]

Mr. Denham: Officials from the Department have been in contact with senior officers from Nottinghamshire Social Services Department in relation to concerns that have been expressed about the welfare of the children involved.

Nunnery Fields Hospital

Mr. Brazier: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if contracts have been exchanged for the sale of the Nunnery Fields Hospital site. [149521]

Ms Stuart: Contracts for the sale of the Nunnery Fields Hospital site have not been exchanged.

MMR Vaccine

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when and for how long his Department reviewed the research carried out by Professor John O'Leary at Coombe Women's Hospital in Dublin on autism and the MMR vaccine; and what the conclusions of the review were. [149344]

Yvette Cooper: The United Kingdom health departments are advised on all matters concerning immunisation by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). The JCVI reviewed a paper entitled 'Enterocolitis in children with developmental disorders', of which Professor O'Leary was a co-author, at its meeting of October 2000. The JCVI concluded that the paper did not provide any new evidence to alter its views on the safety of MMR vaccine.

We are aware that Professor O'Leary also gave a presentation to the United States of America Congressional Oversight Committee on Autism and Immunisation in April 2000. The material presented to the Oversight Committee has, as far as we are aware, not yet been published in a peer-reviewed journal.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* MMR, *(b)* MR, *(c)* single antigen measles, *(d)* single antigen rubella and *(e)* single antigen mumps vaccines were administered in the United Kingdom in each year since 1979. [149364]

Yvette Cooper: The information available about measles, mumps and rubella, single antigen measles and single antigen rubella vaccinations given in England from 1979 to 1998–99 is contained in the table. Measles vaccine was given to children aged 12–15 months. Rubella vaccine was given to girls at about 10–14 years. Mumps vaccine has never been a part of the United Kingdom's routine immunisation programme and data on this were not collected.

MMR vaccine was introduced into the routine UK childhood immunisation programme at age 12–15 months in 1988. MR (measles/rubella) vaccine was used only during the schools immunisation campaign of November 1994. In England, 6.6 million doses of MR vaccine were administered to children aged 5–16 years during that campaign.

A second dose of MMR vaccine was introduced into the routine programme in 1996. Data for this vaccine, collected by the Public Health Laboratory Service, Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre, show uptake of 477,000 (in

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1996–97), 933,000 (in 1997–98) and 455,000 (in 1998–99). These figures include doses administered both routinely and during a catch-up programme.

Matters concerning Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are for the devolved Assemblies.

Number of persons immunised in England

Thousand

Year	*MMR: first dose*	*Single antigen measles*	*Single antigen rubella: Schoolgirls immunised*[1]
1979	[2]—	332	341
1980	[2]—	352	320
1981	[2]—	369	313
1982	[2]—	391	324
1983	[2]—	393	315
1984	[2]—	436	312
1985	[2]—	474	269
1986	[2]—	503	270
1987–88[3]	[2]—	647	307
1988–89	670	336	229
1989–90	1,371	25	219
1990–91	1,060	9	199
1991–92	811	[2]—	221
1992–93	628	[2]—	204
1993–94	640	[2]—	181
1994–95	671	[2]—	[2]—
1995–96	572	[2]—	[2]—
1996–97	561	[2]—	[2]—
1997–98	553	[2]—	[2]—
1998–99	531	[2]—	[2]—

[1] The schoolgirl rubella immunisation programme was ended in October 1995.
[2] Not available
[3] Numbers immunised cover 15 month period from 1 January 1987–31 March 1988.
Source:
Forms SBL 607, KC50, KC50A Department of Health, Statistics division SD2B

Autism

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the improvements and changes in the diagnosis of autism that occurred in each year since 1979; and by what means and when GPs and other health professionals were made aware of these changes. [149346]

Mr. Hutton: There have been considerable advances in the diagnosis of autism since 1979. This has been aided by the development of new diagnostic tools. These include the Diagnostic Interview for Social and Communication Disorders whose further development is being led by the National Autistic Society and the Autism Diagnostic Interview developed by Professor Ann Le Couteur. Dissemination is largely through professional publications, conferences and training days.

Press Releases

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many press releases were issued by his Department in the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000; how many have been issued in the current financial year; and what his estimate is of the total number for the current financial year. [149243]

Ms Stuart: The number of press releases issued in each of the financial years requested is in the table.

Financial year	*Total*
1996–97	296
1997–98	330
1998–99	559
1999–2000	743

In the current financial year 565 press releases have been issued to date. It is estimated the total for 2000–01 will be 715.

Health Professionals (Training)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* doctors and *(b)* nurses have been in training in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [149350]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is in the tables.

Numbers of hospital medical doctors in training in England as at 30 September

	All doctors in training[1]	*Registrar group*	*Senior house officer*	*House officer*
1990	23,630	9,710	10,900	3,020
1991	24,250	9,900	11,290	3,060
1992	24,690	10,080	11,570	3,040
1993	25,420	10,370	11,960	3,090
1994	25,780	10,750	12,190	3,020
1995	26,980	10,820	12,930	3,220
1996	27,820	10,840	13,770	3,220
1997	29,280	11,360	14,560	3,360
1998	29,790	11,590	14,750	3,450
1999	30,420	12,100	14,780	3,540

[1] Doctors in training previously referred to as Junior doctors
Note:
Figures are rounded to the nearest 10
Source:
Department of Health medical and dental workforce census

GP Registrars[1]*, England as at 1 October for each year*

	Headcount
1989	1,735
1990	1,562
1991	1,639
1992	1,613
1993	1,529
1994	1,445
1995	1,404
1996	1,305
1997	1,343
1998	1,446
1999	1,520

[1] Previously referred to as Trainees
Source:
Department of Health General and Personal Medical Services Statistics

Nursing and midwifery student population

Numbers

	Pre registration total[1]	*Degree total*[2]	*Midwifery*[3,4]	*Total*
1994–95[5]	38,840	916	—	39,756
1995–96	35,609	1,047	—	36,656
1996–97	35,238	1,139	—	36,377
1997–98[6]	34,087	1,062	3,263	38,412

Nursing and midwifery student population

Numbers

	Pre registration total[1]	*Degree total*[2]	*Midwifery*[3,4]	*Total*
1998–99[5]	36,030	1,314	3,272	40,616
1999–2000[6]	38,990	2,772	3,464	45,226

[1] All pre-registration non-degree training
[2] Pre 1998 data exclude degree training funded by DFEE
[3] Pre 1997–98 data do not separate nursing and midwifery figures
[4] Includes some post registration training
Sources:
[5] 1994–95 to 1996–97 source Minimum Data Set February 1995
[6] March 1997 FWIR
[7] April 2000 FWIR
[8] November 2000 FWIR

Mental Health Services

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the expenditure on mental health services as a proportion of total NHS spending in each year since 1988–89; and if he will make a statement. [149347]

Mr. Hutton: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave on 1 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 266W.

District Nurses

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patient contacts there were with district nurses in each year since 1989–90; and if he will make a statement. [149349]

Mr. Denham: Information about patient contacts with district nurses is contained in the statistical report "Patient care in the community, District Nursing summary information for 1999–2000, England". Copies of the summary are available in the Library.

Stewart Committee

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he next plans to meet the Stewart Committee on mobile phone safety; and what new studies he has asked the Committee to undertake. [149519]

Yvette Cooper: The Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones (the Stewart group) was set up to investigate the public health implications of mobile phone technologies. Their report was published on 11 May 2000 and the group stood down shortly thereafter. Copies of the report are available in the Library. The report included a recommendation for a substantial research programme to be set up. This programme, jointly funded by Government and industry, was announced in December 2000 and will be launched at a scientific workshop in central London on Friday 9 February. The research will be undertaken under the direction of an independent programme management committee under the chairmanship of Sir William Stewart. The selection and management of studies will be in the hands of the programme management committee. Details of this new committee are available on the website "www.doh.gov.uk/mobilephones"

Enrolled Nurses

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those hospitals which do not offer permanent posts to enrolled nurses. [148437]

Mr. Denham: This information is not collected centrally but may be held locally by individual National Health Service employers. We have made it clear that the systematic use of short-term contracts for nurses and other staff should end.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Numbers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list, on a comparable basis, the number of police officers, broken down by rank, in each force in England and Wales, and for England and Wales as a whole, at *(a)* 31 March 1997 and *(b)* 30 September 2000, indicating the change in the number of officers at each rank in each force and in England and Wales as a whole over that period. [149209]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 February 2001]:* The information requested is in the table.

Police force	*Chief constable*	*Assistant chief constable*	*Superintendent*	*Chief inspector*	*Inspector*	*Sergeant*	*Constable*	*Total police ranks*
Total strength for ordinary duty as at 31 March 1997[1]								
Avon and Somerset	1	3	29	43	144	454	2,315	2,989
Bedfordshire	1	2	16	12	61	156	846	1,094
Cambridgeshire	1	2	15	14	62	207	1,001	1,302
Cheshire	1	3	20	30	94	308	1,590	2,046
Cleveland	1	1	13	21	78	224	1,121	1,458
Cumbria	1	2	13	16	54	176	882	1,144
Derbyshire	1	3	21	24	92	274	1,376	1,791
Devon and Cornwall	1	3	30	45	139	413	2,234	2,865
Dorset	1	2	18	24	69	201	969	1,284
Durham	1	2	20	22	75	211	1,130	1,461
Essex[2]	1	3	31	44	143	469	2,269	2,961
Gloucestershire	1	2	14	19	55	170	872	1,133
Greater Manchester	1	6	79	95	378	1,021	5,342	6,922
Hampshire	1	3	38	45	157	509	2,698	3,452
Hertfordshire[3]	1	3	19	29	94	249	1,365	1,758
Humberside	1	3	19	30	111	299	1,582	2,045
Kent	1	4	30	43	165	463	2,554	3,260
Lancashire	1	4	27	42	178	503	2,492	3,247
Leicestershire	1	2	18	20	95	275	1,556	1,949
Lincolnshire	1	2	13	21	56	183	921	1,196
London, City of	1	2	12	15	51	122	656	859
Merseyside	1	4	51	59	187	656	3,272	4,230
Metropolitan Police[4]	7	28	211	344	1,197	4,218	20,671	26,677

Police force	Chief constable	Assistant chief constable	Superintendent	Chief inspector	Inspector	Sergeant	Constable	Total police ranks
Norfolk	1	2	17	19	64	195	1,133	1,432
Northamptonshire	1	2	12	9	54	168	931	1,177
Northumbria	0	4	39	51	181	517	2,885	3,677
North Yorkshire	1	2	14	22	65	216	1,018	1,338
Nottinghamshire	1	3	23	20	104	331	1,822	2,323
South Yorkshire	1	4	40	46	159	473	2,436	3,159
Staffordshire	1	3	26	33	120	344	1,684	2,211
Suffolk	1	2	15	12	59	169	922	1,180
Surrey	1	3	21	19	91	245	1,240	1,620
Sussex	1	4	28	39	162	477	2,374	3,085
Thames Valley	1	3	54	39	198	542	2,858	3,695
Warwickshire	1	2	11	11	52	141	708	926
West Mercia	1	3	19	31	118	305	1,563	2,040
West Midlands	1	4	76	79	342	974	5,636	7,113
West Yorkshire	1	4	49	68	255	726	4,106	5,209
Wiltshire	1	2	13	15	63	179	881	1,154
Dyfed-Powys	1	2	14	17	42	173	756	1,005
Gwent	1	2	11	15	52	198	964	1,243
North Wales	1	2	18	26	74	224	1,024	1,369
South Wales	1	3	33	51	155	473	2,260	2,976
Total all forces	48	145	1,290	1,679	6,164	18,811	96,914	125,051
Total strength for ordinary duty as at 30 September 2000								
Avon and Somerset	1	3	22	36	147	438	2,294	2,941
Bedfordshire	1	2	13	12	54	141	783	1,006
Cambridgeshire	1	2	14	11	59	191	989	1,266
Cheshire	1	3	17	26	100	332	1,521	2,000
Cleveland	1	2	24	2	67	196	1,129	1,421
Cumbria	1	2	8	14	50	156	817	1,048
Derbyshire	1	3	24	26	83	281	1,363	1,780
Devon and Cornwall	1	4	34	35	137	400	2,261	2,873
Dorset	1	2	14	22	63	198	999	1,299
Durham	1	2	19	23	81	212	1,244	1,581
Essex	1	3	22	40	130	436	2,147	2,780
Gloucestershire	1	2	11	16	54	171	887	1,142
Greater Manchester	1	6	77	88	319	992	5,285	6,767
Hampshire	1	3	33	39	165	530	2,663	3,435
Hertfordshire	1	3	21	30	104	272	1,530	1,961
Humberside	1	2	22	24	102	268	1,486	1,905
Kent	1	5	25	39	146	479	2,544	3,239
Lancashire	1	3	30	35	166	516	2,463	3,215
Leicestershire	1	3	15	21	96	260	1,614	2,010
Lincolnshire	1	2	10	16	59	185	888	1,162
London, City of	1	1	8	12	48	93	557	720
Merseyside	1	4	46	53	170	604	3,203	4,081
Metropolitan Police	5	26	192	380	1,166	3,944	18,981	24,695
Norfolk	1	2	15	23	68	216	1,062	1,387
Northamptonshire	1	2	11	11	51	165	925	1,166
Northumbria	1	5	41	58	193	550	3,037	3,885
North Yorkshire	1	2	11	12	66	210	991	1,293
Nottinghamshire	1	3	20	24	115	306	1,762	2,232
South Yorkshire	1	4	38	51	176	494	2,420	3,184
Staffordshire	1	2	16	24	107	335	1,672	2,157
Suffolk	1	2	13	15	54	171	860	1,115
Surrey	1	3	17	21	88	310	1,673	2,113
Sussex	1	5	29	35	160	464	2,119	2,812
Thames Valley	1	2	43	34	196	567	2,905	3,748
Warwickshire	1	2	12	9	40	120	728	912
West Mercia	1	2	16	26	92	298	1,471	1,906
West Midlands	1	4	59	34	301	1,019	5,931	7,350
West Yorkshire	1	5	46	72	232	657	3,793	4,806
Wiltshire	1	2	14	16	56	182	829	1,099
Dyfed-Powys	1	2	15	18	46	184	779	1,045
Gwent	1	2	11	16	57	203	981	1,271
North Wales	1	2	13	21	60	230	1,066	1,393
South Wales	1	4	31	38	169	443	2,343	3,029
Total all forces	47	145	1,172	1,557	5,892	18,419	94,997	122,230
Difference in number of officers between September 2000 and March 1997								
Avon and Somerset	0	0	-7	-7	3	-16	-21	-48
Bedfordshire	0	0	-3	0	-7	-14	-63	-87
Cambridgeshire	0	0	-1	-3	-4	-16	-12	-36
Cheshire	0	0	-3	-4	6	24	-68	-46
Cleveland	0	1	11	-19	-11	-28	8	-38
Cumbria	0	0	-5	-2	-4	-20	-65	-96
Derbyshire	0	0	3	2	-9	7	-13	-10
Devon and Cornwall	0	1	4	-10	-2	-13	28	8
Dorset	0	0	-4	-2	-6	-3	30	15

Police force	Chief constable	Assistant chief constable	Superintendent	Chief inspector	Inspector	Sergeant	Constable	Total police ranks
Durham	0	0	-1	1	6	1	114	121
Essex[2]	0	0	-9	-4	-13	-33	-122	-181
Gloucestershire	0	0	-3	-3	-1	1	15	10
Greater Manchester	0	0	-2	-7	-60	-29	-57	-154
Hampshire	0	0	-5	-6	8	21	-35	-17
Hertfordshire[2]	0	0	2	1	10	24	166	202
Humberside	0	-1	3	-6	-9	-30	-96	-140
Kent	0	1	-5	-4	-19	16	-10	-21
Lancashire	0	-1	3	-7	-12	13	-29	-33
Leicestershire	0	1	-3	1	1	3	58	61
Lincolnshire	0	0	-3	-5	3	3	-32	-35
London, City of	0	-1	-4	-3	-3	-29	-99	-138
Merseyside	0	0	-5	-6	-17	-52	-69	-149
Metropolitan Police[2]	-2	-2	-19	36	-31	-274	-1,690	-1,982
Norfolk	0	0	-2	4	4	21	-71	-45
Northamptonshire	0	0	-1	2	-3	-3	-6	-11
Northumbria	1	1	2	7	12	33	152	208
North Yorkshire	0	0	-3	-10	1	-6	-27	-45
Nottinghamshire	0	0	-3	5	-9	-25	-59	-92
South Yorkshire	0	0	-2	5	17	21	-15	26
Staffordshire	0	-1	10	-9	-13	-9	-12	-54
Suffolk	0	0	-2	3	-5	2	-62	-65
Surrey[2]	0	0	-4	2	-2	65	433	493
Sussex	0	1	1	-4	-2	-13	-256	-273
Thames Valley	0	-1	-11	-5	-2	24	47	53
Warwickshire	0	0	1	-2	-12	-22	20	-14
West Mercia	0	-1	-3	-5	-26	-7	-92	-134
West Midlands	0	0	-17	-45	-41	45	295	237
West Yorkshire	0	1	-3	4	-23	-69	-313	-403
Wiltshire	0	0	1	1	-7	3	-53	-55
Dyfed-Powys	0	0	1	1	4	11	24	41
Gwent	0	0	0	1	5	5	17	28
North Wales	0	0	-5	-5	-14	6	42	24
South Wales	0	1	-2	-13	14	-30	83	53
Total all forces[3]	-1	0	-118	-121	-272	-392	-1,917	-2,821

[1] Full-time equivalents
[2] Prior to 1 April 2000 the Metropolitan police district included areas of Essex, Hertfordshire and Surrey. After that date the responsibility for policing these areas transferred to the county forces. To compensate for the additional area police officer resources were transferred from the Metropolitan police to the surrounding forces, more information is available in Home Office Statistical Bulletin 2/01.
[3] Totals do not include secondments

Criminal Injuries Compensation

Mr. Bailey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will announce the improvements he plans to make to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme. [149217]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 23 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 539W.

Mr. Bailey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the average length of time taken by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority to process compensation awards. [149218]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 544–45W.

Citizenship Applications

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date he first made public the Government's proposals for the change of policy on citizenship outlined in paragraph 10.7 of the White Paper "Fairer, Faster and Firmer—A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum"; and if he will make a statement. [147633]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 29 January 2001]:* The Government's formal proposals, as set out in paragraph 10.7 of the White Paper "Fairer, Faster and Firmer—A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum" were first published in the White Paper on 27 July 1998.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to issue guidance notes in languages other than English to assist applicants to complete a statement of evidence form to support a claim for asylum. [149569]

Mrs. Roche: The explanatory notes which accompany the statement of evidence form are being revised and translated into over 60 languages. Non-governmental organisations have been consulted about the content of the revised document. The purpose of the explanatory notes is to help applicants complete the statement of evidence form and understand how their application will be processed. The explanatory notes also provide information on how to seek legal advice, access translation services and obtain medical assistance as required. The intention is to issue the first translated documents later this month.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to announce the outcome of his review of the voucher scheme for asylum seekers. [149570]

Mrs. Roche: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) on 8 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 413W.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement setting out the reasons for the difference between the number of asylum appeals *(a)* received by his Department and *(b)* referred by his Department to the Immigration Appellate Authority during 2000. [149571]

Mrs. Roche: The data recently published are provisional. The main reasons for the difference between the number of asylum appeals received in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate and the number referred to the Immigration Appellate Authority are:

(a) increased work in progress on the appeals received within the Immigration and Nationality Directorate as decision output has risen;

(b) a number of cases in which a non-compliance decision was originally made but it has subsequently emerged that a statement of evidence form had been received in time. We have undertaken to reconsider these cases; and

(c) because the current data on appeals lodged are taken from manual records and we believe that they overstate the actual number of appeals lodged. The Immigration and Nationality Directorate is in the process of transition from manual to electronic records for appeals. The total number of appeals lodged is likely to be revised downwards once the reliability of new electronic data have been established.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will end the use of Winchester prison to house asylum seekers. [149520]

Mrs. Roche: It is the Government's intention that the current use of remand accommodation at Winchester prison should cease by the end of October 2001 when new dedicated immigration detention and holding centres become available.

Alcohol-related Crime

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the measures on alcohol-related crime contained in the Criminal Justice and Policing Bill will apply to licensed bars in private sports clubs; and if he will make a statement on police powers of enforcement in such cases. [149586]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Non-profit-making private sports clubs are allowed to supply alcohol, to members and guests, if they have a magistrates court registration certificate. If a club chooses to obtain a full justices' on-licence, so that it can also sell alcohol to the general public, then Clause 19 of the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, which gives the police powers to close down disorderly or excessively noisy licensed premises, will apply, but not otherwise.

Departmental Policies (Staffordshire, Moorlands)

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to Staffordshire, Moorlands constituency, the effects on Staffordshire, Moorlands of his Department's policies and actions *(a)* since 2 May 1997 and *(b)* in the 12 months ending on 1 May 1997. [149194]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000, is available in the Library.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects cannot be matched in the way requested, although set out are examples relating to the Staffordshire, Moorlands constituency or the immediate locality.

Staffordshire police have provided the following information on the overall number of recorded crimes in the Staffordshire Moorlands East and West areas:

Year ended 31 March 1997—6,460

Year ended 30 September 2000—6,525.

These figures are not, however, directly comparable as there was a change in counting rules for recorded crime on 1 April 1998, which laid more emphasis on measurement of one crime per victim, and also expanded the coverage of offences. It has been estimated that the change in counting rules increased the number of recorded crimes counted nationally, over England and Wales as a whole, by 14 per cent.

Under the Crime Reduction Programme there is a Staffordshire-wide project running under the Targeted Policing Initiative (TPI) dealing with prolific offenders. The amount awarded for this project is £529,000.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Staffordshire, Moorlands to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000; and

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Pub Exclusion Orders

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many pub exclusion orders were *(a)* applied for and *(b)* granted in (i) 1998, (ii) 1999 and (iii) 2000. [148957]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The power to make a pub exclusion order is contained in section 1 of the Licensed Premises (Exclusion of Certain Persons) Act 1980. Where a person is convicted of an offence committed on licensed premises and the court is satisfied that in committing that offence the offender resorted to violence, or offered or

threatened to resort to violence, the court may make an exclusion order, which prohibits the offender from entering those premises, or any other specified premises. Currently maintained statistics do not allow the identification of occasions where pub exclusion orders are made by the court.

Police Recruitment (Asian Women)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to encourage more women of Asian heritage to join the police. [148941]

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is the responsibility of individual chief officers of police to recruit the right people to serve in their forces. It is important for the police service to reflect the communities which it serves, and to help them achieve this my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has set all forces recruitment targets for minority ethnic officers. Useful advice to forces in relation to black and Asian women is contained in research recently published by the Home Office into attitudes of people from minority ethnic communities towards a career in the police service.

Fires

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many fires in *(a)* houses, *(b)* sheltered accommodation and *(c)* residential care homes took hold in upholstery which had not been treated with fire retardants in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [148944]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is contained in the table. The information provided by fire brigades distinguishes between upholstery containing combustion modified foam, which would comply with the Furniture and Furnishings (Fire) (Safety) Regulations 1988, as amended, and upholstery containing other foams and fillings which do not. It is not possible to give a figure for the number of fires which may have started in upholstery treated with any form of proprietary flame retardant treatment. The information in the table relates to fires attended by local authority fire brigades in 1999 where upholstery furniture was the material first ignited.

Fires[1] in dwellings and residential care homes where material first ignited was upholstery furniture, United Kingdom, 1999

Location	*Total upholstery fires*	*Fires involving non-fire retardant upholstery[2]*
Dwellings[3]	2,480	2,472
Of which:		
Sheltered accommodation	65	63
Residential care homes[4]	820	818

[1] All figures are based on sample data, weighted to brigade totals. figures include late call, heat and smoke incidents.

[2] Refers to any upholstery which contains foams or other fillings which do not comply with Regulations.

[3] Dwellings include caravans, boats and other non building structures used solely as a permanent residence.

[4] Includes elderly persons homes, children's homes, homes for the disabled, charitable hostels, and other types of welfare and charitable establishments.

Proxy and Postal Votes

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the new form for proxy and postal votes will be published. [148945]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001 do not prescribe a form to be used to apply for an absent vote, but regulation 51 sets out the information required in an application. We shall be circulating to Electoral Registration Officers in mid-February a suggested formulation of an application form for postal votes. The requirements for a proxy vote have not changed and so no new form is necessary.

Animal Welfare

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures his Department has taken to improve animal welfare since May 1997. [148958]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There have been a number of measures to improve animal welfare since May 1997.

The use of animals in scientific procedures is strictly regulated by what is widely acknowledged to be the toughest legislation of its kind in the world. We are working to ensure that the highest possible standards of animal welfare are applied and that animals are used only where it is fully justified—where the benefits outweigh the costs and where there are no suitable alternatives. To this end we are promoting the fullest application of the 3Rs—the replacement of procedures with others which do not use animals, the reduction of the number of animals used, and the refinement of procedures to minimise pain and suffering.

In addition to our commitment to the 3Rs, the other main individual measures this Government has introduced since the election to ensure that animals are used only where fully justified are as follows. We have:

secured a voluntary ban on testing cosmetic finished products on animals;

increased the budget made available to the Animal Procedures Committee to sponsor research on alternatives by 45 per cent. to £265,000 for 2000–01;

banned the use of animals to test alcohol and tobacco products;

increased the size of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate from 18 to 21, and recruited seven new inspectors to fill these and other vacancies;

introduced a requirement that all establishments licensed under the 1986 Act have local ethical review processes as a complement to the existing controls under the Act;

announced our intention never to allow the use of great apes (gorillas, chimpanzees, pygmy chimpanzees and orang-utans);

announced the phasing out of the use of ascitic animals in certain forms of monoclonal antibody production; and

ended the licensing of the LD50 test and of tests for skin corrosivity and phototoxic potential where valid alternatives exist.

Other support given to animal welfare includes:

backing a Private Member's Bill which became the Breeding and Sale of Dogs (Welfare) Act 1999, a measure aimed at tightening regulation of commercial dog breeding establishments, and issue to local authorities of related detailed guidance;

preparation, with the Association of Circus Proprietors, of a code of practice on the care and welfare of animals in travelling circuses;

making an order that allows for an indefinite prohibition of the culling of seals on the east coast of England; and

participating in the Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group which was established last year to ensure that the UK's overall animal welfare strategy is effectively co-ordinated.

Crime Statistics

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many crimes were recorded on 2 January. [149119]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Recorded crime details are not collected centrally on a daily basis. The latest available data on recorded crime are for the year ending September 2000. These showed that there were 5,221,416 recorded crimes in England and Wales in that year.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* vehicle crimes and *(b)* domestic burglaries there were in *(a)* April 1997 and *(b)* January 2001. [148977]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Details of recorded crime are no longer collected monthly. Comparisons of recorded crime figures between different dates are normally made using annual totals. The figures for the requested categories of crime, for the years ending March 1997 and September 2000, which is the most recent published data, are as follows:

England and Wales—numbers of recorded crimes

Burglaries	*Vehicle crimes*[1]	*Domestic*
Year ending:		
March 1997	1,245,052	581,985
September 2000[2]	1,000,317	417,380

[1] Theft of and from vehicles
[2] Owing to the change in counting rules for recorded crime on 1 April 1998, direct comparisons cannot be made between data before and after this date. However, it has been estimated that the change in counting rules increased the number of thefts of and from vehicles counted by 1 per cent. and all burglaries by 0.1 per cent.

Crime and Disorder Act

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many designations have been made to date under section 16(1) of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; and how many directions have been given under section 16(2) of that Act. [149165]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not available centrally.

Section 16 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 provides the statutory basis for truancy operations which are conducted in partnership by the police and local education authorities. Designations in accordance with section 16(1) and directions in accordance with section 16(2) are made for the period of the truancy operation only. There is no requirement on either the police or the local education authority to conduct these operations at specified intervals, or to report to Government Departments when they do so. We have, however, recommended that they jointly review the truancy problem in each local education authority area and conduct truancy operations each term as appropriate.

Section 16 operations are an important tool in helping both to reduce truancy and the potential that young people will be drawn into crime or other anti-social behaviour when they should be at school.

Orders

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many Sex Offender Orders have been made to date in each police force area in England and Wales; how many have been *(a)* discharged and *(b)* breached; and if he will make a statement; [149162]

(2) how many Child Safety Orders have been made to date in each police force area in England and Wales; how many have been *(a)* discharged and *(b)* breached; and if he will make a statement; [149164]

(3) how many Parenting Orders have been made to date in each police force area in England and Wales; how many have been *(a)* discharged and *(b)* breached; and if he will make a statement. [149163]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Available information, up to 30 September 2000, is given in the table.

The number of Parenting, Child Safety and Sex Offender Orders (as introduced under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998) made, discharged or breached within pilot areas and nationally up to 30 September 2000[1]

	Made			
	Number up to 31 May 2000	*Nationally from 1 June to 30 September 2000*[1]	*Discharged*	*Breached (up to 30 June 2000)*[1]
Sex Offender Order[2]	32	11	—	—
Greater Manchester	—	1	—	—
Metropolitan police	—	1	—	—
Lancashire	—	2	—	—
Northamptonshire	—	1	—	—
Nottinghamshire	—	1	—	—
Suffolk	—	1	—	—
West Yorkshire	—	2	—	—
Dyfed-Powys	—	1	—	—
North Wales	—	1	—	—
Parenting Order[3]	—	40	—	1
Of which given at:				

The number of Parenting, Child Safety and Sex Offender Orders (as introduced under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998) made, discharged or breached within pilot areas and nationally up to 30 September 2000[1]

	Made			
	Number up to 31 May 2000	*Nationally from 1 June to 30 September 2000*[1]	*Discharged*	*Breached (up to 30 June 2000)*[1]
Civil and family proceedings courts	—	18	[5]—	—
Cleveland	—	1	—	—
Greater Manchester	—	6	—	—
Metropolitan police	—	5	—	—
Northumbria	—	4	—	—
Suffolk	—	1	—	—
West Sussex	—	1	—	—
Criminal courts	—	[7]22	[5]—	—
Durham	—	2	—	—
Greater Manchester	—	4	—	—
Lancashire	—	6	—	—
Leicestershire	—	1	—	—
Metropolitan police	—	1	—	—
Nottinghamshire	—	2	—	—
South Yorkshire	—	1	—	—
Warwickshire	—	2	—	—
West Midlands	—	3	—	—
			—	—
Child Safety Order[6]	[5]—	[10]—	[5][9]—	[10]—
Care Order for Non-compliance with Child Safety Orders	[5]—	[10]—	[5]—	[10]—

[1] Provisional
[2] Implemented on 1 December 1998
[3] Data by area for Sex Offender Orders only available from 1 June 2000
[4] Subsection 2(7) of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 provides that 'except with the consent of both parties, no sex offender order shall be discharged before the end of the period of five years beginning with the date of service of the order'
[5] Not available
[6] Piloted from 30 September 1998 and implemented nationally from 1 June 2000
[7] Data for parenting orders given at criminal courts up to 30 June 2000 only
[8] Breach recorded in Dyfed-Powys police force area in 1999
[9] If the child fails to comply with any requirement, the court may, on application of the responsible officer, discharge the order and make in respect of him a care order under s31 (10(a)) of the Children Act 1989
[10] Not applicable

Committals

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will propose legislation to adopt into English law the Scots law rule of bringing an offender to trial within 110 days of committal to trial *(a)* for young offenders and *(b)* for all offenders; and if he will make a statement. [148943]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government are committed to reducing the time taken to bring defendants to trial, especially those under the age of 18. To this end we have introduced a number of reforms designed to reduce delay, the latest (which was implemented nationally on 15 January) being the new procedure for sending indictable-only cases to the Crown Court. These measures are reinforced both by custody time limits which restrict the time for which defendants may be held in custody pending trial, and by statutory time limits within which the prosecution must bring cases to trial, which are currently being piloted in selected youth courts. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 introduced tighter criteria for granting extensions to these time limits, as well as making provision for limits in cases involving juveniles to cover the period from arrest to first listing.

PRIME MINISTER

Speaker's Committee

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Prime Minister if he has appointed a Minister with responsibilities in relation to local government to the Speaker's Committee established under section 2 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. [149835]

The Prime Minister: In accordance with section 2(3) of the Act, I have appointed my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions as a member of the Speaker's Committee.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Children and Family Court

Mrs. Butler: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what action she is taking locally to provide advice, training and guidance regarding the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service prior to its commencement. [149167]

Jane Kennedy: Last year we ran a series of regional conferences for staff and one specifically targeted at administrators, including a conference for east and east midland staff held in Peterborough in June 2000. We are currently running a similar programme of regional conferences for managers, and the conference for east and east midland managers was held in Peterborough in January of this year. At national level, we are developing new induction training for officers of the service and will provide further training for staff as CAFCASS comes into being.

WALES

Planning Legislation (Tuckey Ruling)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with National Assembly Secretaries on the ruling of Lord Justice Tuckey on legislative provision on planning matters in Wales in relation to the requirements of European legislation and of the Human Rights Act 1998. [148320]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions with Assembly Secretaries about a range of issues, including both planning law and the impact of the Human Rights Act 1998 in Wales.

The judgment of the Divisional Court is now the subject of an appeal. The appeal will be heard in the House of Lords on 26 February. The National Assembly is being kept abreast of developments.

Mr. Adrian McMenamin

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales from what date Mr. Adrian McMenamin has been employed in the Wales Office; what the terms of reference of his post are; and what his civil service grade is. [148869]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Mr. McMenamin has been employed by the Wales Office since December 1999. He is employed under the terms of the model contract for special advisers, a copy of which is available in the Library of the House. Special advisers are not appointed to mainstream civil service grades.

Press Releases

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many press releases were issued by his Department in the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000; how many have been issued in the current financial year; and what his estimate is of the total number for the current financial year. [149241]

Mr. Paul Murphy: In 1996–97, our predecessor Department, the Welsh Office, issued 650 press notices, 774 in 1997–98, and 776 in 1998–99. The Wales Office issued 54 in 1999–2000 and has issued 88 this financial year. It is estimated that the total number for the current financial year will fall between 90 and 100 press notices.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure was in his Department for the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000, and what the planned expenditure and breakdown of expenditure for 2000–01 is on (i) public opinion research, (ii) television, radio and newspaper advertising and (iii) direct mail. [149263]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My Department runs no publicity campaigns and hence has spent nothing on advertising since its creation in July 1999. Its predecessor Department, the Welsh Office, spent £1,795,000 in 1996–97, £2,661,000 in 1997–98, and £2,685,000 in 1998–99. All the individual campaigns are evaluated separately, taking into account effectiveness and value for money.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Kosovo

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many *(a)* countries, *(b)* international organisations and *(c)* non-governmental organisations are involved in providing aid to Kosovo. [148927]

Clare Short: According to information provided by the OSCE office in Kosovo and the Kosovo Department of Reconstruction, there are 25 countries, 12 international organisations and 402 international non-governmental organisations involved in providing aid to Kosovo.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the impact of the United Kingdom aid programme in Kosovo. [148928]

Clare Short: We have recently reviewed progress against the strategy for our development programme in Kosovo prepared in January 2000. We have made the transition from humanitarian assistance to targeted technical assistance for longer-term capacity building focused on areas such as social welfare, public administration reform and health. We are also working closely with the European Agency for Reconstruction and the World Bank. We are revising our strategic objectives for the next phase of support to Kosovo.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to review the *(a)* focus and *(b)* co-ordination of the international aid effort in Kosovo. [148929]

Clare Short: Co-ordination of international assistance to Kosovo is the responsibility of the UN Interim Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). We have discussed priorities with the newly appointed head of UNMIK, Mr. Hans Haekkerup and his staff. The focus of the international effort should be on developing the capacity of Kosovars to take increasing levels of responsibility for public administration and service delivery.

A donor meeting will be held in Pristina on 25–26 February to review the position and agree priorities for future aid.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Prison Service Framework Document

Mr. McWalter: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he plans to make available the Northern Ireland Prison Service Framework Document 2000–05. [149900]

Mr. Ingram: Copies of the Northern Ireland Prison Service Framework Document have now been placed in the Library.

Plastic Baton Rounds

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what have been the results of recent studies into the feasibility of providing an effective alternative to plastic baton rounds for use in crowd control situations in Northern Ireland; and what have been the costs of these studies in the last 10 years. [144690]

Mr. Ingram: The Independent Commission on Policing, recognising the need for an alternative to the baton round, recommended a research programme to find an acceptable, effective and less potentially lethal alternative. The research programme was launched in July 2000, phase I of which, a literature review, is almost complete. This stage of the project has incurred only limited costs, beyond those of the staff involved. Phase II of the project, which will commence later this month, will involve a more detailed cost analysis.

Life Sentences

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were serving a life prison sentence for murder in Northern Ireland on 1 January. [149625]

Mr. Ingram: At 1 January 2001, there were 78 men and one woman serving sentences of life imprisonment for murder in prisons in Northern Ireland. The figure of 78 men includes eight prisoners on restricted transfer to NI from the Home Office. In addition there were three males detained at the Secretary of State's pleasure (convicted of murder committed while under 18 years of age).

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Solicitor-General what was the average cost of a decision by the Crown Prosecution Service not to proceed with a prosecution which was at an advanced stage in the last 12 months for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [148955]

The Solicitor-General: No information is held which enables the Crown Prosecution Service to provide the cost of those cases where, at an advanced stage, a decision was taken not to proceed. During 2000, the average cost of all cases which have been dropped at any stage of the proceedings in the magistrates courts was estimated to be £56.44 per case.

The CPS conducts an independent review of every case received from the police in accordance with the criteria set out in the Code for Crown Prosecutors. There are two stages in the decision to prosecute. Firstly, there must be sufficient evidence to offer a realistic prospect of conviction, and secondly the prosecution must be in the public interest. If a case fails either of these tests, then the CPS must discontinue the proceedings.

A survey conducted during the period October to December 1998 showed that the main reasons for not proceeding were:

in 24 per cent. of cases an essential legal element was missing from the prosecution case;

in 14 per cent. of cases a conviction was likely to result only in a very small or nominal penalty; and

in 13 per cent. of cases the victim of an offence refused to give evidence or retracted the evidence.

The review of a case is a continuing process, and a case may fail either of the criteria for a prosecution at any stage. For example, the CPS may not be aware until the case is listed for trial that a key prosecution witness is unwilling or no longer willing to give evidence. Where this happens, the decision not to proceed can be taken only at this stage even though the costs of reviewing the case and preparing it for the trial have already been incurred.

TREASURY

Press Releases

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many press releases were issued by his Department in the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000; how many have been issued in the current financial year; and what his estimate is of the total number for the current financial year. [149242]

Dawn Primarolo: The number of press releases issued by the Treasury for the services of the Central Office of Information (COI), who distribute press releases, can be provided readily in calendar year form as follows:

Year	*Number of press notices*
1997	184
1998	239
1999	283
2000	151
2001 to date	10

Future numbers cannot be predicted.

Hinduja Brothers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which Ministers and officials in his Department have *(a)* been contacted by and *(b)* contacted (i) Mr. G. P. Hinduja and (ii) Mr. S. P. Hinduja since 2 May 1997; if he will list the occasions on which there was such contact; and if he will make a statement. [148141]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* It is not the normal practice of the Government to release details of meetings or discussions with private individuals or companies.

All relevant papers will be made available to the Inquiry being conducted by Sir Anthony Hammond QC.

Public Expenditure (Definition)

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what definition he uses to determine whether an item of public expenditure is defined as *(a)* Government spending and *(b)* Government investment. [148832]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 6 February 2001]:* The Treasury uses a definition of aggregate public expenditure and investment derived from the national accounts produced by the Office for National Statistics. An explanation of the definitions and concepts can be found in the introduction to chapter 1 of Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses 2000–01 (Cm 4601).

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many claimants are in receipt of working families tax credit while being paid less than the hourly minimum wage. [148749]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* This information is not available. It is not possible to establish from the data reported on the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) application form alone whether the applicant was entitled under the relevant legislation to the National Minimum Wage (NMW), and at which rate.

Extra data are obtained for those WFTC applications which indicate that the hourly rate of pay is less than the NMW and are subject to further investigation by NMW officers. However, this process does not yield a reliable estimate of the total number of applicants paid below NMW rates.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* families and *(b)* children living in the London Borough of Wandsworth on 1 January have benefited from the working families tax credit. [149366]

Dawn Primarolo: For the number of families benefiting in Wandsworth, I refer my hon. Friend to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) on 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 425W.

The publication referred to in that answer also gives the national average number of children per family receiving Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC). The 5 per cent. sample used for these analyses is too small to yield a reliable separate estimate of the average number of children for families receiving WFTC in Wandsworth.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what is the estimated number of families in Morecambe and Lunesdale failing to claim Working Families Tax Credit; [148971]

(2) how many families in Morecambe and Lunesdale have benefited from the Working Families Tax Credit. [148970]

Dawn Primarolo: For the number of families in Morecambe and Lunesdale benefiting from the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), I refer my hon. Friend to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) on 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 425W. No estimate of the number eligible for WFTC is available.

Children's Tax Credit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 23 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 568W, regarding Children's Tax Credit, for what reason he did not *(a)* use child benefit records to identify the address of eligible households and *(b)* ask non-taxpayer recipients of the claim form to pass it to taxpayers in the household. [148430]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 2 February 2001]:* I have nothing to add to the answer I gave to the hon. Gentleman on 23 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 568W.

Tax Credits

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many people in Yorkshire and Humberside receive the disabled person's tax credit; [149447]

(2) how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time workers in Yorkshire have benefited from the working families tax credit. [149451]

Dawn Primarolo: Copies of the latest Quarterly Enquiries giving statistics for the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) and the Disabled Person's Tax Credit are in the Library. They contain estimates of the number of recipients in each region.

There is no single definition of what comprises full-time work. The table shows an analysis by hours worked of families in Yorkshire and The Humber receiving WFTC at August 2000.

Thousand

Hours normally worked, per week, by main earner	*Recipients*
16 <20	26.3
20 <24	15.7
24 <30	10.1
30 <36	17.7
36 <40	26.7
40 and over	30.1
All cases	126.6

Note:
Estimates based on a 5 per cent. sample of awards, and therefore subject to sampling error

Ofgem

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will provide a detailed breakdown of the expenditure by Ofgem in 2000–01 on the merger of Offer and Ofgas; and how much of this relates to *(a)* redundancy, *(b)* refurbishment costs and *(c)* dilapidation. [149135]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Ofgem's 2000–01 final costs relating to the merger of Offer and Ofgas will not be available until after the end of the financial year. However, merger costs in 2000–01 are now expected to be around £14 million rather than the initial estimate of £20.2 million.

Corus

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations Corus made to him on the strength of sterling against European currencies in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000. [149359]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury meets a wide range of companies every year to discuss matters of mutual interest. Many of these discussions are conducted in confidence. It would not be practical to identify all representations without incurring disproportionate cost, breaching confidence or both.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many written parliamentary questions about the Millennium Dome have been refused answer on the ground of commercial confidentiality since 1 May 1997. [147437]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* Of the 1,206 questions that have been answered on the Millennium Experience since May 1997, 77 questions have been answered by this Department on which information requested has been declined on the grounds of commercial confidentiality. This represents 6.38 per cent. of all questions answered.

In addition, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions has answered 19 questions on the ground of commercial confidentiality in relation to the competition for the future use of the Millennium Dome.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will place in the Library copies of the Sponsorship Agreement for each sponsor of the Millennium Dome. [147784]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* The details of individual contracts between the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) and sponsors are commercially confidential. An outline of NMEC's approach to contractual arrangements with sponsors was placed in the Libraries of the House on 17 December 1998.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the proportion of total Exchequer spending represented by his Department in *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99, *(d)* 1999–2000, *(e)* 2000–01 and *(f)* in each of the years covered by the Comprehensive Spending Review. [148183]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 1 February 2001]:* My Department's spending as a proportion of Government's Total Managed Expenditure, for the years 1996–97 to 2000–04 is set out in the table.

DCMS spending as a proportion of total managed government spending[1]

Year	DCMS (£ million)	Total TME (£ million)	Percentage
1996–97	1,483	316,000	0.47
1997–98	1,996	322,800	0.62
1998–99	2,708	331,000	0.82
1999–2000	2,902	340,700	0.85
2000–01[2]	3,321	371,600	0.89
2001–02[3]	3,120	392,900	0.79
2002–03[3]	3,269	415,400	0.79
2003–04[3]	3,339	439,600	0.76

[1] Excludes BBC revenue grants; includes Lottery expenditure
[2] Estimate
[3] Plans

Over the period until 2003–04, DCMS funding will have increased by 125 per cent. in cash terms and 89 per cent. in real terms.

Library and Leisure Services

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the levels of spending were on *(a)* library services and *(b)* leisure services per head of population in (i) Staffordshire and (ii) each other county of England (1) in the current year and (2) in each of the last three years, distinguishing in each case the element represented by Standard Spending Assessment. [148295]

Mr. Alan Howarth: It is not possible to list spending on leisure services in the private and voluntary sectors. However, local authorities do report their own expenditure on leisure services and these data are shown for Staffordshire and every other county[1] in England on a per head basis in the table. Local authorities report their own expenditure on library services and this is also shown for Staffordshire and other counties[1] in England on a per head basis. A definition for this expenditure data follows.

The SSA system does not make a separate provision for library or leisure services; rather these are two of the many services funded through the Environmental, Protective and Cultural Services SSA Block. Consequently, I am unable to provide the information requested.

Definition of Expenditure Data

Expenditure on services is defined as net current expenditure on employees and running expenses less sales, fees, charges, internal recharges, other non-grant income (such as receipts from other authorities). It is gross of expenditure funded by specific and special grants.

[1] The figure for each county includes all local authorities within that area.

	1997–98					1998–99				
County	Population mid-1997	Library x £1,000	£ per head	Leisure x £1,000	£ per head	Population mid-1998	Library x £1,000	£ per head	Leisure x £1,000	£ per head
Avon	991,639	9,728	9.81	9,271	9.35	999,295	9,795	9.80	13,420	13.43
Bedfordshire	552,295	6,334	11.47	10,156	18.39	556,628	6,522	11.72	10,767	19.34
Berkshire	797,488	10,004	12.54	11,031	13.83	800,180	9,576	11.97	16,216	20.27
Buckinghamshire	677,527	7,347	10.84	5,526	8.16	681,873	7,983	11.71	8,538	12.52
Cambridgeshire	712,240	7,036	9.88	7,795	10.94	719,767	7,709	10.71	10,159	14.11
Cheshire	982,102	10,124	10.31	13,834	14.09	984,280	10,988	11.16	18,560	18.86

	1997–98					1998–99				
County	*Population mid-1997*	*Library x £1,000*	*£ per head*	*Leisure x £1,000*	*£ per head*	*Population mid-1998*	*Library x £1,000*	*£ per head*	*Leisure x £1,000*	*£ per head*
Cleveland	555,842	7,772	13.98	12,285	22.10	556,344	7,811	14.04	13,687	24.60
Cornwall	485,621	4,774	9.83	4,232	8.71	488,373	5,418	11.09	7,650	15.66
Cumbria	492,113	5,129	10.42	7,447	15.13	492,884	5,278	10.71	11,195	22.71
Derbyshire	965,460	9,778	10.13	10,886	11.28	970,087	10,631	10.96	14,451	14.90
Devon	1,063,900	9,526	8.95	11,882	11.17	1,068,388	9,737	9.11	20,046	18.76
Dorset	687,520	8,374	12.18	5,295	7.70	691,215	8,584	12.42	11,577	16.75
Durham	608,349	6,043	9.93	12,166	20.00	607,770	6,670	10.97	14,349	23.61
East Sussex	740,733	8,141	10.99	9,068	12.24	747,183	8,045	10.77	16,998	22.75
Essex	1,595,278	19,062	11.95	18,700	11.72	1,605,622	20,337	12.67	25,702	16.01
Gloucestershire	559,287	5,689	10.17	5,537	9.90	557,257	6,114	10.97	10,854	19.48
Hampshire	1,636,640	19,042	11.63	22,424	13.70	1,643,958	19,171	11.66	33,157	20.17
Hereford and Worcester	701,726	5,861	8.35	8,084	11.52	706,120	5,835	8.26	11,377	16.11
Hertfordshire	1,024,764	13,404	13.08	11,913	11.63	1,033,616	12,775	12.36	16,686	16.14
Humberside	884,714	10,702	12.10	18,517	20.93	883,117	11,142	12.62	24,108	27.30
Isle of Wight	125,896	1,341	10.65	1,649	13.10	126,989	1,359	10.70	3,926	30.92
Kent	1,565,960	15,717	10.04	16,430	10.49	1,574,561	15,516	9.85	29,314	18.62
Lancashire	1,425,127	15,986	11.22	20,314	14.25	1,426,839	17,249	12.09	29,000	20.32
Leicestershire	929,027	7,655	8.24	14,974	16.12	928,716	9,798	10.55	16,216	17.46
Lincolnshire	619,388	6,065	9.79	6,856	11.07	623,130	6,222	9.99	13,069	20.97
Norfolk	783,042	7,636	9.75	8,607	10.99	790,275	7,822	9.90	13,191	16.69
Northamptonshire	610,302	6,230	10.21	6,392	10.47	615,796	6,133	9.96	9,109	14.79
Northumberland	308,767	2,766	8.96	4,551	14.74	309,642	2,694	8.70	6,846	22.11
North Yorkshire	737,632	6,715	9.10	9,846	13.35	742,404	7,022	9.46	12,178	16.40
Nottinghamshire	1,032,169	11,285	10.93	16,787	16.26	1,031,587	11,330	10.98	22,149	21.47
Oxfordshire	610,805	5,298	8.67	6,197	10.15	616,707	5,835	9.46	9,252	15.00
Shropshire	424,565	3,790	8.93	5,056	11.91	430,212	3,840	8.93	6,607	15.36
Somerset	486,682	4,208	8.65	3,874	7.96	489,280	4,588	9.38	6,349	12.98
Staffordshire	1,060,262	10,581	9.98	13,525	12.76	1,061,280	10,961	10.33	19,514	18.39
Suffolk	666,585	6,234	9.35	7,236	10.86	671,095	6,127	9.13	11,704	17.44
Surrey	1,057,137	10,463	9.90	6,422	6.07	1,060,541	10,431	9.84	9,292	8.76
Warwickshire	503,589	5,187	10.30	5,999	11.91	506,713	5,833	11.51	8,075	15.94
West Sussex	746,602	7,529	10.08	10,747	14.39	751,845	7,607	10.12	14,800	19.68
Wiltshire	599,365	5,761	9.61	11,058	18.45	605,511	6,180	10.21	15,293	25.26
Greater London Council	7,116,936	138,853	19.51	96,405	13.55	7,182,062	139,285	19.39	104,290	14.52
Greater Manchester	2,571,849	33,237	12.92	36,555	14.21	2,577,434	35,171	13.65	42,599	16.53
Merseyside	1,413,441	21,232	15.02	21,642	15.31	1,409,371	21,705	15.40	28,121	19.95
South Yorkshire	1,304,539	15,055	11.54	38,622	29.61	1,304,136	15,326	11.75	43,697	33.51
Tyne and Wear	1,121,406	16,650	14.85	26,321	23.47	1,115,844	16,986	15.22	30,356	27.20
West Midlands	2,630,642	35,272	13.41	33,476	12.73	2,628,196	36,873	14.03	39,783	15.14
West Yorkshire	2,110,095	22,412	10.62	28,609	13.56	2,113,252	22,351	10.58	37,184	17.60
No County Area	5,235	0	0.00	0	0.00	5,210	0	0.00	1,042	200.00
Scilly Isles	1,959	17	8.68	0	0.00	1,997	23	11.52	0	0.00

	1999–2000					2000–01				
County	*Population mid-1999*	*Library x £1,000*	*£ per head*	*Leisure x £1,000*	*£ per head*	*Population mid-2000*	*Library x £1,000*	*£ per head*	*Leisure x £1,000*	*£ per head*
Avon	1,008,114	10,619	10.53	10,671	10.59	1,008,114	11,089	11.00	14,073	13.96
Bedfordshire	562,214	7,138	12.70	11,110	19.76	562,214	7,434	13.22	12,096	21.51
Berkshire	800,567	11,056	13.81	13,935	17.41	800,567	11,374	14.21	14,499	18.11
Buckinghamshire	689,433	8,214	11.91	10,021	14.54	689,433	8,789	12.75	10,314	14.96
Cambridgeshire	724,897	8,186	11.29	13,236	18.26	724,897	7,797	10.76	11,882	16.39
Cheshire	982,527	9,961	10.14	14,195	14.45	982,527	12,392	12.61	16,835	17.13
Cleveland	555,944	7,979	14.35	12,784	23.00	555,944	8,756	15.75	14,543	26.16
Cornwall	492,569	5,554	11.28	8,598	17.46	492,569	5,532	11.23	7,917	16.07
Cumbria	491,814	5,220	10.61	12,626	25.67	491,814	5,111	10.39	14,737	29.96
Derbyshire	974,084	10,949	11.24	13,576	13.94	974,084	11,836	12.15	16,207	16.64
Devon	1,075,011	10,263	9.55	23,325	21.70	1,075,011	10,357	9.63	22,962	21.36
Dorset	692,543	8,915	12.87	11,752	16.97	692,543	9,489	13.70	10,077	14.55
Durham	606,744	6,696	11.04	14,858	24.49	606,744	7,125	11.74	14,538	23.96
East Sussex	754,339	8,394	11.13	18,072	23.96	754,339	8,732	11.58	16,575	21.97
Essex	1,617,660	21,135	13.07	27,507	17.00	1,617,660	21,584	13.34	28,004	17.31
Gloucestershire	561,941	6,181	11.00	9,923	17.66	561,941	6,397	11.38	10,437	18.57
Hampshire	1,652,818	19,569	11.84	38,929	23.55	1,652,818	20,295	12.28	39,775	24.06
Hereford and Worcester	708,194	6,176	8.72	13,217	18.66	708,194	6,400	9.04	12,762	18.02
Hertfordshire	1,043,028	13,368	12.82	14,003	13.43	1,043,028	13,876	13.30	17,547	16.82
Humberside	881,586	11,211	12.72	26,208	29.73	881,586	12,169	13.80	28,048	31.82
Isle of Wight	128,231	1,482	11.56	4,387	34.21	128,231	1,462	11.40	3,695	28.82
Kent	1,587,243	19,515	12.29	32,986	20.78	1,587,243	18,805	11.85	30,125	18.98
Lancashire	1,425,533	17,851	12.52	31,407	22.03	1,425,533	18,918	13.27	28,203	19.78
Leicestershire	934,687	9,904	10.60	17,885	19.13	934,687	11,287	12.08	19,599	20.97
Lincolnshire	628,612	6,630	10.55	14,020	22.30	628,612	6,273	9.98	13,394	21.31
Norfolk	796,460	8,293	10.41	12,496	15.69	796,460	9,346	11.73	13,556	17.02

	1999–2000					2000–01[1]				
County	Population mid-1999	Library x £1,000	£ per head	Leisure x £1,000	£ per head	Population mid-2000	Library x £1,000	£ per head	Leisure x £1,000	£ per head
Northamptonshire	621,162	6,369	10.25	11,752	18.92	621,162	6,235	10.04	9,387	15.11
Northumberland	310,168	2,879	9.28	7,189	23.18	310,168	3,016	9.72	7,089	22.86
North Yorkshire	747,613	7,159	9.58	13,386	17.90	747,613	7,319	9.79	13,821	18.49
Nottinghamshire	1,032,685	11,561	11.20	23,500	22.76	1,032,685	13,653	13.22	24,272	23.50
Oxfordshire	626,233	5,756	9.19	9,606	15.34	626,233	6,114	9.76	11,533	18.42
Shropshire	432,383	3,975	9.19	7,060	16.33	432,383	4,117	9.52	8,083	18.69
Somerset	493,079	4,379	8.88	8,668	17.58	493,079	4,863	9.86	7,645	15.50
Staffordshire	1,060,606	10,510	9.91	19,849	18.71	1,060,606	11,388	10.74	19,917	18.78
Suffolk	674,639	6,391	9.47	12,520	18.56	674,639	6,721	9.96	11,520	17.08
Surrey	1,078,067	11,250	10.44	12,964	12.03	1,078,067	11,475	10.64	13,030	12.09
Warwickshire	507,909	6,441	12.68	8,323	16.39	507,909	7,334	14.44	9,465	18.64
West Sussex	760,652	7,663	10.07	16,520	21.72	760,652	7,762	10.20	16,204	21.30
Wiltshire	610,326	6,655	10.90	18,854	30.89	610,326	7,068	11.58	15,593	25.55
Greater London Council	7,279,038	141,872	19.49	128,803	17.70	7,279,038	145,854	20.04	120,814	16.60
Greater Manchester	2,577,040	35,960	13.95	45,416	17.62	2,577,040	38,395	14.90	46,809	18.16
Merseyside	1,403,625	21,669	15.44	30,386	21.65	1,403,625	22,779	16.23	30,826	21.96
South Yorkshire	1,302,410	15,714	12.07	41,266	31.68	1,302,410	16,122	12.38	39,093	30.02
Tyne and Wear	1,108,458	17,212	15.53	31,000	27.97	1,108,458	18,205	16.42	35,253	31.80
West Midlands	2,626,505	36,948	14.07	43,144	16.43	2,626,505	38,425	14.63	47,930	18.25
West Yorkshire	2,115,380	22,219	10.50	42,860	20.26	2,115,380	22,854	10.80	43,124	20.39
No County Area	6,007	0	0.00	1,378	229.40	6,007	0	0.00	3,486	580.32
Scilly Isles	2,086	31	14.86	66	31.64	2,086	33	15.82	77	36.91

[1] Population figures as at mid-1999

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Education Funding

14. **Mrs. Curtis-Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on education funding for Sefton metropolitan council since 1997. [147919]

Ms Estelle Morris: For Sefton, SSA has increased from over £106 million in 1997–98 to £132 million in 2001–02. During this period, over £27 million has been allocated to schools capital. In 2001–02 over £12 million has been allocated for other grants, including the Standards Fund and School Standards Grant. Under this Government, funding nationally per pupil has already increased by over £300 in real terms, and it will increase by a further £150 per pupil for 2001–02.

22. **Miss Kirkbride:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent meetings he has had with local education authorities to discuss the level of school funding. [147929]

Ms Estelle Morris: My ministerial colleagues and I regularly talk to representatives of LEAs about the level of school funding. In 2001–02, real terms funding per pupil will rise in England by £150, following an increase of £300 since 1997. This contrasts with a cut of £60 per pupil between 1994–97 in real terms.

26. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent representations he has received *(a)* from and *(b)* on behalf of Worcestershire head teachers about the funding of education in the county; and if he will make a statement. [147933]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend has received a number of representations about the funding of education in Worcestershire from and on behalf of head teachers in the county. On top of the significant increases that have already been announced for 2001–02, we have made an extra £52 million available to provide support to help some local education authorities manage funding changes in 2001–02. Worcestershire will receive £1.35 million as its share of this additional funding, which will help the authority deal with known pressures in advance of the longer term revision of local authority finance.

Early Years Education

15. **Valerie Davey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made in achieving greater integration between child care and early years education. [147920]

Ms Hodge: Bringing together child care and early years education is a vital principle underpinning our approach to this area. It makes sense both for children and for the modern family. We are developing a range of initiatives to support this principle—Sure Start, Early Excellence Centres and the Neighbourhood Reserves Initiatives which all aim to join-up early years education and child care. We will be extending these programmes and setting clear targets for EYDCPs to create new additional integrated placed for young children.

16. **Mr. Casale:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on progress made towards providing nursery education for all three and four-year-olds. [147921]

27. **Ms Drown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made towards providing universal free nursery education for all three and four-year-olds. [147934]

Ms Hodge: All four-year-olds have been able to access a free early education place since 1998. By 2004 we will provide a free place for every three-year-old. Recently, we announced the funding for 2001–02, which will enable us to provide 80,000 more free nursery places for three-year-olds as part of the programme of expansion. We are doubling the amount spent on nursery education from £1 billion to £2 billion by 2004.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of children in England receive education at *(a)* three and *(b)* four years old. [147930]

Ms Hodge: Almost 100 per cent. of four-year-olds and 85 per cent. of three-year-olds receive some amount of nursery education each week. All four-year-olds have been able to access a free early education place since 1998. By 2004 we will provide a free place for every three-year-old.

State Schools (Repairs)

17. **Dr. George Turner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to address the backlog of building improvements and replacement required by state schools. [147922]

Jacqui Smith: Investment in school buildings over the next three years will total £7.8 billion. This is in addition to over £2 billion being invested in school buildings this year. By 2003–04, this will rise to £3.2 billion a year. This contrasts with the £683 million spent in 1996–97. It means that 650 schools will be completely rebuilt or refurbished; over 7,000 schools will have major repairs; every school will have a share of £1 billion for capital improvements.

Bett Report

18. **Mr. Berry:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has had with the Higher Education Funding Council for England about the implementation of the Bett report on pay in the higher education sector. [147923]

Mr. Wicks: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave today to my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd), *Official Report* columns 1065–66.

Act of Worship

19. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the extent to which collective acts of worship are taking place in school. [147924]

Jacqui Smith: Ofsted inspections underpin our commitment that all schools are expected to make provision for a daily act of collective worship. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools' annual report for 1998–99, published in February 2000, revealed that 94 per cent. of primary schools provide a daily act of collective worship. The report says that in most schools teachers work hard to make collective worship a meaningful experience which provides pupils with a chance to reflect on important issues and builds a sense of community.

Learning Support/Pupil Referral Units

20. **Mr. Coaker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has had with teacher representatives about the establishment of learning support units and pupil referral units. [147925]

Jacqui Smith: We discuss such issues regularly as we meet representatives of the teacher associations about discipline and other issues. We are providing £174 million from April to tackle truancy, improve discipline and educate excluded pupils. Schools have welcomed the increased provision and the fact that there are 1,000 more places in PRUs for excluded pupils than in 1997, as well as plans for over 1,000 in-school units by 2002.

However, it is for local education authorities and the senior management teams of schools between them to decide where best to establish Learning Support Units to meet identified needs. Before opening or closing a Pupil Referral Unit, local education authorities should consult locally, including other Pupil Referral Units and their management committees, which may include headteachers.

School Places (Southwark)

21. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of *(a)* nursery school places for four year-olds, *(b)* primary school places for five year-olds and *(c)* secondary school places for 11 year-olds available in the London borough of Southwark in the year 2001–02, and the number of children of each age group during the same year. [147928]

Mrs. Hodge: My Department does not collect detailed information on the provision of nursery or school places by local education authorities in England. It is for each local education authority to plan and keep under review the supply of school places so as to ensure there is sufficient provision to meet demand. The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 requires every local education authority to prepare a School Organisation Plan (SOP). The SOP sets out how the authority proposes to deal with surplus or deficits of school provision over a five-year period and sets out the context for proposals for changes in school organisation. Where LEAs can demonstrate insufficient school places to meet future demand they may apply to the Department for capital funding to provide additional places for statutory aged children. The spring 2000 nursery education grant headcount showed in Southwark there were 2,866 four-year-old pupils. The annual school census for January 2000 showed that there were 3,181 pupils aged five in maintained primary schools and 2,040 11 year olds in maintained secondary schools.

New Deal (Liverpool)

24. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the impact of the New Deal in Liverpool. [147931]

Ms Jowell: At the end of November 2000, 12,680 young people in Liverpool had started the New Deal programme. In Liverpool, the programme has helped 5,350 young people move from benefit into work, through the commitment of over 1,400 employers. We know that many more young people will have left the New Deal for jobs without telling the Employment Service: they are not included in these figures.

In Liverpool the falls in unemployment among the New Deal for Young People client group have also been substantially faster than for other groups. In Liverpool, since April 1998, claimant unemployment among those aged 18–24, unemployed for six months or more, has fallen by 70 per cent. from 3,232 to 952. This compares

with a fall of 25 per cent. in total unemployment, 33 per cent. in total youth (18–24) unemployment, and 38 per cent. in the total number unemployed for six months or more.

Other New Deals are also showing encouraging results. For example, 6,944 people had entered New Deal 25+ at November 2000, with 1,243 having found employment. To the end of October, 2,718 people had participated in New Deal for Lone Parents with 853 moving into employment.

Teacher Vacancies and Recruitment

25. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of teacher shortages in Buckinghamshire schools. [147932]

Ms Estelle Morris: The latest figures available show that there were 55 vacancies in maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special schools in Buckinghamshire in January 2000. My Department has received no reports from Buckinghamshire local education authority that would call into question the ability of any school in the county to offer a full timetable to date.

31. **Mr. Brazier:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent meetings he has had with parents of schoolchildren to discuss the number of vacancies in the teaching profession. [147938]

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent meetings he has had with teachers to discuss teacher recruitment. [147926]

Ms Estelle Morris: I refer the hon. Members to the reply that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave earlier today to the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing), *Official Report* columns 1054–55.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the number of vacancies in the teaching profession at the latest date for which figures are available. [147927]

Ms Estelle Morris: The latest comprehensive figures published by my Department, based on a census of English local authorities taken in January 2000, showed 1,420 vacancies for full-time posts in maintained nursery and primary schools, 1,250 vacancies for full-time posts in secondary schools and 240 vacancies for full-time posts in special schools. The results from two sample surveys of schools in England, undertaken by my Department in the first week of this term, published on 2 February, estimate that there were between 600 and 1,100 vacancies for full-time posts in nursery and primary schools and between 1,300 and 1,600 vacancies for full-time posts in secondary schools.

New Deal for Disabled People

28. **Laura Moffatt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made in developing a national New Deal for Disabled People. [147935]

32. **Ms Ryan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made in developing a national New Deal for Disabled People. [147939]

Ms Hodge: The New Deal for Disabled People is being extended nationally. Building on the lessons of the pilot phase, the extension will see the creation of a network of job brokers who will work closely with both employers and clients to match vacancies against the skills and potential of individuals. An invitation to tender was issued on 27 November and the evaluation of bids from organisations wishing to become job brokers is due to commence shortly. Announcement of successful bidders is planned for early April with the service due to get under way from July 2001.

Class Sizes (Secondary Schools)

29. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average class size is for secondary schools in England. [147936]

Ms Estelle Morris: The size of the average secondary class in January 1997 was 21.7. The most recent available figure, for January 2000, was 22—around five fewer pupils on average than for primaries. The slight rise is nothing new. The figure was below 20 in 1989, and rose consistently throughout the 90s. The rate of growth has in fact slowed since 1997 as a result of additional Government investment.

We are delivering our infant class size pledge, including in Lancashire. In the authority in September 2000, just 16 per cent. of pupils were in infant classes of 31 or over. The figure in January 1997 was over 42 per cent.

Coalfield Communities (Economic Activity)

30. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on initiatives he has taken to improve economic activity rates in former coalfield communities. [147937]

Ms Jowell: We now have action teams for jobs in many of our coalfield areas suffering with the lowest employment rates; Easington Wansbeck, Sunderland, Tyneside, Rotherham and Barnsley and Doncaster are all covered by action teams and there are some early success stories—for example, of the 138 contacts made in Easington, 60 of these have resulted in jobs. In Doncaster, the employment zone offers tailored support to help former mine workers back into work. The New Deal covers all areas of the country including former coalfield areas. By the end of November, it had helped over 269,000 young people off benefit and into work. The new Learning and Skills Council will target support for those people who have been victims of industrial and economic change, and provide the skills and training that people need to find sustainable employment. Matters relating to Wales should be addressed to the Welsh Assembly.

GCSE Courses

33. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to increase the modularisation of GCSE courses. [147940]

Mr. Wicks: We have no plans to increase the modularisation of GCSE courses.

Child Care (Labour Market)

34. **Caroline Flint:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what impact the expansion in child care and early years services has had on the labour market. [147941]

Ms Hodge: Since 1997 there has been an unprecedented expansion of child care places. By September 2000 more than 546,000 children had been helped through the creation of new child care places. Even after regard has been given to places closing when childminders or playgroup workers move on, this still represents new places for 343,000 children.

It has also led to a large expansion in the number of people working in child care and related occupations in the UK—122,000 since autumn 1997. This is the second fastest growing occupational groups in the UK Labour market, showing how the national child care strategy is producing opportunities for work as well as opportunities for children.

Employment Zones

35. **Ms Rosie Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the establishment of employment zones. [147942]

Ms Jowell: The 15 employment zones have got off to a very encouraging start and the numbers of people getting and keeping work are exceeding expectations. Individual needs are being met through personal job accounts and strong local leadership. We will in due course evaluate and spread the good practice which emerges.

Disability Rights Commission

Mr. Hopkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment has been made of the performance of the Disability Rights Commission. [147915]

Ms Hodge: I have regular meetings with the chairman and chief executive of the Disability Rights Commission to review performance. The commission has got off to an excellent start. It is receiving over 1,000 calls a week on its helpline. The Government have asked it to tackle a range of policy issues and it is making good progress in raising public awareness of both the DRC itself and disability issues.

British Academy

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for the provision of grant-in-aid to the British Academy. [149832]

Mr. Wicks: Subject to Parliament's approval of the Main Supply Estimates, we intend to allocate to the British Academy a maximum of £36,441,000 for the financial year 2001–02. The level of grant for 2001–02 reflects the outcome of the Government's Spending Review. It takes into account the arrangements for the payment of grant through the academy of the arts and Humanities Research Board for postgraduate awards and for those in certain professional and vocational subjects. The grant for 2001–02 fully takes into account the uprating needed to increase maintenance grants for doctoral students. The Arts and Humanities Research Board should increase these grants to a minimum of £7,500 in 2001–02, in line with the Secretary of State's commitment last summer that arts and humanities stipends would be raised in line with those for science, with a minimum level of £9,000 by 2003–04. The grant also includes the additional £750,000 for the British School at Rome.

Rural Schools

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the Government's support for rural schools. [148391]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Government support rural schools. The White Paper "Our Countryside: The Future—A Fair Deal for Rural England", published in November last year, reinforced our commitment to continue a presumption against the closure of rural schools, invest to improve facilities, and connect all rural schools to the internet by 2002. As a result of our policies, only two rural schools have been approved for closure since August 1999, against a historical average of 30 such closures a year. Many rural schools are also small schools and benefit from the administrative support fund for small schools and the small schools support fund. From April 2001, these standards fund grants will be merged into a single small schools fund worth £80 million.

Excellence in Cities

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the Excellence in Cities programme. [148534]

Ms Estelle Morris: Excellence in Cities (EiC) addresses the educational problems of our major cities. It provides new opportunities for gifted and talented children; learning mentors to tackle barriers to learning; learning support units to take disruptive pupils out of the classroom; city learning centres; small education action zones; and more beacon and specialist schools.

The programme has been running just over a year in the first 25 local education authorities. By September this year, there will be 58 authorities in the programme covering close to a third of all secondary pupils aged 11 to 16. We will also be introducing excellence clusters in seven areas from September which will pilot the EiC approach in areas of deprivation beyond the big cities—such as rural areas and coastal towns.

Excellence in Cities is already making a real difference. Last year, in the first EiC areas, the percentage of pupils getting five good GSCEs or their equivalent increased by nearly twice as much as it did in other areas. The biggest increases were in the most deprived schools where over half the pupils are entitled to free school meals. In those same areas the numbers of pupils leaving schools with no qualifications fell twice as fast as elsewhere.

Finally, Excellence in Cities has provided dramatic examples of reductions in exclusions. The whole programme has been widely welcomed by schools and teachers.

All this underpins our commitment to a programme which, when fully implemented, will account for over £300 million a year, and will change both the perception and reality of our city schools. A detailed account of the first year of the EiC programme is contained in our publication "Excellence in Cities Report: March 1999 to September 2000" (a copy of which is in the House of Commons Library).

SOCIAL SECURITY

Burial Charges

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many applications for assistance with burial charges have been made to the Social Fund in each of the last five years, and how many have been granted *(a)* in full and *(b)* in part; and if he will make a statement. [148321]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

	1999–2000	*1998–99*	*1997–98*	*1996–97*
Applications[1]	69,730	72,967	74,275	88,169
Full awards[2]	2,665	3,027	3,386	2,805
Partial awards[3]	39,207	40,838	41,387	51,688

[1] The applications column shows all new applications received in the year 1 April to 31 March, including applications subsequently withdrawn.

[2] Awards are those processed in the year 1 April to 31 March. These will include applications received at the end of the previous year but not processed until the year indicated, and will exclude applications received at the end of that year but not processed until the following year. This column includes payments subsequently returned and excludes awards made or altered following a successful appeal.

[3] 1995–96 data are not sufficiently reliable to provide a breakdown between full and partial awards.

Source:
Social Fund Policy, Budget and Management Information System

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the effect on pensioners' incomes of reducing the winter fuel allowance by £50. [148483]

Mr. Rooker: Our reform of the pensions system demonstrates our commitment to ensuring that all pensioners share in the rising prosperity of the country, and to combating pensioner poverty. This year the Winter Fuel Payment is £200. This is double the amount paid last winter, 1999–2000, to qualifying households. The Winter Fuel Payment will continue to play an important role in the fight against fuel poverty and will mean that older people should not have to worry about keeping their homes warm over the winter months. The Winter Fuel Payment, which the hon. Member opposes, has proved to be extremely popular. We shall announce our proposals for this winter in due course in the usual way.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many claims had been made by people living in the Southport constituency for the winter fuel allowance by 26 January; [148591]

(2) how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women living in the Southport constituency are entitled to receive winter fuel allowance. [148592]

Mr. Rooker: Information regarding how many claims were made by 26 January is not available in constituency format and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The latest information we have is that around 22,500 people in the Southport constituency have already received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter. Claims are still being received and processed therefore payments continue to be made. This information is not available for men and women separately.

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if all payments for the winter fuel allowance have been paid; and if he will make a statement. [149479]

Mr. Rooker: Around 11 million Winter Fuel Payments have been made in respect of this winter. As promised, all automatic payments, where clear entitlement was established, were made before Christmas. The same applies to payments in respect of successful claims determined by 9 November 2000. Claims continue to be received and processed, therefore payments continue to be made. In the minority of cases where a person's circumstances changed between the qualifying week and the payment week, cases are dealt with clerically.

Pensions (Expatriates)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security under what circumstances he will review the regulations surrounding frozen pensions for British citizens who have moved outside the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [149629]

Mr. Rooker: UK pensions are paid to anyone who satisfies the qualifying conditions, not just UK nationals. Annual upratings have never been generally paid abroad. The exception is those countries with which we have reciprocal arrangements. We have no plans to change this.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the *(a)* advantages and *(b)* disadvantages of abolishing the regulations associated with freezing pensions for British citizens who have moved outside the United Kingdom. [149628]

Mr. Rooker: To unfreeze fully pensions paid abroad would cost an estimated £300 million a year. This would mean that we would have less to spend on pensioners living in the United Kingdom. Our priority is to focus the resources available on pensioners in the UK, especially those who are in greatest need. There are no plans to unfreeze pensions in countries where upratings are not payable.

Retirement Benefits

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in Morecambe benefit from *(a)* the winter fuel allowance, *(b)* free television licences and (c) the Minimum Income Guarantee. [148969]

Mr. Rooker: For information on Winter Fuel Payments and free television licences, I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer I gave the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 31 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 238W.

For information on recipients of the Minimum Income Guarantee, I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer I gave on 5 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 364W.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what public expenditure on pensions including Winter Fuel Payments and Free Television Licences was at the end of the *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 1999–2000 financial years; [148975]

(2) how much has been spent on the provision of State Pensions, including Winter Fuel Payments and Free Television Licences from 1997 to date. [149083]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

£ million cash terms

	1996–97	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Retirement Pension	31,995	37,726	38,745
Non-contributory Retirement Pension	30	28	27
Winter Fuel Payments	0	902	1,701
Income Support/Minimum Income Guarantee	3,815	3,812	4,082
Social Fund	41	26	29
Christmas Bonus	111	106	107
Non-contributory Christmas Bonus	15	16	17
Concessionary TV licences	0	0	346
Total	40,808	47,774	50,248

Notes:

1. Consistent with Social Security benefit expenditure totals published in the pre-Budget report, November 2000, and in Departmental Reports for earlier years.
2. Winter Fuel Payments were introduced in the winter of 1997–98.
3. The Free Television Licence scheme began in November 2000, and is administered by TV Licensing for the BBC.
4. Any household where a person is aged 75 or over is entitled to a free TV Licence.
5. State Pension Age is currently age 60 for women and age 65 for men.
6. Men and women aged 60 and over are entitled to Winter Fuel Payments. The amount is £200 per household.
7. The figures provided relate to Income Support/MIG/Social Fund for men and women aged 60 or over.
8. The figures quoted for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit are assuming a qualifying condition based on age, ie 60 for women and age 65 for men.
9. Christmas Bonus is paid mainly to pensioners but includes other categories of claimants. It is paid with pensions and Income Support to people over pension age.

Fraud (Morecambe and Lunesdale)

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he has taken to reduce *(a)* benefit fraud and *(b)* housing benefit fraud in Morecambe and Lunesdale. [148965]

Mr. Rooker: After years of neglect, we are getting to grips with Social Security fraud. We are implementing a strategy to tighten up the system and make sure that from the very first claim, the right benefits are going to the right people at the right time. We have set ourselves firm targets to reduce the losses from fraud and error in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance by 25 per cent. by March 2004, and 50 per cent. by March 2006.

We have saved more than £150 million over two years by cross-checking departmental records with information from other Government Departments. More than 22,000 people were sanctioned or prosecuted in 1999–2000, an increase of nearly 60 per cent. on the previous year. We published figures last November which showed that losses from fraud and error in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance had fallen for the first time, a saving of around £60 million.

We continue to invest to help local authorities root out Housing Benefit fraud. We have provided over £100 million since 1998 so that local authorities can implement the verification framework which protects the gateway to benefit by setting out minimum standards for collecting evidence before claims are paid. Over 350 councils are now using the Royal Mail scheme to stop benefit cheques being redirected from the address they have been claimed for.

Our £2 million programme to make better use of IT has given 404 local authorities on-line access to essential benefit information held on departmental systems, reducing the scope for fraud and error. We are now building on this through the integrated inquiry service, which will give authorities access to further information to help combat fraud, including the Department's database of National Insurance numbers. Our new anti-fraud incentive scheme is being phased in from April and will make the gateway to Housing Benefit more secure, putting the focus on prevention as well as detection. The new scheme sets out the anti-fraud activities we expect local authorities to undertake, and it introduces new financial rewards for authorities that act to prevent fraud from happening in the first place.

These are just some of the measures that have already started to make a significant reduction in fraud and error in areas such as Morecambe and Lunesdale. These will be further strengthened by the new measures proposed in the Social Security Fraud Bill currently before Parliament.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people *(a)* are eligible to claim and *(b)* claim the Minimum Income Guarantee in each parliamentary constituency in Scotland. [149591]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Income Support (MIG) pensioner cases[1] by Scottish parliamentary constituency, as at August 2000

Thousand

Parliamentary constituency	*Number of cases*
Aberdeen Central	2.2
Aberdeen North	1.7
Aberdeen South	1.8
Airdrie and Shotts	2.4
Angus	2.5
Argyll and Bute	2.4
Ayr	2.4
Banff and Buchan	2.3
Caithness Sunderland and Easter Ross	1.6
Carrick Cumnock and Doon Valley	2.8
Central Fife	2.1
Clydebank and Milngavie	2.4
Clydesbank	2.9

Income Support (MIG) pensioner cases[1] by Scottish parliamentary constituency, as at August 2000

Thousand

Parliamentary constituency	*Number of cases*
Coatbridge and Chryston	3.0
Cumbernauld and Kilsyth	1.9
Cunninghame North	2.5
Cunninghame South	2.0
Dumbarton	2.6
Dumfries	2.3
Dundee East	3.4
Dundee West	2.9
Dunfermline East	1.9
Dunfermline West	1.3
East Kilbride	1.8
East Lothian	2.0
Eastwood	1.5
Edinburgh Central	2.0
Edinburgh East and Musselburgh	2.7
Edinburgh North and Leigh	2.1
Edinburgh Pentlands	1.5
Edinburgh South	2.3
Edinburgh West	1.4
Falkirk East	2.3
Falkirk West	2.6
Galloway and Upper Nithsdale	2.4
Glasgow Anniesland	3.7
Glasgow Baillieston	3.2
Glasgow Cathcart	2.5
Glasgow Govan	3.0
Glasgow Kelvin	2.9
Glasgow Maryhill	4.4
Glasgow Pollok	3.4
Glasgow Rutherglen	3.0
Glasgow Shettleston	4.7
Glasgow Springburn	4.4
Gordon	1.2
Greenock and Inverclyde	2.6
Hamilton North and Bellshill	2.3
Hamilton South	2.4
Inverness East Nairn and Lochaber	2.1
Kilmarnock and Loudoun	3.2
Kirkcaldy	2.0
Linlithgow	2.0
Livingston	2.2
Midlothian	1.5
Moray	2.0
Motherwell and Wishaw	3.0
North East Fife	1.5
North Tayside	2.0
Ochil	1.6
Orkney and Shetland	1.0
Paisley North	2.7
Paisley South	2.7
Perth	2.1
Ross Skye and Inverness West	2.4
Roxburgh and Berwickshire	1.8
Stirling	1.8
Strathkelvin and Bearsden	2.0
Tweeddale Ettrick and Lauderdale	1.5
West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine	1.3
West Renfrewshire	1.9
Western Isles	1.7

[1] MIG Pensioners are defined where the claimant and/or partner are aged 60 or over.

Notes:

1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.

2. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred and are expressed in thousands.

3. Cases are allocated to each parliamentary constituency by matching the postcode against the 2000 version 1 ONS Postcode Directory.

4. Constituency information represents constituency boundaries as at May 1997. Numbers of people eligible to claim Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) are not available. It is not possible to produce reliable estimates for different parts of Great Britain.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, August 2000

State Pension

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost to the Exchequer of increasing the basic state pension to £92 for a single person and £138 for a couple, taking into account *(a)* savings in regard to (i) the minimum income guarantee and (ii) other benefits payable to pensioners and *(b)* the consequent increases in receipts of tax revenue. [147606]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 6 February 2001]:* The information is in the table.

Cost of increasing the basic state pension to £92 for a single person and £138 for a couple

Year 2001–02

£ billion

Gross total	8.4
Minimum Income Guarantee savings	1.8
Other income related benefit savings	1
Total income related benefit savings	0.8
Tax yield	0.8
Total net cost	5.8

Notes:

1. All costs are given in £ billion to the nearest £100 million.

2. Gross costs are estimated by the Government Actuary's Department.

3. Income related benefits savings are estimated using the Policy Simulation Model.

4. The tax effects are estimated by the Inland Revenue.

5. Costs are given excluding widows and bereavement benefits whose rates are linked by law to the rate of basic Retirement Pension. Including them adds £200 million to the net costs.

Press Releases

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many press releases were issued by his Department in the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000; how many have been issued in the current financial year; and what his estimate is of the total number for the current financial year. [149246]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
DSS	291	311	270	411
Benefits Agency (BA)	60	42	48	—
Contributions Agency (CA)	50	10	3	—
Child Support Agency (CSA)	10	4	—	—

Notes:

1. The information given for the year 2000 includes all Press Releases issued on behalf of the Department and its agencies.

2. The production of Press Releases runs from January to December. To date we have issued 55 in the year 2001. It is not possible to estimate the number we will issue for the whole year.

3. In April 2000 the BA and CSA Press Offices merged with the DSS team and consequently all Press Releases are now categorised as DSS.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 9 February 2001

PRIME MINISTER

Review Body on Senior Salaries

Mr. Miller: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the report and recommendations of the Review Body on Senior Salaries. [150123]

The Prime Minister: The 2001 report of the Review Body on Senior Salaries, which makes recommendations about the pay of the senior civil service, senior military personnel and the judiciary, together with the annual uprating of parliamentary salaries, is being published today. Copies are in the Vote Office and the Library of the House. I am grateful to the chairman and the members of the review body for their work.

The main recommendations of the review body are:

an increase from 1 April 2001 of 3 per cent. in the minimum and maximum values of each of the pay bands for the senior civil service. Within the bands, Departments will determine the individual awards on the basis of performance. As last year, a further 0.4 per cent. of the total senior civil service pay bill should be made available to fund additional performance awards for the most senior staff, whose pay has fallen well behind comparable remuneration elsewhere;

an increase from 1 April 2001 of 3.7 per cent. in judicial salaries; and

an increase from 1 April 2001 of 3.7 per cent. in the maxima of the pay ranges within which individual salaries are set for senior military officers.

The Government have decided to accept these recommendations. Their cost will be met within existing departmental expenditure limits.

Pay increases for Members of Parliament and Ministers are linked automatically to the increase in pay bands for the senior civil service. Their pay entitlement will therefore increase from 1 April 2001 by 3 per cent.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Consumer Protection

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what were the levels of spending on consumer protection per head of population in *(a)* Staffordshire and *(b)* each other county of England (i) in the current year and (ii) in each of the last three years, distinguishing in each case the element represented by Standard Spending Assessment. [148294]

Dr. Howells: The accompanying table of statistics sets out spending per head of population on consumer protection in *(a)* Staffordshire and *(b)* in each other county of England (i) in the current year and (ii) in each of the last three years. A copy of the statistics has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

It is not possible to distinguish the element represented by the Standard Spending Assessment, as that does not make separate provision for consumer protection.

Press Releases

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many press releases were issued by his Department in the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000; how many have been issued in the current financial year; and what his estimate is of the total number for the current financial year. [149244]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* The number of press release issued in each financial year is:

(a) 1996–97: 996

(b) 1997–98: 851

(c) 1998–99: 1,107

(d) 1999–2000: 1,010

(e) 2000–01 (to date): 693.

Postal Services Commission

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will lay the Government's proposed social and environmental guidance to the Postal Services Commission; and if he will make a statement. [150127]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Yesterday I laid in the Library of each House the draft social and environmental guidance which the Secretary of State proposes to issue to the Postal Services Commission in accordance with section 43 of the Postal Services Act 2000. A consultation on the draft guidance was carried out in accordance with section 43(3) of the Act. The consultation closed on 31 January and six responses were received for which the Government are grateful. They contained a number of useful suggestions which have been taken into account in refining the draft guidance.

The process of giving statutory social and environmental guidance has been developed to provide a means of ensuring that regulators take due account of the Government's social and environmental policies in carrying out their statutory functions. Regulators have a statutory duty to have regard to the guidance.

Alkaline Hydrolysis

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what evidence he has collated on the export potential of the technology of alkaline hydrolysis at elevated temperature for the inactivation of transmissible spongiform encephalopathies; and what action he is taking to assist British firms with the licence to manufacture the required machinery. [147864]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answers given him by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 15 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 57W. In addition, I understand that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Department of Health are currently funding research to assess the efficacy of the technology in inactivating infectious TSE agents. Plainly, that is a crucial factor to be addressed before the export potential can be considered.

Pension Funds

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with other Departments on the distribution of pension funds when stock market listed companies are involved in takeovers; and if he will make a statement. [148980]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 6 February 2001]:* None. My Department considers takeovers in line with its competition policy and under the relevant European and UK statutory procedures. Mergers of occupational pension schemes and the distribution of pension funds must take place in accordance with the Pension Act 1995 and Inland Revenue regulations. It is for the trustees of a pension scheme to ensure that changes are carried out in accordance with legislation and do not disadvantage members. Scheme members have a right of challenge to the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority if they consider statutory criteria have not been followed.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Public Library Standards

Ms Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how he proposes to take forward his consultation about draft public library standards. [148158]

Mr. Chris Smith: I am today publishing public library standards. They will come into effect from 1 April 2001, and my Department will monitor and assess performance against them through the annual library planning process. There will be a three-year period for compliance and my officials will be happy to discuss the practicalities with individual library authorities. The draft standards, on which I consulted last year, have been refashioned to reflect better on library service outcomes and the requirements of best value, rather than simple inputs. Within the context of best value, they are resource neutral. I believe that library standards, together with best value provisions, will be a powerful combination to help authorities to drive up library performance. Copies of the library standards, and of the analysis of responses to the consultation exercise which I am also publishing today, are being placed in the Libraries of both Houses. In addition, both documents can be accessed via the Department's website: www.culture.gov.uk.

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the future of the Wembley stadium project. [149093]

Kate Hoey: Wembley National Stadium Ltd. (WNSL) is continuing with its efforts to create a world-class stadium for football and Rugby league at Wembley. WNSL made a statement on 18 January ruling out the possibility of athletics returning to Wembley for the 2005 IAAF world athletics championships.

Picketts Lock

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he intends to publish the minutes of his meeting held on 16 January about Picketts Lock with the Lee Valley Forum. [148751]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* The minutes of the Lee Valley Forum meeting which took place on 16 January have been circulated to forum members for comment. I will place a copy of the minutes in the Library, together with a copy of the minutes of the three previous meetings of the Lee Valley Forum, as soon as comments have been received.

School Sports

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking to encourage sport in schools. [148967]

Kate Hoey: Sport in schools was one of the key themes of our strategy "A Sporting Future for All", which the Government published last year. We now have a number of programmes in place to encourage high quality physical education and sport in schools. Through the school sport co-ordinator programme, there will be a network of 1,000 co-ordinators in secondary schools improving PE and sporting opportunities by 2004. Some £580 million will be invested from the new opportunities fund for sport in and around schools. We work closely with DfEE on these and other initiatives to develop better physical education and sport in schools and will shortly begin consulting on how to deliver an entitlement for school sport which would mean that pupils would have access to two hours of high quality sport or PE each week during and after school.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish "A Sporting Future for All-Action Plan" submitted to him by the implementation group. [148706]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* We are presently considering the recommendations contained within the action plan and will make the plan available on the Department's website shortly.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the School Sports Alliance, established to oversee the new opportunities fund project for sports and arts provision in schools, will publish its conclusions about how funding will be allocated. [148707]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* The School Sports Alliance will announce agreed priorities for the new opportunities fund's opportunities for young people—PE and sport in schools scheme before October, when we expect the money to come on stream.

Lambeth and Southwark Sports Action Zone

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the *(a)* priorities and *(b)* budget for the Lambeth and Southwark sports action zone are for 2001. [149511]

Kate Hoey: The key priority is to produce a detailed needs assessment for the zone. The zone manager, who was appointed in September 2000, has been working with key agencies and organisations—e.g. health and education action zones, local authorities and the police—as well as the local community to produce the assessment which will inform a five-year action plan. Key themes will be the

contribution which sport can make to health, education and lifelong learning, social inclusion, regeneration and community safety.

The budget for the zone is £70,000 a year for five years, which is paying for the zone manager, administrative support and a small operational budget for the needs assessment. Future funding for the zone will be assessed against the provisions of the action plan, although in the meantime projects within the zone will remain eligible for consideration for funding from schemes such as capital awards, awards for all, the active communities development fund and the school sports co-ordinator programme. An award of £291,732 has been made under the school sports co-ordinators programme for the Lambeth and Southwark action zone.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure was in his Department for the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000, and what the planned expenditure and breakdown of expenditure for 2000–01 is on (i) public opinion research, (ii) television, radio and newspaper advertising and (iii) direct mail. [149258]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* My Department has let only one contract for public opinion research during the period in question. In order to preserve commercial confidentiality I am unable to provide details of the cost. The following table shows the cost of newspaper advertising to attract candidates for the many public appointments for which I am responsible.

	£
1996–97	0
1997–98	0
1998–99	242,700
1999–2000	139,501
2000–01[1]	72,000
2000–01[2]	85,000

[1] Spend to date
[2] Planned spend

No expenditure has been either incurred or is planned for television or radio advertising or direct mail.

Press Releases

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many press releases were issued by his Department in the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000; how many have been issued in the current financial year; and what his estimate is of the total number for the current financial year. [149249]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* The number of press releases issued by my Department for the following financial years are as follows:

Year	*Press releases*
1996–97	411
1997–98	314
1998–99	334
1999–2000	294

Over the same period my Department has also issued 116 invitations to the media.

For the current financial year 2000–01, my Department has issued 300 releases to date.

Television Reception

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many television licences were issued and how many licence holders were entitled to refunds on the basis of interference or bad reception for the last year for which figures are available. [149670]

Janet Anderson: Television licensing statistics relate to licences in force rather than licences issued. As at 31 March 2000, there were an estimated 23.3 million television licences in force. The licence fee is a payment for permission to install or use television to receive television programmes and not for the provision of a service. Refunds are therefore not available in cases of interference or poor reception.

"Seeing Salvation" Exhibition

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he made to the National Gallery regarding the content of the "Seeing Salvation" exhibition. [149697]

Mr. Chris Smith: I and the DCMS have warmly congratulated the National Gallery on the excellent and highly successful "Seeing Salvation" exhibition.

Lottery Grants

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what has been the value to date of national lottery grant applications made by organisations in the London borough of Waltham Forest and the London borough of Redbridge; how many Lottery grant applications have been made by organisations in the London borough of Waltham Forest and the London borough of Redbridge; and how many lottery grant applications in Chingford and Woodford Green have been approved. [149826]

Kate Hoey: We have contacted the national lottery distributing bodies to request such information as they hold, and I will write to the hon. Member as soon as it is available, placing copies of my letter in the Libraries of both Houses.

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much has been paid out in grants, from lottery funds, to the *(a)* London borough of Waltham Forest and *(b)* London Borough of Redbridge in (i) cash terms and (ii) as a percentage of the London total. [149825]

Kate Hoey: According to the information supplied to us by the distributing bodies for the national lottery awards database, the total amount awarded from the national lottery to recipients located in the London borough of Waltham Forest is £12,982,165, which amounts to 0.54 per cent. of the total amount awarded to the London region. The total amount awarded to recipients located in the London borough of Redbridge is £8,771,018, which amounts to 0.37 per cent. of the total amount awarded to the London region.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Solicitor-General when he proposes to conduct another survey into the morale of the Crown Prosecution Service; and if he will place details of the survey in the Library. [R] [149692]

The Solicitor-General: The CPS conducted its first staff attitude survey and stress audit in mid-2000. As a result, the CPS board agreed a number of measures to improve morale. Substantial additional resources available to the CPS next year will build on work that has already been done to alleviate the causes of stress.

The CPS recently published its commitment regularly to assess staff attitudes in its 2001–02 business plan and proposes to run further surveys to establish how staff perceptions have changed on a comparative basis. The next survey is planned for 2002, but no decisions have yet been made on the exact scope, extent or distribution arrangements for that survey.

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Pay Review Body

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the report and recommendations of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body. [150175]

Mr. Hoon: The 2001 report of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body has been published today. Copies of the report are available in the Vote Office and the Library of the House. I wish to thank the chairman and members of the review body for their hard work in producing this report.

The AFPRB has recommended an increase in basic military salary of 3.7 per cent. for all ranks. The AFPRB has also recommended increases in the rates of additional pay (eg flying pay, submarine pay and diving pay) in the reserves' bounties, and in charges.

These recommendations fully support the armed forces strategic personnel policies, in particular in relation to recruitment and retention. The additional cost to the defence budget will be £222 million. This will be met within existing departmental expenditure limits.

The AFPRB's recommendations are to be accepted in full with implementation effective from 1 April 2001.

In addition, alongside the copies of the review body's report, I have placed in the Library a copy of a supplementary letter from the chairman of the AFPRB recommending the introduction of two financial retention incentives for certain categories of aircrew. The additional cost of these measures will be £16.8 million in 2001–02, which will also be met within existing departmental expenditure limits.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many UK military personnel are deployed on the ground in Sierra Leone; [146483]

(2) if he will make a statement on the progress made in training of the Sierra Leone Army by the UK training teams. [146482]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 19 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 89W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) and on 26 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 725W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell).

Kosovo

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Albanians apprehended for illegal activity by UK members of KFOR in the last two months were handed over to *(a)* KFOR authorities and *(b)* Camp Bondsteel. [149380]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* Sixty-one ethnic Albanians were apprehended for illegal activity by British troops operating as part of the KFOR reserve in support of Multi-National Brigade (East) (MNB(E)), in the past two months (December 2000 and January 2001) and were handed over to KFOR authorities at the detention facility, Camp Bondsteel.

Weapon Components

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence where the components for *(a)* the L15 and *(b)* the M107 rounds for the A590 gun are (i) manufactured and (ii) assembled. [149353]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* Components for the L15 round are manufactured by RO Defence, at its sites in Birtley, Bridgwater, Bishopton, Blackburn and Glascoed. The final assembly of the L15 round takes place at Glascoed, Gwent.

The M107, a cheaper training projectile, is no longer procured for use by the British Army. The last batch of M107 was received in July 1999 and was procured through NAMSA from the Italian contractor, Simmel, by competitive tender. We have no knowledge of where the components were manufactured and assembled, which really is a matter for the contractor. Approximately 1,100 M107 projectiles remain and will be consumed at training during this year.

HEALTH

Doctors and Dentists Pay Review Body

Mrs. Fitzsimons: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the supplementary report of the Doctors and Dentists Pay Review Body. [150087]

Mr. Denham: I am responding on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the supplementary report of the review body on doctors and dentists remuneration (DDRB). I understand that a similar announcement is being made by the First Minister and the Minister for Health and Community Care in Scotland. Copies of the reports are available in the Vote Office and the Library. I am grateful to the chairman and members of the DDRB for their hard work.

We announced on 18 December that the pay recommendations of the DDRB were being accepted in full and without staging. The DDRB recommended an overall pay increase of 3.9 per cent. for salaried doctors and dentists and general medical and dental practitioners.

To encourage the retention of general medical practitioners, the DDRB has also recommended a 7 per cent. increase in seniority allowances, worth in the region of £500 for a general medical practitioner with 25 years service. This is in addition to the 3.9 per cent. increase in intended average net remuneration.

The supplementary report from the DDRB covers areas of GPs income aimed at meeting the expense of running their practices and any balancing recovery from debts owed by the profession. In its considerations of what provision to make for indirectly reimbursed practice expenses and the operation of the balancing correction the review body have recommended:

provision for indirect expenses of £23,790 for each GP;

a recovery of £248 per GP in accordance with normal rules; and

a joint review by the BMA and Health departments of the operation of the pay system. This should look at handling the cumulative overpayment that has occurred in the system (£2,684 per GP), the operation of the balancing mechanism and forecasting of expenses in time for next year's round.

The Government share DDRB's concerns about the operation of the balancing mechanism, the setting of practice expenses and the management of the cumulative debt. We have decided that the BMA and the Health departments should put work in hand immediately to develop a review of these issues. That being the case, the Government have decided to suspend the balancing mechanism pending the outcome of the review.

The average GP will benefit by a further £248 above what the DDRB have recommended. In addition, we will consider constructively how to manage the cumulative debt of the profession (around £80 million) for the benefit of patients and the development of practices.

DDRB also recommended that urgent agreement was needed on flu vaccination payments. Higher payments to GPs were introduced in last autumn's campaign to increase vaccination coverage of people aged 65 and over. We now propose that the whole cost of these payments, not just the proportion relating to the extra coverage achieved, should remain available for investment in general practice.

The gross income of GPs will therefore increase to £80,300 per annum, as shown in the table, with effect from 1 April 2001.

£

	April 2000	*April 2001*
1. IANI (includes 2001 seniority increase)	54,220	56,510
2. Expenses provision	24,510	23,790
3. IANI plus Expenses (1+2)	78,730	80,300
4. Balancing recovery	(261)	[1](248)
5. IAGI (3+4)	78,469	80,300

[1] Suspended

Tattoos and Piercings

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what representations he has received concerning the safety of tattoos and piercings; [147522]

(2) what research his Department has carried out into the safety of tattoos and piercings; [147524]

(3) what assessment he has made of the health risks associated with tattoos and piercings; [147523]

(4) what guidance his Department has issued to the public on the safety of tattoos and piercings. [147525]

Yvette Cooper: We have received a small number of representations about the safety of skin piercing, including tattooing.

The Department has not commissioned any research into the safety of skin piercing.

If proper hygienic precautions are not taken, there is a risk of blood-borne virus infection and localised wound infections. Localised wound infections may also occur after skin piercing, if the tattooing or piercing is touched by the client with dirty hands or comes into contact with soiled clothes, towels or bedlinen. Non-infectious and usually not serious complications may occur such as swelling around the piercing and bleeding.

Advice on the risk of blood-borne virus transmission via skin piercing has been included in leaflets for the public on sexual health for young people, HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C published by Health Promotion England. The Department's leaflets on general health advice for travellers and specific advice on avoiding the risks of HIV infection while abroad provide similar information. Local authorities, which are responsible for regulating skin piercing businesses, have also produced information for the public.

Embryonic Stem Cell Research

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if his support for the establishment of a House of Lords Select Committee on Embryonic Stem Cell Research is conditional on its membership being balanced and representative of different views on the subject. [148275]

Yvette Cooper: Membership of House of Lords Select Committees is a matter for the Lords' Committee of Selection. We look forward to working with the Committee and will, as we have said, consider its conclusions carefully.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the commitment of the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Lord Hunt, in the House of Lords on 22 January 2001, House of Lords, *Official Report*, column 121, to review regulations in the light of the report of a House of Lords Select Committee on Embryonic Stem Cell Research includes annulling those regulations if the Committee concludes that such research is not necessary; and if he will make a statement. [148273]

Yvette Cooper: We have made it clear that we will consider very carefully the conclusions of the House of Lords Select Committee and will review the regulations in the light of those conclusions. However, the Committee has not yet begun its deliberations and it is not possible to speculate on whether action may be appropriate when its conclusions are known.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what criteria the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority intends to adopt for assessing, in connection with project licence applications it receives, whether research upon embryonic stem cells offers potential for progress which could not be made using adult stem cells. [148272]

Yvette Cooper: Research involving the use of human embryos can be carried out only if it meets the strict conditions of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 and a licence has been issued by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA).

Among other things, the 1990 Act requires the HFEA to be satisfied that any proposed use of embryos is necessary for the purposes of the research. If the proposed use of embryos is not considered necessary for any reason, a licence will not be granted.

The HFEA may grant licenses for research projects only for the purposes set out in the 1990 Act and in the Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Research Purposes) Regulations.

For each research project the HFEA requires a detailed application describing:

the objectives of the project;

the scientific background;

the methodology and experimental design;

the estimated usage of oocytes and embryos; and

the source of this material.

The application must also include:

the CVs of all staff participating directly in the research project;

information for patients relating to the proposed project;

relevant clinical and laboratory protocols;

consent forms regarding use of gametes and embryos for this project; and

any relevant publications.

The HFEA requires research applications to have Research Ethics Committee approval. The project must explain its objectives, protocols and why the research is necessary. Before considering a research application the HFEA obtains at least two peer review reports on the project's merits covering:

whether the research fulfils the categories for which embryo research is permitted

the importance of the research in the field

whether research has been done before

whether the use of human embryos is justified

suitability of the methods

length of the study

applicant's qualifications.

An HFEA Licence Committee is arranged to consider each application and the peer review reports. It will also consider the information given to donors.

Research is monitored through:

annual licence renewal, subject to acceptable progress reports;

annual progress reports (in cases where two or three-year licences are granted);

final reports.

Social Services Spending

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the levels of spending on social services per head of population were in *(a)* Staffordshire and *(b)* each other county of England (i) in the current year and (ii) in each of the last three years, distinguishing in each case the element represented by standard spending assessment. [148293]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is shown in the table.

Current expenditure on personal social services per head of population

£

	1997–98 gross (final outturn)	*1998–99 gross (final outturn)*	*1999–2000 gross (provisional outturn)*
Bedfordshire	166.26	175.29	186.06
Berkshire[1]	192.07	—	—
Buckinghamshire	160.09	169.87	180.05
Cambridgeshire[1]	149.16	167.95	178.78
Cheshire[1]	167.25	179.66	201.59
Cornwall	180.50	186.86	199.22
Cumbria	168.77	172.95	185.55
Derbyshire	184.85	171.71	215.53
Devon[1]	206.03	209.59	227.59
Dorset	169.32	170.32	185.37
Durham	175.55	183.96	233.54
East Sussex	218.03	225.78	244.77
Essex[1]	183.53	187.65	203.72
Gloucestershire	133.93	173.87	184.37
Hampshire	138.87	147.47	160.25
Hertfordshire	179.39	185.96	201.01
Isles of Scilly	145.99	182.77	181.69
Kent[1]	179.74	193.40	224.45
Lancashire[1]	205.30	211.75	227.14
Leicestershire	128.17	136.10	149.94
Lincolnshire	145.07	188.09	208.34
Norfolk	192.69	207.33	225.70
North Yorkshire	164.90	177.45	189.39
Northamptonshire	165.96	183.67	202.98
Northumberland	214.70	234.73	—
Nottinghamshire[1]	204.22	195.64	204.29
Oxfordshire	149.21	162.59	183.15
Shropshire[1]	173.89	178.02	192.06
Somerset	147.50	157.62	185.93
Staffordshire	152.85	163.89	177.04
Suffolk	167.07	174.84	193.43
Surrey	155.97	186.24	174.91
Warwickshire	154.48	163.64	170.31
West Sussex	190.73	193.41	203.27
Wiltshire	143.08	150.98	186.78
Worcestershire[1]	163.95	175.30	193.26
Shire Counties	172.80	181.41	—

[1] 1997–98 data relate to county prior to local government reorganisation on 1 April 1998.

Note:

Not comparable with figures for earlier years as these figures are net of income from client contributions etc.

Standard spending assessment for personal social services per head of population

£

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Bedfordshire	113.86	118.94	122.56	130.19
Berkshire[1]	114.66	—	—	—
Buckinghamshire	106.52	110.98	113.19	119.54
Cambridgeshire[1]	115.85	113.01	118.40	125.02
Cheshire[1]	119.73	122.94	132.79	139.88
Cornwall	135.98	146.07	155.67	164.12
Cumbria	128.02	138.50	149.31	157.19
Derbyshire	128.32	134.23	143.59	153.85
Devon[1]	141.81	140.93	145.94	153.57

Standard spending assessment for personal social services per head of population

£

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
Dorset	128.55	134.73	140.79	149.55
Durham	155.77	156.79	175.24	185.21
East Sussex	156.35	165.49	165.87	174.71
Essex[1]	129.75	133.09	142.07	150.48
Gloucestershire	119.22	127.29	134.44	140.39
Hampshire	111.29	113.20	116.17	122.56
Hertfordshire	131.40	135.99	139.92	148.19
Isles of Scilly	143.79	129.36	107.10	119.51
Kent[1]	133.13	142.46	146.98	154.20
Lancashire[1]	140.41	147.68	153.83	160.78
Leicestershire	£99.19	107.23	113.95	119.61
Lincolnshire	130.13	132.12	138.50	145.78
Norfolk	135.05	135.99	143.24	152.90
North Yorkshire	125.22	126.68	126.24	133.39
Northamptonshire	117.01	122.51	130.96	137.49
Northumberland	141.38	137.45	148.27	156.48
Nottinghamshire[1]	141.98	130.11	139.05	147.38
Oxfordshire	116.01	118.23	117.98	124.81
Shropshire[1]	122.65	127.64	135.70	144.09
Somerset	128.41	133.37	138.16	146.34
Staffordshire	113.00	119.22	128.92	135.81
Suffolk	124.90	131.65	138.07	145.15
Surrey	123.32	126.37	127.25	133.09
Warwickshire	114.66	122.11	131.81	139.02
West Sussex	136.70	141.60	140.54	148.12
Wiltshire	114.97	114.91	118.45	125.32
Worcestershire[1]	120.26	124.23	130.90	137.88
Shire Counties	126.87	130.80	136.73	144.23

[1] 1997–98 data relate to county prior to local government reorganisation on 1 April 1998.

Per cent. excess of SSA

Percentage

	1997–98 gross (final outturn)	1998–99 gross (final outturn)	1999–2000 gross (provisional outturn)	2000–2001 net (budgeted)
Bedfordshire	46	47	52	25
Berkshire[1]	68	—	—	—
Buckinghamshire	50	53	59	25
Cambridgeshire[1]	29	49	51	21
Cheshire[1]	40	46	52	16
Cornwall	33	28	28	4
Cumbria	32	25	24	5
Derbyshire	44	28	50	18
Devon[1]	45	49	56	12
Dorset	32	26	32	3
Durham	13	17	33	6
East Sussex	39	36	48	12
Essex[1]	41	41	43	15
Gloucestershire	12	37	37	12
Hampshire	25	30	38	10
Hertfordshire	37	37	44	21
Isles of Scilly	2	41	70	36
Kent[1]	35	36	53	33
Lancashire[1]	46	43	48	19
Leicestershire	29	27	32	6
Lincolnshire	11	42	50	10
Norfolk	43	52	58	16
North Yorkshire	32	40	50	10
Northamptonshire	42	50	55	37
Northumberland	52	71	—	31
Nottinghamshire[1]	44	50	47	15
Oxfordshire	29	38	55	32
Shropshire[1]	42	39	42	10
Somerset	15	18	35	9
Staffordshire	35	37	37	9
Suffolk	34	33	40	13
Surrey	26	47	37	20
Warwickshire	35	34	29	9
West Sussex	40	37	45	13
Wiltshire	24	31	58	25

Per cent. excess of SSA

Percentage

	1997–98 gross (final outturn)	1998–99 gross (final outturn)	1999–2000 gross (provisional outturn)	2000–2001 net (budgeted)
Worcestershire[1]	36	41	48	13
Shire Counties	36	39	—	16

[1] 1997–98 data relate to county prior to local government reorganisation on 1 April 1998.

Hospital Respite

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will define the term respite as it applies to an NHS hospital. [148755]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* The term accident and emergency respite or diversion is used to describe periods when, due to local peaks in demand or other circumstances, a national health service trust arranges for appropriate patients to be temporarily diverted to other local hospitals in line with local protocols. Central guidance makes it clear that no hospital may close to emergency admissions unilaterally.

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many times, and for how long, Alexandra hospital has been on respite during December 2000 and January 2001. [148753]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 5 January 2001]:* In line with national and local protocols for hospitals experiencing periods of heavy pressure in accident and emergency departments, the Alexandra Hospital requested that Hereford and Worcester Ambulance Service national health service trust divert any appropriate patients to Worcester Royal Infirmary on three occasions in January 2001.

This was for a period of three hours on two occasions and for eight hours on one occasion. At no time did this involve closing the accident and emergency department and the number of patients affected was minimal. There were no occasions in December 2000.

Dietary Sodium

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will conduct a review into the evidence of the impact of dietary sodium. [149100]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 February 2001]:* We accept that there is a large body of authoritative opinion that there are public health gains to be made by a reduction in sodium consumption. There are no plans to conduct a further review of the evidence on the impact of dietary sodium on health.

As part of a wider policy on reducing deaths from heart disease and stroke, we are committed to working with the food industry to improve the overall balance of the diet, including sodium/salt in foods.

Dental Charges

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what percentage of adult patients received no help with dental charges under the health benefits scheme in the latest year for which figures are available; [149329]

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(2) what percentage of adult patients aged *(a)* 60 years and over and *(b)* under 60 years received no help with dental charges under the health benefits scheme in the latest year for which figures are available. [149330]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* The available information is for courses of treatment in the general dental services. 75 per cent. of adult courses of treatment attracted the full patient charge up to the maximum limit in 1999–2000 in England. The corresponding percentages for *(a)* patients aged 60 years and over and *(b)* adults aged under 60 years were 82 per cent. and 73 per cent. respectively.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what the average charge for a course of dental treatment is for *(a)* patients aged 60 and over and *(b)* adult patients aged under 60 years, who do not receive help through the health benefits scheme; [149327]

(2) what the average charge for an adult course of dental treatment is for patients not receiving help through the health benefits scheme. [149326]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* For patients paying the full patient charge up to the maximum limit for dental treatment in the general dental services, the average charge for a course of treatment was £21.82 in 1999–2000 in England.

The corresponding averages for *(a)* patients aged 60 years and over and *(b)* adult patients aged under 60 years were £22.22 and £21.69 respectively.

Prescription Charges

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many adult patients received courses of treatment for which they met the full charge with no help from the health benefits scheme in each of the last 10 years. [149331]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* The available information is for courses of treatment in the general dental services. For patients who pay the full patient charge up to the maximum limit, the number of courses of treatment is shown in the table for the years 1991–92 to 1999–2000 for England.

General dental service: Number of courses of treatment for charge-paying patients, 1991–92 to 1999–2000

England	*Million*
Year	*Courses of treatment*[1]
1991–92	19.5
1992–93	19.7
1993–94	18.8
1994–95	18.6
1995–96	18.4
1996–97	18.2
1997–98	18.8
1998–99	19.6
1999–2000	19.6

[1] The number of courses of treatment includes a few correction records.

Richard Neale

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received from the victims of Richard Neale; and what plans he has to hold a public inquiry into this case. [149442]

Mr. Hutton: We have received several representations recently requesting a public inquiry into the case of Richard Neale. It is clear that there needs to be a full and independent review to examine past events and ensure that all relevant lessons are learned. I anticipate that this would be led by an independent chairman with appropriately qualified and experienced expert panel members. The panel would hear evidence from a wide range of individuals, including Neale's former patients or their relatives.

However, the Chief Medical Officer is not yet in a position to take this further, until the position on police referral and civil litigation is clearer. In the meantime, the matter is being kept under very active review, and appropriate steps to initiate an independent review will be taken as soon as they can be.

Emergency Calls

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review the recommended response times of ambulances to different categories of emergency calls; and if he will make a statement. [149678]

Ms Stuart: Targets, supported by evidence of clinical and cost effectiveness, have been set for all 999 and urgent ambulance calls. Category A calls which may be immediately life-threatening should be responded to within eight minutes irrespective of location in 75 per cent. of cases by 31 March 2001. All other calls should be responded to within 14 minutes in urban areas and 19 minutes in rural areas in 95 per cent. of cases.

Clinical evidence suggests that achievement of the 75 per cent. milestone could save 1,800 lives each year in people under 75 years of age suffering heart attacks. National Health Service ambulance trusts are improving their response times. We are determined that every NHS ambulance trust must achieve the 75 per cent. milestone as quickly as possible. 75 per cent. is an achievable milestone and further progress will be one of the things considered in the context of future developments in NHS emergency care.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many emergency calls for ambulances were received *(a)* nationally, *(b)* in each shire county and *(c)* in Gloucestershire in each of the last five years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [149676]

Ms Stuart: Information about emergency calls for each National Health Service ambulance trust and nationally in each of the last five years is contained in Table 3 of the Department of Health Statistical Bulletin "Ambulance Services, England 1999–2000". A copy is in the Library and available at www.doh.gov.uk/public/sb0014.htm.

Prader-Willi Syndrome

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what training doctors receive in diagnosing and treating people with Prader-Willi syndrome; and if he will make a statement. [149673]

Mr. Hutton: The diagnosis of Prader-Willi syndrome forms part of the training curriculum for all paediatric specialists. Specialists involved in the diagnosis include paediatric endocrinologists and geneticists as well as developmental or neurological specialist paediatricians.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with health authorities about the diagnosis and treatment of children with Prader-Willi syndrome; what NHS funding is available for the diagnosis and treatment of such children; and if he will make a statement. [149684]

Mr. Hutton: Prader-Willi syndrome (PWS) is usually diagnosed within the community child health services. The process of diagnosis can be a long one, as it may take some time of observation and multidisciplinary assessment to distinguish from other developmental or behavioural problems.

Records of expenditure relating specifically to children suffering from PWS are not available centrally. Packages of care reflecting the child's individual needs are drawn up locally with parents, specialist clinicians and other agencies.

Ambulance Service

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the sickness levels are in the ambulance service in *(a)* the UK, *(b)* Gloucestershire and *(c)* all shire counties; and if he will make a statement. [149677]

Ms Stuart: The average sickness absence rate for staff directly employed by national health service ambulance trusts in 1999 was 6.6 per cent. Figures for each individual NHS ambulance trust are shown in the table. We have set national improvement targets for health authorities and NHS trusts to reduce sickness absence rates by 20 per cent. by 2001 and 30 per cent. by 2003.

Sickness absence rates 1999

NHS Ambulance trust name	*Percentage*
Avon Ambulance Service NHS Trust	7.6
Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Ambulance and Paramedic NHS Trust	5.5
Cumbria Ambulance Service NHS Trust	6.6
Dorset Ambulance Service NHS Trust	6.9
East Anglian Ambulance NHS Trust	8.2
East Midlands Ambulance NHS Trust	10.0
Essex Ambulance Service NHS Trust	4.3
Gloucestershire Ambulance Service NHS Trust	6.9
Greater Manchester Ambulance Service NHS Trust	6.0
Hampshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust	7.8
Hereford and Worcester Ambulance Service NHS Trust	5.9
Kent Ambulance NHS Trust	7.0
Lancashire Ambulance Service NHS Trust	5.0
London Ambulance Service NHS Trust	7.8
Mersey Regional Ambulance Service NHS Trust	6.6
North East Ambulance Service NHS Trust	6.7
Oxfordshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust	3.6
Royal Berkshire Ambulance NHS Trust	3.3
South Yorkshire Metropolitan Ambulance and Paramedic NHS Trust	8.0
Staffordshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust	7.4
Surrey Ambulance Service NHS Trust	7.0
Sussex Ambulance Service NHS Trust	7.0
The Two Shires Ambulance NHS Trust	5.5
Warwickshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust	7.3
West Country Ambulance Service NHS Trust	6.4
West Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Trust	5.8
West Yorkshire Metropolitan Ambulance Service NHS Trust	3.1
Wiltshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust	4.1
England	6.6

Note:
Excludes Lincolnshire Ambulance and Health Transport Service and Tees East and North Yorkshire Ambulance Service NHS trusts

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Beef Imports

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food from which countries the importation of beef into the UK is prohibited; and if he will make a statement. [148057]

Ms Quin: Specific prohibitions on imports of beef from Portugal, South Africa and Swaziland are currently in place because of the disease situations in those countries. Beef may be imported from EU member states other than Portugal in accordance with Community rules. Beef may only be imported into any EU member state from third countries that have been approved by the European Commission and it must come from approved premises in those countries. Those approved third countries which currently have approved establishments are set out in the list shown. Beef cannot be imported into the UK from any third country which is not on this list.

Argentina
Australia
Brazil
Botswana
Canada
Croatia
Czech Republic
Hungary
Malta
Namibia
New Zealand
Paraguay
Poland
Romania
Slovakia
Slovenia
United States of America
Uruguay
Switzerland
Yugoslavia
Zimbabwe.

Secondments

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list secondments from commercial companies to his Department since 1997. [148404]

Ms Quin: There have been secondments from the Royal Bank of Scotland, Manor Bakeries and the BBC since 1997.

Cattle Passports

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received about technical support at BCMS for farmers applying for cattle passports; and if he will make a statement. [148429]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 2 February 2001]:* A number of requests and suggestions for an increase in general advisory support have been received in recent months from the BCMS industry forum, the industry-Government working group on livestock identification and directly from producers. The BCMS telephone helpline offers support on a very wide range of issues. Additionally, BCMS publish an extensive range of free publications on various aspects of cattle identification. These, together with advice from field officers on farm inspections, offer a good level of general advisory support to farmers. We expect that the number of farmers contacting BCMS by electronic means to increase significantly through the launch of our new website.

Pesticides

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress has been made towards achieving the Government's objective of minimising the environmental impact of pesticides. [148865]

Ms Quin: The MAFF publication "Towards Sustainable Agriculture—A Pilot Set of Indicators", (which is available on the MAFF website www.maff.gov.uk) includes five indicators of pesticide use which, taken together, show the progress that is being made on minimisation.

The Government recognise that there is an on-going need to encourage and support minimisation as a component of the drive towards more sustainable agriculture. We will continue to fund a wide-ranging programme of research on minimisation, support schemes promoting environmentally friendly farming, and to promote the work of the independent pesticides forum.

PETS Scheme

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the names of appointed carriers under the PETS scheme will be announced. [148686]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* Participation by transport companies in the scheme is voluntary. We have already announced a number of carriers approved to bring in animals from Western Europe. These are Hoverspeed, P&O Stena, Sea France, Brittany Ferries, P&O European and Eurotunnel Shuttle Service. A number of airlines have also been approved as carriers—British Midland, Lufthansa and Finnair and, most recently, Air Malta and Cyprus Airways. Carriers are approved to carry animals on specific routes; there is no blanket approval for a ferry company or airline. As additional transport companies and new routes are approved by the Ministry, details will be placed on the website (http//:www.maff.gov.uk/animalh/quarantine) and made available through the PETS helpline (0870 241 1710). We are currently in negotiation with several additional companies.

Cattle Traceability Centre

Dr. Jack Cunningham: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many people are employed at the cattle traceability centre in West Cumbria; and if he will make a statement on its development. [149174]

Ms Quin: 619 people are currently employed at the British cattle movement service (BCMS) in Workington. A recent better quality services (BQS) review concluded that keeping BCMS in the public sector is the right way to achieve a high quality, trusted service. As a result, 452 staff currently employed on a fixed term basis will be made permanent employees. The number of permanent employees at BCMS will then be 474. A further 145 people are currently employed on a temporary basis.

The BQS review also identified measures to improve the quality and efficiency of the service BCMS provides. These relate particularly, but not exclusively, to the greater use of technology and are now being taken forward by BCMS. We will also continue to look at how BCMS can best work with the developing CAP payments agency in England and its equivalents in Scotland and Wales, as well as its potential role in tracking livestock other than cattle.

Government Action Plan (Farming)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what means there are for farmers to inform themselves of the Government's action plan for farming; and if he will make a statement. [148954]

Ms Quin: The Government publish a regular action plan for farming bulletin, reporting progress on all the measures in the plan. The latest bulletin was issued on 6 February and was distributed to those attending the annual general meeting of the National Farmers Union. All issues of the bulletin are available on the MAFF website (www.maff.gov.uk).

Farmers representatives also attend meetings of the agriculture strategy industry forum, established by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, to review progress on the action plan and drive forward the strategy.

Organophosphate Pesticide

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the organophosphate pesticide known as Crufomate [chemical name: Phosphoramidic Acid, Metryl-, 2-Chloro-4-(1.1-Dimetryletryl) Phenyl Metryl Ester] is licensed for use in the United Kingdom. [148621]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* No. Evidence provided to the Phillips inquiry indicated that two products containing Crufomate previously marketed in the UK for the treatment of warble fly infestations were withdrawn by the manufacturers prior to the introduction of the Warble Fly Order 1978.

Rochester Floating Fisheries

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how many boats from *(a)* Rochester oyster and floating fishery and *(b)* Rochester floating fishery are unregistered; [148712]

(2) if boats from *(a)* Rochester oyster and floating fishery and *(b)* Rochester floating fishery are registered to fish for sole in the Medway. [148711]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* The Rochester oyster and floating fishery claims a fishery in the Medway by Acts of Parliament and Royal Charter. However, as stated in the previous answer to my hon. Friend on 25 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 188W, only the courts are in a position to be able to rule on whether the Medway is truly a public or private fishery. I am not aware that any of the vessels owned by Rochester oyster and floating fishery members are registered or licensed.

Support Payments

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what date farmers in the Shropshire area were given notification of the new arrangements for hill livestock payments; what the deadline was for applications for payments under this scheme; and if he will make a statement. [149288]

Ms Quin: The proposed hill farm allowance (HFA) for England was outlined in the IACS 2000 booklet, distributed to producers in March 2000. This explained that there was no need for producers to submit specific HFA claims. Detailed guidance, issued to English hill farmers in December 2000, reaffirmed that specific HFA claims are not required. Farmers in the Shropshire areas were treated no differently.

The deadline for submission of an IACS 2000 application was 15 May 2000 and lead to automatic consideration for HFA 2001 using data from IACS, the sheep annual premium scheme, the suckler cow premium scheme and details of milk quota held on 31 March 2000. Some hill farmers will have to supply additional data where we cannot assess automatically their eligibility for HFA payments. They were written to at the end of January and have three weeks in which to reply.

Bovine Tags

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will review the use of yellow tags used to label cows *(a)* to consider if there is a better alternative tag available and *(b)* to reconsider the £5 replacement fee for damaged or lost tags. [148845]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* The requirement for cattle eartags is laid down in European Union legislation (Council Regulation 1760/2000). Any changes therefore would need to be agreed at EU level.

Eartags authorised for official cattle identification are supplied to the industry by a range of eartag manufacturers. The price they charge for replacement tags is a commercial matter. Farmers may be able to reduce their costs by selecting an alternative supplier. We are currently investigating the principal reasons for loss or damage to cattle eartags with a view to helping the industry minimise the need for replacement tags.

Sea Defence Projects

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what funding he will make available for research into coastal erosion and sea defences in Devon under the shoreline management plan; and when such work will take place. [149513]

Mr. Morley: The Ministry funds a programme of strategic research and development on flood and coastal defence. However, it is for local operating authorities (normally the Environment Agency and local authorities) to undertake more site-specific studies, such as those identified in shoreline management plans. The Ministry provides grant aid to operating authorities for studies of coastal processes and scheme feasibility, provided the proposals meet certain criteria. The timing of such studies is a matter for the operating authorities.

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr. Spring: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will make a statement on the implications for the CAP budget of Commissioner Schreyer's statement on additional financing in respect of BSE on 31 January; [148760]

(2) what estimate he has made of the potential cost to the CAP of the imbalance in the EU beef market resulting from BSE. [148764]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* The Commission's initial estimate of the cost of the measures agreed at the December Agriculture Council was 971 million euro. We understand that the Commission will be proposing further measures to the February Agriculture Council, which will now take place on 26/27 February. We do not yet know what the Commission will propose but welcome the fact that it recognises the need to constrain total CAP expenditure within the ceilings set out in the current financial perspective.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proposals the Government have made to ensure that the cost of the CAP remains within the Berlin financing perspectives following recent changes in demand in the EU. [148761]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* The Commission is responsible for making proposals. The UK Government support the Commission's intention to propose a package of measures before the February Council which ensure that total CAP expenditure remains within the ceilings set out in the current financial perspective.

Beef Labelling

Mr. Webb: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to ensure that beef which is slaughtered abroad and processed in the United Kingdom is not labelled as solely British; and if he will encourage local authority trading standards officers to enforce existing regulations. [149583]

Ms Quin: Under EU rules, fresh, chilled or frozen beef must not be labelled as British unless it is derived from cattle born, raised and slaughtered in the UK. To use the term "British", an operator must have an approval issued by one of the UK agriculture departments and employ an independent third party verifier to check the validity of the claim. My Department has issued guidance on the EU beef labelling rules to operators in England and has

worked closely with LACOTS on guidance to local authorities on enforcement. The guidance which has been issued by LACOTS asks local authorities to be pro-active in securing compliance with the rules. Further information is available via the Department's website (http://www.maff.gov.uk/foodrin/fdindx.htm).

Skills Deficiencies

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to follow-up skills deficiencies in land-based industries revealed by skills checks and to secure their remediation through vocational training programmes. [149472]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* Some 10,000 skill check training need assessments are being co-ordinated by Lantra national training organisation using funding provided under the action plan for farming. Lantra is aggregating the information obtained through this exercise to compile a comprehensive picture of the sector's training needs at both a national and regional level. Where relevant, the information will be used to help refine the work force development plan which Lantra is currently developing for DfEE.

£22 million has been made available to fund training through the vocational training scheme (VTS) which forms part of the England rural development programme. The VTS is open for applications and farmers who have identified a training need through the skill check programme can apply for funding where they wish to undertake 20 days or more of training. Alternatively, training providers can apply on behalf of groups of farmers. This can be for much shorter periods provided the collective time is for 20 training days or more. Lantra is working closely with training providers to ensure that the funding available under the VTS is fully and effectively utilised to address key skill gaps. The VTS will fund up to 75 per cent. of eligible training costs. To date, just over 90 VTS applications have been received and 20 projects worth some £300,000 have been approved.

Flooding (Hereford)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the report from W. S. Atkins regarding flood defences for the City of Hereford will be published; and if he will make a statement. [149524]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* I understand that Messrs. W. S. Atkins have completed preliminary investigations into potential options for flood alleviation at Hereford and have submitted a report to the Environment Agency. The report will be presented to the Wye local flood defence committee for consideration at its meeting on 2 March 2001.

Renderers

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the companies that have tendered in the last three years for Government contracts for rendering beef, indicating which of them are associated or connected with each other. [R] [149686]

Ms Quin: There have been no tenders for rendering services in the past three years, the previous tender having been held in 1997. The arrangements are being reviewed this summer.

Farmers (Retirement Schemes)

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he proposes to introduce a retirement scheme for owner occupiers and tenant farmers; and if he will make a statement. [R] [149688]

Mr. Morley: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) on 23 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 515W.

Agrimonetary Compensation

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if, during this financial year, he proposes to draw down the full agrimonetary compensation to which the UK agricultural industry is entitled. [R] [149689]

Ms Quin: In the current financial year we expect to pay some £182 million in agrimonetary compensation, including £100 million of optional compensation. Further compensation became available on 1 January this year; we expect the Commission to notify us of the amount later this month. The Government then have until the end of April to decide whether to pay any optional amounts.

SCOTLAND

Regional Aid

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement on European Union regional aid *(a)* in the years 1997 to 2000 and *(b)* proposed for 2001. [145665]

Mrs. Liddell: Structural fund expenditure in Scotland for 1997–98 was £164 million, for 1998–99 was £160 million and for 1999–2000 was £205 million. Planned expenditure for 2000–01 is £130 million. Total funds available for 2000–06 are euro 1,700 million (about £1 billion at current exchange rate).

Poverty

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement on poverty in Scotland, and numbers of Scottish people living in poverty, in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000. [145645]

Mrs. Liddell: The UK Government have introduced a range of measures to address poverty and social exclusion. For example, the national minimum wage has ensured decent minimum levels of pay for over 100,000 people in Scotland and the New Deal has helped over 30,000 young people in Scotland into jobs since its introduction in 1998. The Working Families Tax Credit benefits over 100,000 families in Scotland and, together with other measures introduced this Parliament, is estimated to lift around 100,000 children in Scotland out of poverty by 2002. (We are committed to abolish child poverty in 20 years, with the ambition to halve it in 10 years.) For the elderly, we have introduced the Minimum Income Guarantee, which

benefits around 164,000 people aged 60 or over; an increased Winter Fuel Payment, which benefits around 1 million people aged 60 or over; and free television licences for those people aged 75 or over, benefiting over 300,000 pensioners. Over the course of this Parliament, we are spending across Great Britain an extra £9 billion, over and above inflation, on pensioners, with over half going to the poorest third.

The Government have also set up the Joint Ministerial Committee on poverty to ensure that the UK Government and the devolved Administrations can work together to tackle the problems of poverty and social exclusion.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many people in Glasgow, Pollok are in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit. [147871]

Mr. Foulkes: Copies of the latest quarterly inquiries giving statistics for the Working Families Tax Credit and the Disabled Persons Tax Credit are in the House Library. These statistics contain estimates, based on a 5 per cent. sample of awards, of the number of recipients in each parliamentary constituency and in each local authority. As at August 2000, it is estimated that around 2,100 families in Glasgow, Pollok were in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Local Transport Plans

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that money allocated to local authorities for local transport plans is not transferred to other local authority services. [149172]

Mr. Hill: For 2001–02, the majority of capital funding allocated for local transport will be provided in the form of grant and supplementary credit approvals (SCA) which are ring-fenced for transport.

From 2002–03 the new cross-service single capital pot—which will include a contribution to cover small-scale integrated transport measures and maintenance of local highways and bridges—will be introduced to provide authorities with discretion over the allocation of capital funds across their functional responsibilities. This does not affect the need for authorities to allocate the resources required to deliver their objectives and targets. It does, however, allow them greater flexibility in the use of those resources and will help deliver improved outcomes and better services through more effective tackling of cross-cutting issues. Allocations for major transport schemes costing over £5 million will continue to be provided as grant and SCA and ring-fenced to the particular schemes concerned.

We have now put in place, under the provisions of the Transport Act 2000, a clear statutory duty on authorities to carry out their functions to deliver their local transport plans and we expect them to commit the resources to do so. We are also requiring authorities to monitor their progress against the objectives and targets set in their plans and to provide annual progress reports which we shall take into account in determining annual allocations to authorities.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the quality of the first round of local transport plans. [149170]

Mr. Hill: It is very encouraging to see the standard and commitment demonstrated by all authorities in completing their full local transport plans (LTPs). Overall, they represent a significant improvement on the provisional plans submitted in July 1999.

The plans demonstrate that authorities are taking forward the Government's integrated transport agenda at the local level, taking full account of the importance of the environment, safety, economy, accessibility and integration. The full LTPs are also increasingly integrated with wider corporate objectives, and recognise the role transport can play in tackling broader local issues such as health and social exclusion.

The commitment many authorities have shown in engaging local partners and communities in finalising their full plans has been particularly impressive, with many undertaking comprehensive and innovative participation exercises.

The plans also illustrate that authorities are aware of the importance of monitoring their performance and are taking steps to ensure that monitoring systems are in place to show how they will achieve their targets and objectives.

Oil Tankers

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what negotiations he is initiating to ensure that maritime states give shelter to oil tankers on the high seas which are in danger of breaking up. [148169]

Mr. Hill: This is a matter which potentially affects all maritime states, and the appropriate international forum in which to discuss it is the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). Indeed, the IMO's Maritime Safety Committee is expected to discuss the issue of ports/places of refuge when it meets in May of this year.

Planning

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to levy charges on an increasing scale on developers who make repeated appeals in residential planning cases. [149057]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have no plans to levy charges on developers who make repeated planning appeals. Section 70A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 gives local planning authorities the power to turn away planning applications where a substantially similar proposal has been rejected by the Secretary of State, on appeal or following a call-in, within the previous two years and where there has been no significant change in the material circumstances.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will bring forward proposals to give objectors equal rights to developers and their agents when inspectors visit sites subject to residential planning applications. [149058]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Under the statutory rules for handling appeals by inquiries or hearings, all parties, including objectors, have an opportunity to attend a site visit if undertaken by an inspector. The rules for handling appeals by written representations do not include provision for a site visit, but an inspector will always make one. The planning inspectorate will notify objectors of the site visit arrangements if they have been asked to do so.

In all cases, inspectors refuse to hear evidence or submissions from any parties during a site visit.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will limit the number of appeals a developer can make in residential planning cases. [149059]

Ms Beverley Hughes: A developer's right of appeal to the Secretary of State against a local planning authority's refusal of, or failure to decide, a planning application is a long-established part of the planning system. Section 70A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 enables local planning authorities to turn away repeat applications in defined circumstances. We have no plans to change the current position.

Transport Infrastructure

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the value was of Government financial grants to the South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive for each year from 1996–97 to the most recent year for which figures are available. [149069]

Mr. Hill: I should first point out that there is a fundamental difference between Passenger Transport Executives (PTEs) and Passenger Transport Authorities (PTAs). The PTAs function is to formulate general policies for meeting public transport requirements in its area, and the function of the PTE is to put these policies into effect, with funding from the PTA.

The figure I am quoting relate to grants and borrowing approvals announced in the local transport capital expenditure settlements for the South Yorkshire PTA for the financial years 1996–97 to 2001–02. They are as follows:

	£ million
1996–97	3.251
1997–98	5.600
1998–99	6.125
1999–2000	8.500
2000–01	11.923
2001–02	22.500
Total	57.899

In addition, some of the funds initially allocated to the South Yorkshire PTA were transferred to the South Yorkshire districts in-year for public transport works. Of the total figure of £57.899 million allocated to the South Yorkshire PTA for the period 1996–97 to 2001–02, it is estimated that £43.894 million was transferred to the South Yorkshire districts. This gives an estimated residual figure of £14.005 million issued to the South Yorkshire PTA over the six year period.

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the value was of Government financial support for transport infrastructure projects affecting Doncaster residents, for each year since 1996–97. [149070]

Mr. Hill: The figures I am quoting relate to grants and borrowing approvals announced in the local transport capital expenditure settlements for Doncaster Metropolitan borough council for the financial years 1996–97 to 2001–02. They are as follows:

	£ million
1996–97	5.712
1996–98	2.732
1998–99	1.036
1999–2000	2.850
2000–01	19.684
2001–02	[1]24.790
Total	56.804

[1] This figure includes £9 million Transport Supplementary Grant held back until required.

In addition, some of the funds initially allocated to the South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Authority (SYPTA) were transferred to the South Yorkshire districts in-year for public transport works. For the period 1996–97 to 2001–02 some £57.899 million was initially issued to the SYPTA, and of this it is estimated that £9.243 million was transferred to Doncaster Metropolitan borough council. This gives an estimated total of £66.047 million issued to Doncaster over the six year period.

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his policy regarding the use of a hybrid Bill as the means of promoting a transport infrastructure project to which the Transport and Works Act 1992 applies. [148976]

Mr. Hill: The Transport and Works Act procedure is the normal means of considering whether authority should be given for transport infrastructure projects that fall within its scope. This would not preclude the possibility of the Government promoting a hybrid Bill where we considered this to be an appropriate means of authorising a scheme.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many submissions were received by his Department *(a)* in total and *(b)* from Worcestershire to the consultation paper on local government finance; [148891]

(2) how many schools in Worcestershire submitted responses to the local government finance Green Paper. [148892]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We received 16,321 consultation responses in sufficient time to include them in the analysis of responses to the local government finance Green Paper. 14,402 of these were part of a campaign by the Fair Education Funding Forum (F40). Many of these were from schools and parents in Worcestershire. Further analysis of the responses by geographical location is not feasible as some of the addresses are unclear and such analysis could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will rank, in descending order, each local authority in the West Midlands on the basis of wealth per head of population. [148889]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested is not available.

Water Authorities

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has to change the responsibilities of water authorities whose customers have had their properties damaged because of the failure of the water authority properly to safeguard their plant and equipment; and if he will make a statement; [149081]

(2) if he will introduce legislation to give Government powers to prosecute water companies which fail to protect their equipment from the effects of flooding. [149515]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Water and sewerage undertakers already have a statutory duty to maintain their systems (including plant and equipment). Their performance is put under scrutiny by the Office of Water Services and, as part of this, checks are made on the serviceability of their networks. The undertakers are also required to have plans in place to deal with any failure in the system.

Where waste water from a company's sewer enters a customer's property, customers are entitled to the return of a years sewerage charges up to £1,000 under the guaranteed standards scheme. If sewer flooding is caused by severe weather (eg widespread flooding), payment is not due. These provisions are in addition to individuals rights under common law.

We have no plans at present to make changes to these responsibilities or make any failure a criminal offence.

Flooding

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to compensate fully local authorities for the total costs of the recent floods; and if he will make a statement. [148950]

Ms Beverley Hughes: In addition to the emergency assistance available to local authorities under the Bellwin scheme and the extra £51 million to accelerate new flood defence schemes, my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the chair of the floods task force, recently announced that a further £11.6 million has been made available nationally to pay for the Environment Agency's short-term emergency response and repair costs.

In order to find a longer-term solution to the current problems, we have already embarked upon a review of the way in which flood defence is funded. All of the relevant Government Departments and agencies are involved in this review, including MAFF, DETR, HMT and the Environment Agency. The review steering group is currently commissioning research to inform the work of the review. Based on the current timetable, the review is expected to report its conclusions in September this year.

Departmental Policies (Morecambe and Lunesdale)

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, including statistical information, the effect on the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [149125]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The constituency of Morecambe and Lunesdale has benefited from a range of Government initiatives since 2 May 1997, including:

Capital allocations for housing

Year	*£ million*
1997–98	1.8
1998–99	3.0
1999–2000	3.4
2000–01	3.9
2001–02	4.4

By 2001–02, the resources made available to support Lancaster city council's housing capital investment programme will have more than doubled since the Government came to power. It is for the local authority to determine where within its boundary these resources are invested.

Single regeneration budget

SRB Round 1—Turning the Tide: Morecambe

This is a seven-year strategy to halt decline and build tourism through the comprehensive regeneration of an area in the town centre. The scheme builds on pre-existing housing schemes and extends to business, training and environmental projects.

SRB total is £4.3 million, of which £2.7 million since 1997–98.

SRB Round 5—Luneside regeneration

This seven-year scheme aims to tackle dereliction and draw private investment into key sites in Lancaster. It addresses deprivation through linked programmes of enterprise support, training and community development.

SRB total is £4.997 million

It is not possible to identify the exact proportion of this figure allocated to areas within the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency.

Local transport plans

Year	*£ million*
1997–98	[1]11
1998–99	[1]8
1999–2000	[1]10
2000–01	[2]11
2001–02	28

[1] These figures are for Lancashire country council's transport policies and programmes allocation

[2] This figure is from Lancashire county council's provisional local transport plan settlement

It is not possible to determine exactly how much of these amounts has been spent on the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency. The constituency has benefited from Lancashire county council's integrated transport policies.

European funding

The Government have secured European funding for Morecambe under the North West Objective 2 programme for 2000–06. It is not possible to state the amounts involved because the programme has yet to be launched.

Local government finance settlement

The following figures show the Government grants to Lancaster county council and Lancaster city council as part of the local government finance settlement.

The information for general grant (revenue support grant, national non domestic rates, and damping grants) is a follows:

Year	*£ million*
Lancaster city council	
1997–98	11.028
1998–99	11.015
1999–2000	11.283
2000–01	11.671
2001–02	12.236
Lancashire county council	
1997–98	—
1998–99	578.211
1999–2000	601.844
2000–01	628.203
2001–02	644.494

These figures have not been adjusted to make year on year comparisons possible. There is no figure for 1997–98 because Lancashire county council was undergoing reorganisation.

It is not possible to determine the exact amounts allocated by the two councils to the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency.

Housing (Young People)

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what provision he has made for housing of people aged 16 to 18 years in England. [149787]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: We are determined to provide stronger support for people who become unintentionally homeless. We will extend the groups of vulnerable homeless people who have a priority need for accommodation to include 16 and 17-year-olds, and care leavers aged 18 to 21. We will make these changes shortly by order under section 189 of the 1996 Housing Act.

We are also concerned to improve the provision and management of supported housing for young people. The new supporting people programme will come into effect in 2003–04, providing an integrated policy and funding framework for support services for vulnerable households, including young people. Additionally, we will provide £120 million capital funding for a new safer communities supported housing fund, together with associated revenue support of £17 million, to provide new housing and support for young people at risk, and other vulnerable people.

HOME DEPARTMENT

RSPCA

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what reasons underlay the decision by the Charities Commission that the RSPCA cannot display the words "Ban Animal Experimentation" on a RSPCA van. [149290]

Mr. Boateng: This is a matter for the Charity Commission, which will write to my hon. Friend. A copy of the Commission's reply will be placed in the Library.

Staffordshire Constabulary

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many civilian staff were employed by Staffordshire constabulary *(a)* in May 1997 and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available. [148390]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* Information on police service personnel numbers is collected twice a year in March and September. On 31 March 1997, Staffordshire police had 763 civilian support staff. On 30 September 2000, the latest date available, the force had 897 civilian support staff, 134 more civilian staff than the force had in March 1997.

Fire Services

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the levels of spending on fire services were per head of population in *(a)* Staffordshire and *(b)* each other county of England (i) in the current year and (ii) in each of the last three years, distinguishing in each case the element represented by standard spending assessment. [148291]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Information on net current expenditure per head of population in England, based on returns to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, is shown in the table.

Fire service: net current expenditure per head 1997–98 to 2000–01

£ per head of population

Fire authority	*1997–98 Outturn*	*1998–99 Outturn*	*1999–2000 Outturn*	*2000–01 Budget-based*
Avon	25.84	27.10	28.35	29.63
Bedfordshire and Luton	25.55	25.92	28.65	28.91
Berkshire	23.12	23.27	25.05	26.47
Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes	19.75	20.60	20.80	22.53
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	20.79	20.62	22.58	24.09
Cheshire	24.33	24.77	27.46	28.20
Cleveland	38.49	39.13	41.39	43.74
Cornwall	24.35	24.65	25.26	26.46
Cumbria	27.52	27.61	29.98	32.20

Fire service: net current expenditure per head 1997–98 to 2000–01

£ per head of population

Fire authority	*1997–98 Outturn*	*1998–99 Outturn*	*1999–2000 Outturn*	*2000–01 Budget-based*
Derbyshire	21.21	23.78	24.34	25.61
Devon	26.05	26.88	28.84	30.13
Dorset	21.87	24.07	25.10	26.19
Durham and Darlington	26.96	27.44	28.76	30.58
East Sussex	26.77	26.84	29.81	30.46
Essex	25.60	26.45	27.87	28.93
Gloucestershire	21.41	21.97	22.71	24.17
Greater Manchester	29.92	30.87	31.56	33.01
Hampshire	20.45	21.85	23.85	24.67
Hereford and Worcester	22.20	23.60	24.75	26.07
Hertfordshire	23.67	23.65	25.33	26.82
Humberside	30.11	31.40	32.54	34.28
Isle of Wight	34.00	38.69	38.69	40.68
Isles of Scilly	91.88	74.61	74.30	84.37
Kent and Medway Towns	25.45	26.92	28.46	29.27
Lancashire	27.19	28.69	30.24	31.36
Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland	18.68	20.66	21.22	22.37
Lincolnshire	19.49	20.58	22.22	22.37
London	37.22	38.26	38.48	40.78
Merseyside	36.61	38.85	40.89	42.11
Norfolk	19.66	20.49	23.46	26.06
North Yorkshire	23.17	23.50	25.59	25.13
Northamptonshire	18.87	19.89	21.69	22.03
Northumberland	30.79	32.51	37.34	37.02
Nottinghamshire and City of Nottingham	23.54	25.01	26.43	26.62
Oxfordshire	19.65	21.30	22.96	22.80
Shropshire and Wrekin	25.23	26.42	28.92	29.25
Somerset	21.37	22.69	25.15	26.36
South Yorkshire	25.28	27.41	29.32	30.99
Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire	21.49	22.52	23.39	24.37
Suffolk	20.39	21.81	22.27	24.22
Surrey	26.45	28.50	28.77	29.47
Tyne and Wear	33.59	37.29	37.12	39.58
Warwickshire	27.92	27.28	28.78	30.84
West Midlands	27.92	29.53	30.77	32.16
West Sussex	25.37	26.35	28.27	29.45
West Yorkshire	27.16	28.39	29.89	30.29
Wiltshire and Swindon	19.85	20.62	22.09	24.28

The figures are not directly comparable with standard spending assessments (SSA). Details of SSAs per head of population are available in the House of Commons Library in the "SSA Handbook" and, since 1998–99, in "Standard Spending Assessments Authority by Authority". This information is also available on the internet at: http://www.local.detr.gov.uk/finance/ssa/handbook/0001/hand0001.htm. Information on the 2001–02 settlement will be available in due course.

Coroners Courts

Mr. Singh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce proposals for the reform of coroner's courts. [149298]

Mr. Boateng: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health announced on 30 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 177, the Home Secretary has set in train a review of the coroners system. The aim will be to consider what arrangements are needed for the investigation of suspicious and unnatural deaths. Account will be taken of the Chief Medical Officer's recommendations for changes to death certification procedures, and the reports of the Bristol Infirmary and Alder Hey Inquiries. The review will also keep in touch with the Shipman inquiry. Further details, including the terms of reference and the review team, will be announced in due course.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the amount *(a)* spent, *(b)* claimed and *(c)* allocated to the London borough of Waltham Forest and the London borough of Redbridge in respect of expenditure on asylum seekers in (i) 1998–99 and (ii) 1999–2000. [149828]

Mrs. Roche: Prior to 1 April 1999, the Department of Health administered all grants for supporting asylum seekers. On 1 April 1999, the Home Office took over responsibility for administering the support grant for asylum-seeking adults and families. The Department of Health retained responsibility for the payment of the grant for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) until 1 April 2000, when responsibility transferred to the Home Office.

The amounts spent, claimed and paid to date for the London borough of Waltham Forest and the London borough of Redbridge in
(i) 1998–99 and (ii) 1999–2000 are shown in the table.

£

Grants	Waltham Forest 1998–99[1]	Waltham Forest 1999–2000[2]	Redbridge 1998–99[1]	Redbridge 1999–2000[2]
(a) Spent	3,297,458	8,594,864	4,591,053	8,091,301
(b) Claimed	3,297,458	8,594,864	4,591,053	8,091,301
(c) Paid to date	3,297,458	8,594,864	4,591,053	8,091,301

[1] Figures provided by the Department of Health relate to three grants administered by that Department. These grants are *(a)* Families with children asylum seekers grant, *(b)* Adult asylum seekers grant and *(c)* unaccompanied asylum-seeking children grant (UASC). All of these figures remain subject to adjustment following the receipt of audited claims.

[2] Figures include amounts for the Adult and Families grant administered by the Home Office and the UASC grant administered by the Department of Health. All figures are net of Housing Benefit. These figures relate to the initial claims made by these authorities. Some audit certificates have yet to be received for this period and adjustments may be required once all of these certificates are submitted.

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers were residing in the *(a)* London borough of Waltham Forest and *(b)* London borough of Redbridge (i) in May 1997 and (ii) on the most recent date for which figures are available. [149827]

Mrs. Roche: Central Government do not collect information in the form requested.

The Association of London Government has provided figures, which show the number of asylum seekers being supported by the London boroughs of Waltham Forest and Redbridge.

	Waltham Forest[1]	Redbridge[2]
May 1997		
Families[3]	85	110
Singles[4]	100	130
UASCs[5]	5	10
January 2001		
Families[3]	425	390
Singles[4]	620	980
UASCs[5]	155	220

[1] January 2001 figures as at 19 January 2001
[2] January 2001 figures as at 26 January 2001
[3] Families include cases with only adult dependants
[4] Some single adults may live in other areas of the country but the accommodation is provided by the London borough
[5] UASC—Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children under 18
Note:
These figures have been rounded to the nearest five

Information is not available on the number of asylum seekers not being supported by the London boroughs but residing in Waltham Forest and Redbridge.

Entry Clearance

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the conclusions were of the ministerial review of family visit appeals conducted between 20 November 2000 and 11 January 2001; and if he will place a report of the review team's findings in the Library. [149534]

Mrs. Roche: I refer the hon. Member to the reply my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) on 11 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 609W. The ministerial review was completed in January and resulted in the reduction of the fees for appealing against a decision to refuse a visit visa as a family visitor to £125 and £50 from £500 and £150. A team of officials will continue to review other aspects of these appeals. A copy of their terms of reference will be placed in the Library.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the net income from fees for family visit appeals since 2 October 2000; and what proportion of this net income relates to appeals which are outstanding. [149535]

Mrs. Roche: The current figures for net income from fees for family visitor appeals in the period 2 October to 31 December 2000 is £16,800. Of this, 31 per cent. related to appeals which are currently outstanding and which may result in further refunds.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the total cost to his Department of administering family visit appeal fees since 2 October 2000. [149536]

Mrs. Roche: Payments are administered by diplomatic posts overseas. The Home Office reimburses the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for refunds following successful appeals. The small administrative costs of doing so are contained within existing resources.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the anticipated net annual income is from family visit appeal fees. [149537]

Mrs. Roche: On the basis of our current planning assumptions, the anticipated net income (gross income minus refund payments) from family visitor appeal fees in a full year is around £560,000.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the anticipated cost is to his and other Departments of collecting and refunding family visit appeal fees. [149538]

Mrs. Roche: The process of collection and refunding family visitor appeal fees is administered by diplomatic posts overseas. These costs are minimal and will be met through efficiency savings. Since the Court Service is not involved in the collection process, it has no significant costs to meet. The Home Office reimburses the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for refunds made following successful appeals. The small administrative costs of doing so are contained within existing resources. The only other cost involved is that of the refund payments themselves. We estimate that this will settle at around £370,000 for a full year.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons have exercised a human rights appeal under section 65 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 against decisions refusing entry clearance; and, of that number, how many applied for entry as a family visitor. [149529]

Mrs. Roche: To obtain this information, we would have to examine individual case files. It is available, therefore, only at disproportionate cost.

Police (Avon and Somerset)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the impact of recent changes in the number of places in police houses in the Avon and Somerset area on his policy on police recruitment; and if he will make a statement. [148737]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Changes to the number of police houses in a police force area are matters for the police authority and chief constable to decide. We expect police authorities and chief constables to achieve best value in the use of the capital resources available to them and to make decisions about those resources in the light of all relevant considerations.

Avon and Somerset constabulary recruited 89 officers in the six months to 30 September 2000 and continues to recruit successfully. The force has been allocated 195 recruits from the crime fighting fund (CFF) over the three years 2000–01 to 2002–03 and it expects to recruit its full allocation of 67 crime fighting fund recruits in 2000–01, over and above previously planned recruitment.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the number of officers *(a)* recruited by, *(b)* resigning from and *(c)* retiring from the Avon and Somerset police force in each year since 1978–79. [148740]

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is not possible to provide information on recruitment and wastage on an individual force basis before the computerisation of the police number database in 1991–92, because of the way in which information on police numbers was previously collected and stored by the Department.

The information in the table is for each year since 1991.

Avon and Somerset constabulary—numbers recruited, resigned and retired since 1991

Year	Number of officers recruited	Number of officers who resigned	Number of officers who retired
1991[1]	133	30	88
1992[1]	95	15	94
1993[1]	123	20	129
1994–95[2]	154	17	184
1995–96	55	8	97
1996–97	174	12	132
1997–98	138	22	124
1998–99	142	14	80
1999–2000	104	21	104
2000–01[3]	89	8	49

[1] Prior to 1995–96 police numbers were collected on a calender year basis rather than a financial year basis

[2] Figures for 1994–95 cover the period 1 January 1994 to 31 March 1995

[3] Figures for 2000–01 are for the period 1 April to 30 September 2000

Prisoners (Medical Services)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of prisoners who suffer from mental health problems; what services are available to help them; what funding is provided for their treatment; and if he will make a statement. [149681]

Mr. Boateng: A survey of psychiatric morbidity among prisoners in England and Wales, undertaken in 1997 by the Office for National Statistics for the Department of Health, showed that around 90 per cent. of prisoners sampled displayed evidence of at least one of the five disorders (personality disorder, psychosis, neurosis, alcohol misuse and drug dependence) considered in the survey.

Prisoners who need in-patient treatment for mental disorder may be transferred to psychiatric hospitals. The care and treatment of prisoners who do not need to be admitted to hospital is generally undertaken by prison health care staff under the supervision of national health service specialists.

The Government's programme of reform for prison health care was set out in "The Future Organisation of Prison Healthcare" (March 1999). All prisons and the health authorities in which they are situated are required by March 2001, jointly to assess prisoners' health needs and to identify appropriate services to meet them. These services should include the development, over time, of in-reach into prisons by community mental health services as part of the broader development of mental health services as set out in the national service framework for mental health. Under the Government's NHS Plan an additional 300 staff will be employed by 2004 to provide such in-reach services to prisoners.

Crime Statistics

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on crime figures for the Vale of Clwyd in the last 12 months. [149790]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Recorded crime figures are not held on a constituency basis. The nearest available figures are for the Denbighshire crime and disorder reduction partnership area. The latest centrally available figures, for the year ending September 2000, are as follows:

	Number of offences	Offences per 1,000 population
Violence against the person	1,047	12.3
Sexual Offences	44	0.5
Robbery	32	0.4
Burglary of a dwelling	489	5.8
Theft of a motor vehicle	348	4.1
Theft from a vehicle	535	7.3

CCTV

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what grants his Department has made towards CCTV coverage in the Vale of Clwyd in each of the last four years. [149789]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In the last four years, two grants have been made towards closed circuit television (CCTV)

coverage in the Vale of Clwyd. In March 1997, £95,000 was awarded towards a scheme in Prestatyn under round 3 of the CCTV challenge competition, and in January 2000, £159,000 was awarded towards improving security in Rhyl under round 1 of the CCTV initiative.

Denbighshire county council has submitted three proposals for further cameras to cover towns in the Vale of Clwyd under round 2 of the CCTV initiative. These are currently under consideration.

House Fires

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people died in house fires in each region in the United Kingdom in each of the last 20 years. [149791]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is contained in the table. Figures are available at fire brigade area level from 1982 onwards.

Deaths in dwelling[1] fires, by brigade area, UK, 1982 to 1999

Brigade area	*1982*	*1983*	*1984*	*1985*	*1986*	*1987*	*1988[2]*	*1989*	*1990*
United Kingdom	728	710	692	700	753	710	721	634	625
England and Wales	578	561	543	527	594	548	569	532	499
England	548	527	503	505	568	510	534	508	478
England—non-met counties	251	257	245	230	287	251	249	261	250
Avon	9	8	8	10	5	8	10	8	6
Bedfordshire	1	3	2	2	4	4	4	4	4
Berkshire	5	3	8	6	7	5	4	5	8
Buckinghamshire	4	2	6	1	4	2	3	6	6
Cambridgeshire	7	6	5	2	4	2	5	3	6
Cheshire	13	9	12	5	7	8	10	5	9
Cleveland	6	4	7	5	4	2	4	6	8
Cornwall	4	3	0	1	6	2	9	4	4
Cumbria	6	2	7	4	5	6	12	8	3
Derbyshire	12	15	8	9	13	13	6	7	10
Devon	7	14	8	9	11	8	5	6	12
Dorset	7	5	4	3	6	6	6	4	5
Durham	16	10	7	5	5	3	11	12	7
East Sussex	4	7	8	13	10	8	4	9	13
Essex	10	14	13	15	14	10	15	11	9
Gloucestershire	3	0	1	9	7	4	5	2	0
Hampshire	13	9	15	11	21	15	9	10	7
Hereford and Worcester	5	3	5	3	4	4	7	7	5
Hertfordshire	7	8	5	5	9	6	12	5	7
Humberside	7	12	6	9	5	9	11	9	10
Isle of Wight	0	5	3	1	4	2	0	0	0
Kent	6	8	14	7	13	17	9	13	18
Lancashire	23	22	16	21	24	14	16	13	14
Leicestershire	0	8	9	7	10	8	4	6	1
Lincolnshire	8	3	3	1	6	2	2	5	3
Norfolk	5	5	6	10	9	5	5	7	5
North Yorkshire	4	9	4	6	2	9	0	7	8
Northamptonshire	4	6	5	4	3	15	7	5	6
Northumberland	3	6	2	3	3	6	3	7	6
Nottinghamshire	6	14	16	7	12	12	11	17	9
Oxfordshire	4	3	1	3	9	4	4	4	3
Shropshire	4	0	2	3	6	2	4	5	1
Somerset	4	1	2	1	6	5	4	1	4
Staffordshire	5	11	3	9	7	6	7	9	6
Suffolk	5	2	6	9	4	4	3	4	6
Surrey	7	5	7	4	9	6	10	6	8
Warwickshire	7	6	3	1	1	4	2	4	5
West Sussex	4	5	6	3	5	2	4	12	4
Wiltshire	6	1	2	3	3	3	2	5	4
Isles of Scilly[3]	—	—	—	—	—	—	0	0	0
England—Met Counties	297	270	258	275	281	259	285	247	228
Greater Manchester	50	46	47	45	58	35	49	32	39
Merseyside	34	14	18	23	30	14	20	20	14
South Yorkshire	17	11	16	15	22	15	16	19	17
Tyne and Wear	23	13	30	15	10	16	20	15	19
West Midlands	35	36	29	24	34	24	37	31	20
West Yorkshire	21	33	21	36	26	32	22	30	25
Greater London	117	117	97	117	101	123	121	100	94
Wales[4]	30	34	40	22	26	38	35	24	21
North Wales	8	7	5	5	6	2	5	4	5
Mid and West Wales	12	12	12	8	8	18	11	5	4
South Wales	10	15	23	9	12	18	19	15	12
Northern Ireland	24	13	21	29	27	24	18	14	13

Deaths in dwelling[1] fires, by brigade area, UK, 1982 to 1999

Brigade area	*1982*	*1983*	*1984*	*1985*	*1986*	*1987*	*1988[2]*	*1989*	*1990*
Scotland	126	136	128	144	132	138	134	88	113
Strathclyde	70	62	67	80	70	77	64	48	63
Highland and Islands	7	9	11	5	6	5	8	4	5
Grampian	8	10	6	14	9	8	5	10	11
Tayside	12	17	8	9	7	8	4	3	4
Lothian and Borders	21	22	20	22	23	16	25	16	18
Fife	3	7	4	4	7	9	10	3	5
Central	3	5	10	4	9	11	9	4	4
Dumfries	2	4	2	6	1	4	8	0	3

Brigade area	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994[3]*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999[4,5]*
United Kingdom	613	578	530	488	559	564	562	506	463 (466)[6]
England and Wales	473	483	403	394	468	461	462	407	356
England	430	449	376	376	428	428	432	384	338
England—non-met counties	202	220	191	197	236	238	250	209	177
Avon	8	5	3	7	2	3	4	4	8
Bedfordshire	3	6	2	4	4	6	3	3	1
Berkshire	8	5	4	4	3	12	5	7	2
Buckinghamshire	2	0	5	3	4	4	7	1	4
Cambridgeshire	6	4	1	6	3	9	4	2	3
Cheshire	5	3	7	5	6	8	11	8	9
Cleveland	4	7	9	1	7	5	10	2	4
Cornwall	2	6	8	2	6	1	6	4	2
Cumbria	3	4	4	5	10	3	4	5	3
Derbyshire	6	16	4	10	6	5	7	8	8
Devon	3	4	3	5	5	6	4	6	4
Dorset	1	4	4	0	10	8	5	2	8
Durham	10	6	8	9	6	3	9	4	9
East Sussex	10	11	6	4	6	7	7	9	5
Essex	11	15	5	6	11	13	14	8	5
Gloucestershire	0	2	1	6	7	5	4	2	1
Hampshire	6	7	5	7	14	15	5	7	8
Hereford and Worcester	4	6	9	6	2	1	6	3	2
Hertfordshire	3	3	5	5	6	10	10	8	4
Humberside	6	8	5	9	18	8	7	10	5
Isle of Wight	0	0	3	1	2	1	1	1	0
Kent	3	10	10	11	12	12	7	5	6
Lancashire	16	13	21	12	21	19	22	17	15
Leicestershire	8	4	10	5	9	10	4	11	3
Lincolnshire	1	3	3	6	6	4	2	8	3
Norfolk	4	5	4	1	2	2	5	1	5
North Yorkshire	3	6	3	8	5	7	7	8	5
Northamptonshire	7	2	0	4	4	3	8	8	4
Northumberland	1	1	4	4	3	0	3	1	2
Nottinghamshire	15	8	6	5	4	11	16	10	9
Oxfordshire	0	4	3	3	4	10	4	10	6
Shropshire	6	6	1	7	1	1	3	0	2
Somerset	2	3	3	2	3	5	4	0	1
Staffordshire	12	15	5	4	8	7	10	8	6
Suffolk	2	0	4	2	9	0	6	6	2
Surrey	2	2	2	6	2	4	5	6	3
Warwickshire	10	6	2	1	1	1	2	3	2
West Sussex	7	3	6	3	1	2	5	3	7
Wiltshire	2	6	3	8	3	7	4	0	1
Isles of Scilly[7]	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
England—Met Counties	228	229	185	179	192	190	182	175	161
Greater Manchester	51	32	32	36	27	24	29	28	32
Merseyside	8	20	13	17	15	19	10	21	11
South Yorkshire	12	12	9	4	8	11	6	12	10
Tyne and Wear	12	12	14	11	6	12	5	8	5
West Midlands	39	37	24	21	26	19	16	18	21
West Yorkshire	26	17	25	24	29	35	24	23	21
Greater London	80	99	68	66	81	70	92	65	61
Wales[4]	43	34	27	18	40	33	30	23	18
North Wales	6	10	10	5	13	7	5	9	3
Mid and West Wales	14	10	9	3	11	8	9	3	5
South Wales	23	14	8	10	16	18	16	11	10

Brigade area	1991	1992	1993	1994[3]	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999[6,7]
Northern Ireland	22	13	14	19	15	7	26	23	27
Scotland	118	82	113	75	76	96	74	76	80
Strathclyde	63	38	47	41	39	56	42	50	43
Highland and Islands	10	7	6	5	3	7	5	8	1
Grampian	11	10	10	4	4	9	7	5	4
Tayside	3	2	14	5	7	4	3	4	4
Lothian and Borders	17	9	18	9	6	6	8	2	13
Fife	6	10	13	7	6	8	2	4	9
Central	7	4	2	2	6	6	4	2	3
Dumfries	1	2	3	2	5	0	3	1	3

[1] Dwellings include houseboats, caravans and any other non-building structure used solely as a permanent residence.
[2] Some casualty data have been revised since previous publication to take into account death certificate information provided by ONS and General Registrar Offices (Scotland and NI). Data revised in Home Office Statistical Bulletin, Fire Statistics, UK, 1999 (Issue 20/00).
[3] Up until 1987 data for Isles of Scilly were included with Cornwall.
[4] The brigades in Wales were restructured in April 1996. (North Wales—formerly Clywd and Gwynedd; Mid and West Wales—formerly Dyfed, Powys and West Glamorgan; and South Wales—formerly Gwent, Mid Glamorgan and South Glamorgan).
[5] Figures from 1994 onwards include late call, heat and smoke incidents. Prior to 1994 these incidents were not recorded.
[6] 1999 UK totals are estimated to take account of likely revisions to the data once further information from death certificates etc have been received. No estimates have been made for individual brigade areas.
[7] Provisional
[8] Estimated
Source:
Home Office: Brigade FDR1 statistical returns

Constituency Spending Limits

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to announce the constituency spending limits which would apply in the event of a general election in *(a)* April and *(b)* May of this year. [149655]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The limits on candidates' election expenses at parliamentary and local government elections are set down in section 76 of the Representation of the People Act 1983, with provision for periodical updating to take account of inflation. An order increasing the limits in line with inflation since March 1997 will be made shortly. The revised limits will be as follows:

Election	Current limit	New limit
Parliamentary general election in a county constituency	£4,965 plus 5.6p per elector	£5,483 plus 6.2p per elector
Parliamentary general election in a borough constituency	£4,965 plus 4.2p per elector	£5,483 plus 4.6p per elector
Local government election	£219 plus 4.3p per elector	£242 plus 4.7p per elector

Prisoners (Age Profile)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* male and *(b)* female prison inmates in England and Wales were aged over (i) 70, (ii) 75, (iii) 80, (iv) 85 and (v) 90 years on 1 January. [148896]

Mr. Boateng: Provisional information for 31 December 2000 about prisoners in England and Wales over the age of 70 years is given in the table. Information on the prison population is also available in successive volumes of "Prison Statistics England and Wales" (chapter one of the 1999 edition CM 4805).

Number of males and females in prison over the age of 70

Age[1]	Males	Females
Over 70	172	3
Over 75	55	–
Over 80	13	–
Over 85	3	–

[1] The category 'Over 70' includes all inmates over the age of 70 (not just 70–74), the category 'Over 75' includes all inmates over the age of 75 (not just 75–79), and so on.

Naturalisation Applications

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many passports have been issued since May 1997 to those seeking citizenship through naturalisation, within seven months of the application being submitted. [148673]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* The information is not available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The Immigration and Nationality Directorate does not keep records of whether successful applicants for British citizenship go on to obtain British passports. The United Kingdom Passport Agency (UKPA) has no way of knowing when a passport applicant applied for British citizenship.

Departmental Policies (Morecambe and Lunesdale)

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, including statistical information, the effect on the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [149127]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed

information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office annual reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home Office annual report 1999–2000, is available in the Library.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out below are examples relating to the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency or the immediate locality:

Under the crime reduction programme, the following amounts have been awarded to Morecambe and Lunesdale:

reducing burglary £53,600 (Morecambe closed circuit television (CCTV) £144,000

Schemes

reducing burglary initiative—a project under round one of the reducing burglary initiative was awarded £53,600 to tackle burglary in the Morecambe area. An application for further funding for the Morecambe area under round three has been received and is currently under consideration.

The initiative has a lot of partnership working between the police and other agencies and is based around the following interventions:

Alarms

Improved Fencing in the area

Improved Lighting

CCTV—two schemes were awarded a total of £144,000 under the first round of the CCTV Initiative.

The West End scheme in Morecambe, awarded £84,000 proposed four cameras to complement the existing camera covering shopping facilities and residential properties. The scheme intends to tackle vehicle crime, violent crime and burglary, in tandem with the alleygating scheme, which will force offenders onto main thoroughfares with CCTC coverage.

The Cable Street scheme in Lancaster, awarded £60,000 proposed three cameras to cover the northern area of Lancaster town centre, to add to the 12-camera system also in operation. The scheme proposed to reduce fear of violent crime, reduce vehicle crime and burglary, as well as addressing the problem of anti-social behaviour.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Morecambe and Lunesdale to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000; and

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Immigration

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate *(a)* the total number of immigrants to the United Kingdom in each year since 1990 and *(b)* how many of those were (i) people granted asylum and (ii) other categories of immigrant. [149186]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested is given in the table.

Acceptances for permanent residence in the United Kingdom, 1990–99

Number of persons

	1990	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
All acceptances[1]	53,200	53,900	52,570	55,640	55,010	55,480	61,730	58,720	69,790	97,120
Refugees and persons given exceptional leave to remain[2]	1,130	990	1,780	3,990	3,290	1,600	4,200	4,830	6,680	22,500
of which:										
Recognised refugees[2,3]	930	750	1,280	2,850	2,260	680	1,120	2,400	4,270	22,500
Persons given exceptional leave to remain[2]	200	240	500	1,140	1,030	920	3,080	2,430	2,410	
All other acceptances[1]	52,070	52,910	50,790	51,650	51,720	53,880	57,530	53,890	63,110	74,620

[1] Includes spouses and dependants

[2] Accepted in own right (excludes spouses and dependants)

[3] Includes refugees from South East Asia and their dependants and persons granted settlement under measures aimed at reducing the pre-July 1993 backlog as announced in the White Paper in July 1998

Source:

Table 6.3 of the Control of Immigration: Statistics United Kingdom 1999

Information for 2000 should be published in June 2001

Detention and Training Orders

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many detention and training orders have been made to date; and if he will make a statement. [149161]

Mr. Boateng: The detention and training order was implemented on 1 April 2000. Information provided by the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales indicates that 4,560 detention and training orders were made between 1 April 2000 and 31 December 2000.

Drug Treatment and Testing Orders

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many drug treatment and testing orders have been made to date in each police force area in England and Wales; how many have been *(a)* discharged and *(b)* breached; and if he will make a statement. [149160]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Prior to 1 April 2000, drug treatment and testing orders were run on a pilot scheme in parts of three police force areas in England and Wales. Information is not available in the form requested, but data provided to the National Probation Directorate by the probation services in the pilot areas are given in the table. Since 1 October 2000, drug treatment and testing orders have been rolled-out on a national basis. No data on orders made since roll-out are yet available.

Number of drug treatment and testing orders made and breached by police force area, England and Wales 30 September 1998 to 31 March 2000

Police force area	*Number made*	*Number breached*
Pilot Data (to 31 March 2000)[1]		
Gloucestershire	100	63
Merseyside	68	29
Metropolitan Police (Croydon)	42	28

Source:
[1] National Probation Directorate (CPG)

Prisons (Industrial Relations)

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made in reforming the arrangements for industrial relations in prisons and in setting up a Prison Service Pay Review Body for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. [150088]

Mr. Straw: On 26 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 713W, my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Home Office, announced that it was my intention to set up a pay review body to make independent recommendations to the Government on the pay of prison governors, prison officers and related grades for the Prison Service in England and Wales and for the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

I indicated that the delivery of those intentions depended on my being satisfied that the state of industrial relations within prisons is such to enable the effective and efficient management of the service. At that time, relations were not satisfactory because the Prison Officers Association (POA) had withdrawn goodwill following a decision to market test Her Majesty's Prison, Brixton.

Since then, there has been a very frank but positive dialogue between the Prison Service, the POA and Ministers on this and a range of other issues. I am pleased to announce today that I am satisfied that the industrial relations climate is now conducive to proceeding with plans for a pay review body.

I am also able to announce the appointment of Sir Toby Frere to the post of chair of the Prison Service Pay Review Body.

This review body will operate on the lines of the five existing review bodies which deal with 1.3 million public sector employees. Like the existing review bodies, it will have a secretariat from the independent Office of Manpower Economics. The remit of the Pay Review Body will also have the scope to make an independent determination in relation to the pay of prison governors, prison officers, night patrol officers and prison auxiliaries in the Northern Ireland Prison Service based on submissions made to it by that service.

This establishment of an independent pay determination mechanism is under the provisions of section 128 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. It is part of a comprehensive improvement in Prison Service management.

It is also my intention, when parliamentary time allows, to replace section 127 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 with a reserve statutory power and a voluntary industrial relations agreement. Section 127, as it stands, makes it unlawful for officers of a prison to take industrial action. The voluntary agreement which has been accepted by the Prison Governors Association (PGA) and the POA national executive committee will be put to a special POA delegates conference at the end of February. This will mean that they have agreed not to induce, support or authorise industrial action. In recognition of this we will provide them with a new disputes procedure which will include independent arbitration. The voluntary agreement, which will be legally binding, will give me, as Secretary of State for the Home Department, the power to seek injunctive relief.

In order to bring about these important improvements in industrial relations in the Prison Service in England and Wales quickly, I intend to use the provisions of the voluntary agreement instead of those in section 127, while awaiting parliamentary time to effect the changes in legislation. However, it is clear on all sides that section 127 would be used in the event of a breakdown of the agreement.

Together, these measures create a new climate for industrial relations in the service. They clear the way for more constructive dialogue on a wide range of issues by modernising the way that this key group of public sector workers deal with their employer.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

European Commission

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy towards monitoring the European Commission's spending on its budget lines, with particular reference to moneys spent on *(a)* information campaigning and *(b)* lobby groups. [147516]

Mr. Vaz: The Council and Parliament are the joint arms of the EU Budgetary Authority and have responsibility in monitoring and setting annual spending for all EC institutions, including the Commission. Within this arrangement, it is the Parliament which has the final say (in its Second Reading of the Budget) over all items of non-compulsory expenditure, which includes funding for information campaigns and lobby groups. With regards to these, it is within the remit of the Commission to make commitments and payments, based on the criteria for the targeting of funds from these budget lines. The Court of Auditors has general responsibility for checking the legality and regularity of underlying transactions involving these and other EC funds and for ensuring the reliability of the Commission's accounts.

Comitology

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many EU regulations and directives containing comitology powers were issued in the last 12 months. [147320]

Mr. Vaz: Many pieces of Community legislation contain implementing measures governed by comitology rules. In 1996, the total number of EU measures containing comitology powers was 4,500. No figures have been released by the Commission since then.

More in-depth information about all EU legislation is available on the internet at europa.eu.int/eur-lex.

Freedom of Movement (Third-country Nationals)

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what representations the Government have made within the institutions of the European Union to enable the free movement of third-country nationals travelling from one EU member state to another; [149092]

(2) if he intends to raise within the EU the question of the freedom of movement within the EU of third-country nationals. [149091]

Mrs. Roche: I have been asked to reply.

The Government have made no such representations and do not intend to do so. The right of free movement within the European Union is limited to citizens of the European Economic Area and their family members. The Government are committed to maintaining the United Kingdom's frontier controls and retaining national control over immigration policy in relation to third-country nationals. Third-country nationals wishing to travel within the European Union may do so in accordance with the requirements applicable in the member state concerned, obtaining visas if necessary.

European Council

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 23 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 564–65W, concerning the consultative conferences and other activities required of European presidencies during 2001 in Annexe IV of the provisional treaty of Nice, if he will list *(a)* the procedures and criteria by which Her Majesty's Government will select representatives of statutory and non-statutory bodies, *(b)* the funds to be used for organising and running these conferences and *(c)* to whom such representatives will report, and how they will consult. [148396]

Mr. Vaz: The Nice treaty agreed that the consultative process should be wide and involve members of civil society. No details have yet been worked out. The Swedish presidency has been mandated to report to the Gothenburg European Council in June. We expect this report to address possible mechanisms and scope for this process.

Sir David Hannay

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) of 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 58W, on Sir David Hannay, how many days Sir David has worked; and how much Sir David was paid in the last financial year for which figures are available. [148876]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 5 February 2001]:* During financial year 1999–2000 Sir David worked 92.5 days in London and overseas at the per diem rate of £400 per day.

Visits (India)

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on how many occasions since he became Minister for Europe the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) has visited India; and how many of these visits were *(a)* on Government business and *(b)* at the expense of the Hindujas or one of their companies or foundations. [149829]

Mr. Vaz: The information is as follows:

(a) Once between 31 January and 5 February 2000 as Minister responsible for entry clearance matters; and

(b) None.

Entry Clearance

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how his Department implements the Joint Entry Clearance Unit's advice to entry clearance officers that an applicant for entry clearance should be advised of the possibility of a human rights appeal only if he or she is insistent that his or her human rights have been breached. [149530]

Mr. Vaz: All applications for entry clearance are considered under the immigration rules and since 2 October 2000 in the light of the Human Rights Act 1998. Should applicants consider that their human rights have been breached, they can make an allegation of non-compliance either at the time of interview or subsequent representations. This will be investigated. If the applicant remains dissatisfied, an appeal will be triggered.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will provide a monthly breakdown, by entry clearance post, of the number of family visit visa refusals in relation to which *(a)* an appeal has been received, *(b)* the refusal has been overturned by an entry clearance manager after receipt of an appeal, *(c)* an appeal has been despatched, *(d)* entry clearance has been issued prior to the outcome of an appeal, *(e)* an appeal has been allowed and notified to the post and *(f)* an appeal has been dismissed and notified to the post, since October 2000. [149531]

Mr. Vaz: The breakdown on family visit refusals, appeals received, refusals overturned after receipt of an appeal and appeals despatched, covers information received from the largest 100 entry clearance posts, which submit monthly statistical returns. There are individual tables for the months of October, November and December. I regret that the information for the remaining 64 small posts (those issuing fewer than 1,200 visas a year) is not available centrally.

The information requested on the issue of entry clearance prior to the outcome of an appeal is not available centrally or locally. The entry clearance manager may only sign the appeal form if he/she decides after review that the refusal stands.

The second breakdown on appeal decisions was provided by the Lord Chancellor's Department and covers all 164 entry clearance posts. The information requested on the notification of the outcome of appeals is not

available centrally and could be provided only at a disproportionate cost by contacting each of the 164 entry clearance posts individually. The Home Office informs posts on the outcome of allowed appeals. The Lord Chancellor's Department informs posts of dismissed appeals.

Family visit visa orals appeals

File number	*Country*	*Date fax received*	*Date appeal received in office*	*Date sent to hearing centre*	*Time taken to action in Lough.*	*Hearing centre*	*Date of hearing*
VV00008/2000	Bangladesh	5 November 2000	10 November 2000	10 November 2000	Same day	Leeds	30 November 2000
VV00010/2000	India	7 November 2000	14 November 2000	14 November 2000	Same day	Taylor HS	5 December 2000
VV00018/2000	Nigeria	13 November 2000	20 November 2000	20 November 2000	Same day	Leeds	7 December 2000
VV00027/2000	Pakistan	n/a	22 November 2000	22 November 2000	Same day	Hatton X	13 December 2000
VV00029/2000	Pakistan	16 November 2000	22 November 2000	22 November 2000	Same day	Hatton X	13 December 2000
VV00030/2000	Pakistan	16 November 2000	22 November 2000	22 November 2000	Same day	Taylor HS	13 December 2000
VV00032/2000	Pakistan	16 November 2000	22 November 2000	23 November 2000	1 day	Hatton X	14 December 2000
VV00037/2000	India	14 November 2000	23 November 2000	23 November 2000	Same day	Taylor HS	13 December 2000
VV00042/2000	India	14 November 2000	29 November 2000	29 November 2000	Same day	Hatton X	20 December 2000
VV00044/2000	Nigeria	20 November 2000	29 November 2000	29 November 2000	Same day	Taylor HS	20 December 2000
VV00045/2000	India	17 November 2000	29 November 2000	29 November 2000	Same day	Birmingham	21 December 2000
VV00047/2000	India	16 November 2000	29 November 2000	29 November 2000	Same day	Taylor HS	20 December 2000
VV00067/2000	Nigeria	23 November 2000	4 December 2000	4 December 2000	Same day	Birmingham	21 December 2000
VV00082/2000	Pakistan	24 November 2000	7 December 2000	7 December 2000	Same day	Taylor HS	28 December 2000
VV00088/2000	Pakistan	6 December 2000	13 December 2000	13 December 2000	Same day	Manchester	3 January 2001
VV00103/2000	Pakistan	n/a	20 December 2000	20 December 2000	Same day	Taylor HS	10 January 2001
VV00114/2000	Sri Lanka	n/a	21 December 2000	21 December 2000	Same day	Taylor HS	18 January 2001
VV00116/2000	Pakistan	13 December 2000	21 December 2000	21 December 2000	Same day	Birmingham	11 January 2001
VV00120/2000	Pakistan	7 December 2000	22 December 2000	28 December 2000	2 days	Taylor HS	12 January 2001
VV00121/2000	Pakistan	7 December 2000	22 December 2000	28 December 2000	2 day	Leeds	16 January 2001
VV00124/2000	Israel	?	28 December 2000	28 December 2000	Same day	Taylor HS	18 January 2001
VV00131/2000	Pakistan	8 December 2000	28 December 2000	28 December 2000	Same day	Hatton X	18 January 2001
VV00138/2000	Pakistan	8 December 2000	29 December 2000	29 December 2000	Same day	Taylor HS	23 January 2001
VV00001/2001	Nigeria	28 December 2000	3 January 2001	3 January 2001	Same day	Taylor HS	24 January 2001
VV00002/2001	Pakistan	19 December 2000	3 January 2001	3 January 2001	Same day	Hatton X	24 January 2001
VV00003/2001	Pakistan	19 December 2000	3 January 2001	3 January 2001	Same day	Manchester	24 January 2001
VV00005/2001	Pakistan	15 December 2000	3 January 2001	3 January 2001	Same day	Leeds	24 January 2001
VV00006/2001	India	22 December 2000	3 January 2001	3 January 2001	Same day	Hatton X	24 January 2001
VV00017/2001	India	19 December 2000	3 January 2001	4 January 2001	Same day	Manchester	25 January 2001
VV00019/2001	India	29 December 2000	5 January 2001	5 January 2001	Same day	Birmingham	26 January 2001
VV00024/2001	Casablanca	n/a	9 January 2001	9 January 2001	Same day	Hatton X	30 January 2001
VV00045/2001	Bombay	29 December 2000	15 January 2001	15 January 2001	Same day	Manchester	5 February 2001
VV00046/2001	New Delhi	5 January 2001	15 January 2001	15 January 2001	Same day	Taylor HS	7 February 2001
VV00048/2001	Dakar	4 January 2001	16 January 2001	16 January 2001	Same day	Birmingham	6 February 2001
VV00049/2001	New Delhi	9 January 2001	16 January 2001	16 January 2001	Same day	Taylor HS	6 February 2001
VV00051/2001	Dakar	4 January 2001	16 January 2001	16 January 2001	Same day	Taylor HS	6 February 2001
VV00058/2001	Nigeria	11 January 2001	17 January 2001	17 January 2001	Same day	Taylor HS	7 February 2001
VV00059/2001	India	2 January 2001	17 January 2001	17 January 2001	Same day	Trafford	6 February 2001
VV00063/2001	Iran	n/a	17 January 2001	18 January 2001	1 day	Birmingham	8 February 2001
VV00065/2001	India	12 January 2001	19 January 2001	19 January 2001	Same day	Hatton X	9 February 2001
VV00066/2001	Pakistan	15 January 2001	19 January 2001	19 January 2001	Same day	Hatton X	9 February 2001
VV00068/2001	Pakistan	15 January 2001	19 January 2001	19 January 2001	Same day	Hatton X	9 February 2001
VV00075/2001	Nigeria	15 January 2001	22 January 2001	22 January 2001	Same day	Hatton X	12 February 2001
VV00077/2001	Nigeria	15 January 2001	22 January 2001	22 January 2001	Same day	Taylor HS	13 February 2001
VV00078/2001	Nigeria	15 January 2001	22 January 2001	22 January 2001	Same day	Taylor HS	13 February 2001
VV00079/2001	Uganda	n/a	22 January 2001	22 January 2001	Same day	Taylor HS	12 February 2001
VV00081/2001	Pakistan	9 January 2001	23 January 2001	23 January 2001	Same day	Birmingham	12 February 2001
VV00083/2001	Nigeria	18 January 2001	24 January 2001	24 January 2001	Same day	Hatton X	14 February 2001
VV00084/2001	Nigeria	n/a	24 January 2001	25 January 2001	1 day	Leeds	14 February 2001
VV00085/2001	Nigeria	n/a	24 January 2001	25 January 2001	1 day	Leeds	14 February 2001
VV00091/2001	Turkey	17 January 2001	25 January 2001	26 January 2001	1 day	Taylor HS	16 February 2001
VV00100/2001	Pakistan	n/a	25 January 2001	29 January 2001	1 day	Glasgow	19 February 2001
VV00105/2001	Pakistan	21 November 2000	29 January 2001	31 January 2001	2 days	Hatton X	22 February 2001
VV00109/2001	Pakistan	17 January 2001	31 January 2001	31 January 2001	Same day	Manchester	23 February 2001
VV00110/2001	India	23 January 2001	31 January 2001	31 January 2001	Same day	Manchester	27 February 2001
VV00111/2001	India	29 January 2001	31 January 2001	31 January 2001	Same day	Manchester	27 February 2001
VV00112/2001	Nigeria	25 January 2001	31 January 2001	31 January 2001	Same day	Taylor HS	22 February 2001
VV00115/2001	India	29 January 2001	31 January 2001	1 February 2001	1 day	Hatton X	22 February 2001
VV00117/2001	Nigeria	25 January 2001	1 February 2001	1 February 2001	Same day	Hatton X	23 February 2001
VV00119/2001	India	23 January 2001	31 January 2001	1 February 2001	1 day	Birmingham	22 February 2001
VV00120/2001	Pakistan	n/a	1 February 2001	1 February 2001	Same day	Birmingham	22 February 2001
VV00121/2001	Turkey	n/a	2 February 2001	2 February 2001	Same day	Leeds	27 February 2001
VV00121/2001	Pakistan	n/a	6 February 2001	6 February 2001	Same day	Birmingham	26 February 2001
VV00123/2001	Pakistan	n/a	6 February 2001	6 February 2001	Same day	Hatton X	27 February 2001

File number	6 week deadline date	Date promulgated	Decision	Total days from Lough. receipt to completion (target 42)	Reason for delay	Date tribunal appeal received	Date sent to Taylor House
VV00008/2000	21 December 2000	30 November 2000	Allowed	20	n/a	—	—
VV00010/2000	25 December 2000	8 December 2000	Allowed	24	n/a	—	—
VV00018/2000	1 January 2001	12 December 2000	Allowed	22	n/a	—	—
VV00027/2000	3 January 2001				Adjourned to 9 January 2001	—	—
VV00029/2000	3 January 2001				Adjourned to 12 February 2001	—	—
VV00030/2000	3 January 2001	21 December 2000	Allowed	29	n/a	—	—
VV00032/2000	4 January 2001	28 December 2000	Dismissed	36	n/a	29 January 2001	30 January 2001
VV00037/2000	3 January 2001	20 December 2000	Dismissed	27	n/a	—	—
VV00042/2000	10 January 2001	29 December 2000	Withdrawn	30	n/a	—	—
VV00044/2000	10 January 2001				Adjourned to 31 January 2001	—	—
VV00045/2000	10 January 2001	2 January 2001	Allowed	33	n/a	—	—
VV00047/2000	10 January 2001				Adjourned to 23 March 2001	—	—
VV00067/2000	11 January 2001	5 January 2001	Allowed	31	n/a	—	—
VV00082/2000	18 January 2001	5 January 2001	Dismissed	28	n/a	—	—
VV00088/2000	24 January 2001	12 January 2001	Allowed	29	n/a	—	—
VV00103/2000	31 January 2001	22 January 2001	Dismissed	32	n/a	—	—
VV00114/2000	1 February 2001	22 January 2001	Allowed	31	n/a	—	—
VV00116/2000	1 February 2001	—	—	—	[1] —	—	—
VV00120/2000	2 February 2001	—	—	—		—	—
VV00121/2000	2 February 2001	—	—	—		—	—
VV00124/2000	8 February 2001	—	—	—	Adjourned to 19 February 2001	—	—
VV00131/2000	8 February 2001	—	—	—	Adjourned to 19 February 2001	—	—
VV00138/2000	9 February 2001	1 February 2001	Allowed	32	n/a	—	—
VV00001/2001	14 February 2001	31 January 2001	Allowed	28	n/a	—	—
VV00002/2001	14 February 2001	5 February 2001	Allowed	32	n/a	—	—
VV00003/2001	14 February 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00005/2001	14 February 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00006/2001	14 February 2001	31 January 2001	Dismissed	28	n/a	—	—
VV00017/2001	14 February 2001	—	—	—	Adjourned to 19 February 2001	—	—
VV00019/2001	16 February 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00024/2001	20 February 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00045/2001	26 February 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00046/2001	26 February 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00048/2001	27 February 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00049/2001	27 February 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00051/2001	27 February 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00058/2001	28 February 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00059/2001	28 February 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00063/2001	28 February 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00065/2001	2 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00066/2001	2 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00068/2001	2 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00075/2001	5 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00077/2001	5 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00078/2001	5 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00079/2001	5 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00081/2001	6 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00083/2001	7 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00084/2001	7 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00085/2001	7 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00091/2001	8 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00100/2001	7 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00105/2001	12 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00109/2001	12 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00110/2001	12 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00111/2001	12 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00112/2001	12 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00115/2001	12 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00117/2001	15 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00119/2001	15 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00120/2001	15 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00121/2001	16 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV09121/2001	20 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—
VV00123/2001	20 March 2001	—	—	—	—	—	—

[1] Adjourned due to Loughborough error—relisted to 8 February 2001 Birmingham

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what has been the total cost to his Department of collecting and refunding family visit appeal fees since 2 October 2000. [149532]

Mr. Vaz: Minimal.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will provide a breakdown, by entry clearance post, of the number of family visit visa applications *(a)* received, *(b)* determined, *(c)* allowed and *(d)* refused in each month since 2 October 2000. [149533]

Mr. Vaz: The breakdown gives the required details for November and December, based on statistics received from the largest 100 entry clearance posts, which submit monthly statistical returns. I regret that the information for the remaining 64 small posts is not available centrally. For the October figures, I refer to my answer to the hon. Member on 12 December 2000, *Official Report*, columns 125–26W.

Family visit applications—December

Post	*Received*	*Determined*	*Issued*	*Refused*
Abidjan	37	37	36	1
Abu Dhabi[1]	103	103	88	15
Abuja	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Accra	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Addis Ababa	50	50	43	7
Almaty	25	25	25	0
Amman	267	267	259	3
Amsterdam	152	152	150	2
Ankara	60	60	59	1
Bahrain	4	4	4	0
Baku	55	55	55	0
Bandar S B	12	12	12	0
Bangkok	124	124	95	29
Banjul	64	64	59	5
Beirut	131	131	129	2
Belgrade	650	453	647	3
Bogota	50	50	41	9
Bombay	566	566	410	156
Bratislava	87	87	87	0
Brussels	59	59	59	0
Bucharest	119	119	111	8
Budapest	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Cairo	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Calcutta	0	0	0	0
Canberra	0	0	–6	6
Casablanca	125	125	113	12
Chicago	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Colombo	45	45	18	27
Copenhagen	47	47	47	0
Damascus	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Dar Es Salaam	105	105	92	13
Dhaka	486	404	376	110
Doha	29	17	24	5
Dubai	60	60	50	10
Dublin	36	0	36	0
Dusseldorf	299	299	295	4
Ekaterinburg	23	23	22	1
Geneva[1]	191	191	174	17
Georgetown	31	31	23	8
Guangzhou	120	96	88	32
Hanoi	5	5	3	2
Harare	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Havana	3	3	3	0
Hong Kong	85	85	83	2
Islamabad	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Istanbul	378	378	360	18
Jakarta	86	86	85	1
Jedda	0	0	0	0
Jerusalem	8	8	8	0
Kampala	136	136	108	28
Karachi	302	1,246	287	15
Kathmandu	0	0	0	0
Khartoum	32	0	26	6
Kiev	158	158	139	19
Kingston	77	77	65	12
Kuala Lumpur	19	19	19	0
Kuwait	103	103	86	17
Lagos	1,439	1,439	1,189	250
Lima	19	19	13	6
Los Angeles	279	279	279	0
Luanda	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Lusaka	183	183	171	12
Madras	119	119	110	9
Madrid	20	20	20	0
Manila	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Minsk	26	26	23	3
Moscow	299	299	290	9
Muscat	36	36	35	1
Nairobi	113	113	94	19
New Delhi	992	992	639	353
New York	1,319	1,086	1,316	3
Nicosia	346	346	339	7
Oslo	45	45	43	2
Ottawa	412	412	411	1
Paris	339	320	337	2
Peking	130	130	124	6
Port Louis	67	0	58	9
Port of Spain	6	6	6	0
Prague	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Pretoria	10	22	7	3
Quito	27	27	26	1
Riga	4	4	4	0
Riyadh	5	5	0	5
Rome	240	240	237	3
Sana'a	0	0	0	0
Sarajevo	146	146	144	2
Shanghai	26	26	26	0
Singapore	13	13	13	0
Sofia	218	218	216	2
Sto Domingo[1]	3	3	2	1
St. Petersburg	73	3	0	3
Stockholm	103	103	101	2
Taipei	0	0	0	0
Tashkent	18	18	17	1
Tbilisi	0	0	0	0
Tehran	0	0	0	0
Tel Aviv	6	6	6	0
Tirana[1]	78	78	73	5
Tokyo	13	13	12	1
Tunis	119	119	96	23
Valletta	0	0	0	0
Vienna	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Warsaw	1	3	–1	2
Washington	472	428	472	0
Wellington	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Yaounde	11	11	11	0
Zagreb	172	172	160	12

[1] Combined total for November/December

Family visit applications—November

Post	*Received*	*Determined*	*Issued*	*Refused*
Abidjan	17	17	13	4
Abu Dhabi	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Abuja	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Accra	681	681	403	278
Addis Ababa	120	120	100	20
Almaty	21	21	20	1
Amman	657	646	492	6
Amsterdam	85	85	80	5

Family visit applications—November

Post	Received	Determined	Issued	Refused
Ankara	22	22	20	2
Bahrain	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Baku	26	26	26	0
Bandar S B	20	20	20	0
Bangkok	185	185	152	33
Banjul	91	91	81	10
Beirut	106	106	106	0
Belgrade	596	453	592	4
Bogota	44	44	33	11
Bombay	566	566	410	156
Bratislava	15	15	15	0
Brussels	28	28	27	1
Bucharest	186	186	182	4
Budapest	2	2	1	1
Cairo	118	118	113	5
Calcutta	0	0	0	0
Canberra	0	0	0	0
Casablanca	126	126	120	6
Chicago	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Colombo	57	57	29	28
Copenhagen	71	71	70	1
Damascus	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Dar Es Salaam	135	135	121	14
Dhaka	287	404	135	152
Doha	26	17	22	4
Dubai	97	97	79	18
Dublin	38	0	38	0
Dusseldorf[1]	468	468	461	7
Ekaterinburg	9	9	8	1
Geneva	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Georgetown	37	37	31	6
Guangzhou	136	96	70	66
Hanoi	17	17	12	5
Harare	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Havana	2	3	2	0
Hong Kong	73	73	65	8
Islamabad	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Istanbul	426	426	401	25
Jakarta	87	87	83	4
Jedda	0	4	0	4
Jerusalem	42	42	42	0
Kampala	41	14	14	0
Karachi	763	1,246	708	55
Kathmandu	0	0	0	0
Khartoum	21	0	9	12
Kiev	200	200	184	16
Kingston	116	116	97	19
Kuala Lumpur	15	15	11	4
Kuwait	0	83	83	0
Lagos	2,693	2,693	2,355	338
Lima	33	33	32	1
Los Angeles	375	375	374	1
Luanda	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Lusaka	126	126	119	7
Madras	216	216	198	18
Madrid	55	55	55	0
Manila	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Minsk	27	27	27	0
Moscow	471	471	458	13
Muscat	29	29	27	2
Nairobi	226	226	194	32
New Delhi	1,025	1,025	647	378
New York	1,379	1,379	1,375	4
Nicosia	268	268	262	6
Oslo	46	46	44	2
Ottawa	485	485	484	1
Paris	318	318	317	1
Peking	73	73	70	3
Port Louis	n/a	n/a	n/a	13
Port of Spain	3	3	3	0
Prague	0	0	0	0
Pretoria	31	31	28	3
Quito	13	13	13	0

Family visit applications—November

Post	Received	Determined	Issued	Refused
Riga	5	5	5	0
Riyadh	25	25	15	10
Rome	111	111	107	4
Sana'a	0	0	0	0
Sarajevo	202	202	201	1
Shanghai	31	31	27	4
Singapore	15	15	15	0
Sofia	257	257	243	14
Sto Domingo	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
St. Petersburg	81	81	77	4
Stockholm	164	164	161	3
Taipei	0	0	0	0
Tashkent	19	19	19	0
Tbilisi	0	0	0	0
Tehran	0	0	0	0
Tel Aviv	12	12	12	0
Tirana	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Tokyo	12	12	12	0
Tunis	97	97	63	34
Valletta	0	0	0	0
Vienna	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Warsaw	10	10	9	1
Washington	451	451	451	0
Wellington	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Yaounde	0	0	0	0
Zagreb	172	172	162	10

[1] Combined total for October/November

Family visit appeals—December

Post	Refusals	Appeals received	Overturned	Despatched
Abidjan	1	0	0	0
Abu Dhabi	15	0	0	0
Abuja	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Accra	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Addis Ababa	7	0	0	0
Almaty	0	0	0	0
Amman	3	0	0	0
Amsterdam	2	0	0	0
Ankara	1	0	0	0
Bahrain	0	1	0	0
Baku	0	0	0	0
Bandar S B	0	0	0	0
Bangkok	29	0	0	0
Banjul	5	0	0	0
Beirut	2	0	0	0
Belgrade	3	0	0	0
Bogota	9	0	0	0
Bombay	156	4	0	4
Bratislava		0	0	0
Brussels	0	1	0	0
Bucharest	8	1	0	1
Budapest	n/a	0	0	0
Cairo	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Calcutta	0	0	0	0
Canberra	6	0	0	0
Casablanca	12	1	0	0
Chicago	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Colombo	27	0	0	0
Copenhagen	0	0	0	0
Damascus	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Dar Es Salaam	13	1	0	0
Dhaka	110	7	0	5
Doha	5	0	0	0
Dubai	10	1	0	1
Dublin	0	0	0	0
Dusseldorf	4	0	0	0
Ekaterinburg	1	0	0	0
Geneva	17	0	0	0
Georgetown	8	0	1	0
Guangzhou	32	2	0	0

Family visit appeals—December

Post	Refusals	Appeals received	Overturned	Despatched
Hanoi	2	0	0	0
Harare	n/a	0	0	0
Havana	0	0	0	0
Hong Kong	2	0	0	0
Islamabad	n/a	12	2	11
Istanbul	18	4	0	4
Jakarta	1	0	0	0
Jedda	0	0	0	0
Jerusalem	0	0	0	0
Kampala	28	0	1	0
Karachi	15	10	0	10
Kathmandu	0	0	0	0
Khartoum	6	0	0	6
Kiev	19	0	0	0
Kingston	12	0	0	0
Kuala Lumpur	0	0	0	0
Kuwait	17	1	0	1
Lagos	250	36	0	30
Lima	6	1	0	0
Los Angeles	0	0	0	0
Luanda	n/a	0	0	0
Lusaka	12	0	0	0
Madras	9	1	0	1
Madrid	0	0	0	0
Manila	n/a	0	0	0
Minsk	3	0	0	0
Moscow	9	0	0	0
Muscat	1	0	0	0
Nairobi	19	0	0	1
New Delhi	353	8	2	5
New York	3	0	0	0
Nicosia	7	0	0	0
Oslo	2	0	0	0
Ottawa	1	0	0	0
Paris	2	0	0	0
Peking	6	0	1	0
Port Louis	9	0	2	0
Port of Spain	0	0	0	0
Prague	n/a	0	0	0
Pretoria	3	0	0	0
Quito	1	0	0	0
Riga	0	0	0	0
Riyadh	5	1	0	1
Rome	3	0	0	0
Sana'a	0	0	0	0
Sarajevo	2	0	0	0
Shanghai	0	0	0	0
Singapore	0	0	0	0
Sofia	2	1	1	0
Sto Domingo	1	0	0	0
St. Petersburg	3	0	0	0
Stockholm	2	0	0	0
Taipei	0	0	0	0
Tashkent	1	0	0	0
Tbilisi	0	0	0	0
Tehran	0	1	1	1
Tel Aviv	0	0	0	0
Tirana	5	0	0	0
Tokyo	1	0	0	0
Tunis	23	0	0	0
Valletta	0	0	0	0
Vienna	n/a	n/a	0	n/a
Warsaw	2	0	0	0
Washington	0	0	0	0
Wellington	n/a	n/a	0	n/a
Yaounde	0	0	0	0
Zagreb	12	0	0	0

Family visit appeals—November

Post	Refusals	Appeals received	Overturned	Despatched
Abidjan	4	0	0	0
Abu Dhabi	n/a	0	0	0
Abuja	n/a	0	0	0
Accra	278	4	0	4
Addis Ababa	20	0	0	0
Almaty	1	0	0	0
Amman	6	0	0	0
Amsterdam	5	0	0	0
Ankara	2	0	0	0
Bahrain	n/a	1	0	0
Baku	0	0	0	0
Bandar S B	0	0	0	0
Bangkok	33	0	0	0
Banjul	10	0	0	0
Beirut	0	0	0	0
Belgrade	4	0	0	0
Bogota	11	0	0	0
Bombay	156	4	0	4
Bratislava	0	0	0	0
Brussels	1	0	0	0
Bucharest	4	0	0	0
Budapest	1	0	0	0
Cairo	5	0	0	0
Calcutta	0	0	0	0
Canberra	0	0	0	0
Casablanca	6	0	0	0
Chicago	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Colombo	28	1	0	1
Copenhagen	1	0	0	0
Damascus	n/a	0	0	0
Dar Es Salaam	14	0	0	0
Dhaka	152	5	0	5
Doha	4	0	0	0
Dubai	18	1	0	1
Dublin	0	0	0	0
Dusseldorf	7	0	0	0
Ekaterinburg	1	0	0	0
Geneva	n/a	1	0	0
Georgetown	6	1	1	0
Guangzhou	66	2	0	0
Hanoi	5	0	0	0
Harare	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Havana	0	0	0	0
Hong Kong	8	0	0	0
Islamabad	n/a	21	2	19
Istanbul	25	18	0	0
Jakarta	4	1	0	1
Jedda	4	0	0	0
Jerusalem	0	0	0	0
Kampala	0	1	1	0
Karachi	55	1	0	1
Kathmandu	0	0	0	0
Khartoum	12	1	0	0
Kiev	16	0	0	0
Kingston	19	1	0	1
Kuala Lumpur	4	0	0	0
Kuwait	0	1	0	1
Lagos	338	22	0	23
Lima	1	0	0	0
Los Angeles	1	0	0	0
Luanda	n/a	0	0	0
Lusaka	7	0	0	0
Madras	18	1	0	1
Madrid	0	0	0	0
Manila	n/a	0	0	0
Minsk	0	0	0	0
Moscow	13	0	0	0
Muscat	2	0	0	0
Nairobi	32	2	0	2
New Delhi	378	15	2	11
New York	4	0	0	0
Nicosia	6	0	0	0

Family visit appeals—November

Post	*Refusals*	*Appeals received*	*Overturned*	*Despatched*
Oslo	2	0	0	0
Ottawa	1	0	0	0
Paris	1	0	0	0
Peking	3	1	1	0
Port Louis	13	2	2	2
Port of Spain	0	0	0	0
Prague	0	0	0	0
Pretoria	3	0	0	0
Quito	0	0	0	0
Riga	0	0	0	0
Riyadh	10	0	0	0
Rome	4	0	0	0
Sana'a	0	0	0	0
Sarajevo	1	0	0	0
Shanghai	4	0	0	0
Singapore	0	0	0	0
Sofia	14	1	1	0
Sto Domingo	n/a	0	0	0
St. Petersburg	4	0	0	0
Stockholm	3	0	0	0
Taipei	0	0	0	0
Tashkent	0	0	0	0
Tbilisi	0	0	0	0
Tehran	0	0	0	0
Tel Aviv	0	1	0	1
Tirana	n/a	0	0	0
Tokyo	0	0	0	0
Tunis	34	2	0	2
Valletta	0	0	0	0
Vienna	n/a	0	0	0
Warsaw	1	0	0	0
Washington	0	0	0	0
Wellington	n/a	0	0	0
Yaounde	0	0	0	0
Zagreb	10	0	0	0

Military Crisis Management

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress made by the EU in setting up consultation and co-operation links between the EU and *(a)* NATO's non-EU members, *(b)* other countries which are candidates for accession to the EU and *(c)* other prospective partners in EU-led crisis management. [149796]

Mr. Vaz: The Nice European Council agreed arrangements to enable non-EU European Allies and other accession candidates to be involved in all phases of EU military crisis management. There will be regular consultation and dialogue at ministerial, Military Committee and official level, building on the interim agreements reached in June 2000. These arrangements are being implemented under the Swedish presidency. Nice also agreed initial proposals for the involvement of Canada, Ukraine, Russia and other potential partners. The elaboration of these arrangements is also being taken forward under the Swedish presidency.

EU/NATO Co-operation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of progress made in setting up modalities for full consultation, co-operation and transparency between the EU and NATO. [149795]

Mr. Vaz: The Nice European Council made wide-ranging proposals for a strategic partnership between the EU and NATO to ensure co-operation, consultation and transparency. NATO Foreign Ministers, meeting on 14–15 December, welcomed the Nice proposals. NATO proposed that EU and NATO Ministers should meet at least once every six months and that the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC) and NATO's North Atlantic Council (NAC) should hold joint meetings at least three times every six months. NATO agreed that additional meetings would be held in times of crisis. At the 22 January General Affairs Council, the EU welcomed NATO's positive reaction to Nice and agreed NATO's proposals on joint EU/NATO meetings. The EU presidency and NATO Secretary-General have thus concluded that the EU and NATO are in agreement on the elements for the permanent arrangements for consultation and co-operation between the EU and NATO. The first PSC/NAC meeting took place in Brussels on 5 February.

National Missile Defence

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with other Government Departments on *(a)* the missile threat to Europe and *(b)* the US Government's preparations to pursue national missile defence. [149794]

Mr. Vaz: The Department has regular discussions with other interested Government Departments, in particular the Ministry of Defence, across the range of issues related to missile defence, including the missile threat to Europe and US national missile defence.

Israeli/Palestinian Conflict

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to hold discussions with the new Israeli Government; and if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's Government's policy on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. [149656]

Mr. Wilson: The Prime Minister has already spoken to the new Israeli Prime Minister and we will seek to maintain our excellent relations with Israel.

Peace in the middle east will be achieved only through a negotiated settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as between Israel and Lebanon and Syria. The UK will remain actively engaged, doing all it can to bring about a just and lasting peace based on United Nations Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, and the principle of land for peace.

Barcelona Process

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the aims of the European Union in the Barcelona process for economic development in the countries involved. [147694]

Mr. Vaz: The EU's aims for the economic development of the Southern Mediterranean countries involved in the Barcelona process were reaffirmed at the Conference of Euro-Mediterranean Foreign Ministers at Marseilles last November. The Foreign Secretary informed the Foreign Affairs Committee of the presidency conclusions from Marseilles in November, which outlined

the EU's economic aims for the Barcelona process. I also informed the European Scrutiny Committees in late November last year.

The aim of the economic chapter of Barcelona is to establish an area of shared prosperity in the Mediterranean. At Marseilles, Ministers (both from the EU and the Mediterranean partners) reaffirmed their continuing objective to create a Euro-Mediterranean free-trade area by 2010. Ministers at Marseilles also agreed to take new measures for greater liberalisation of agricultural trade. Ministers placed emphasis on accelerating the outstanding negotiations under way with Algeria, Syria, and Lebanon, and signing of the Association Agreement with Egypt. Partner countries which already have Association Agreements in place were encouraged to open up further to one another economically in order to foster their integration into the global economy.

In support of these aims, the EU recently agreed the MEDA II regulation, which provides financial assistance to Mediterranean Partners. At Marseilles, EU Ministers confirmed that the indicative figure for the MEDA regulation over the period 2000–06 would be euro 5.35 billion.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

School Expenditure (Wandsworth)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the total spending on schools in the London borough of Wandsworth in each of the last five years. [147838]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows spending on schools in Wandsworth for the financial years 1994–95 to 1998–99, the latest year for which this information is currently available. These figures are based on net institutional expenditure on schools maintained by the local education authority in cash terms.

	£ million
1994–95	55
1995–96	55
1996–97	49
1997–98	50
1998–99	53

The following table sets out the overall resources made available to Wandsworth local education authority in both cash and real terms. These funding figures are not directly comparable with net institutional expenditure set out in the previous table.

Standard Spending Assessment and special/specific grants

£ million

	Cash	Real terms
1997–98	92	99
1998–99	95	99
1999–2000	101	103
2000–01	111	111

The following table expresses this funding on a per pupil basis. This reflects a real terms increase in funding per pupil in Wandsworth over the last three years of £400.

Standard Spending Assessment and special/specific grants

£ per pupil

	Cash	Real terms
1997–98	3,520	3,780
1998–99	3,610	3,770
1999–2000	3,850	3,930
2000–01	4,180	4,180

Under this Government, funding per pupil has already increased by over £300 nationally in real terms, and it will increase by a further £150 per pupil for 2001–02. Under the last Government, funding per pupil fell by £60 in real terms between 1994–95 and 1997–98. There will be further increases in funding following the year 2000 spending review, a further £370 per pupil over the three year period, taking the total increase to nearly £700 between 1997–98 and 2003–04.

Student Loans

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the net present value is of loans to students in financial year 1999–2000 under the current loan system; what rate of interest would be required to increase the net present value of student loan debt by £0.7 billion; and if he will make a statement. [148138]

Mr. Wicks: The net present value of the estimated £982 million income contingent loans issued in 1999–2000 to students domiciled in England and Wales is estimated to be £590 million. The nominal rate of interest required to increase this by £0.7 billion is estimated to be around 13 per cent. These figures are based on new estimates of the resource cost of income-contingent loans, which is now estimated to be 40 per cent. of the face value of the loans.

The net present value given here is different from that quoted in the Department for Education and Employment's annual accounts for 1999–2000 because the latter includes mortgage-style as well as income contingent-style loans. Loans issued to students domiciled in Scotland and Northern Ireland are a matter for the Scottish Parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly respectively.

Pupil Numbers

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* primary school and *(b)* secondary school pupils were in classes of 30 or more in (i) West Sussex and (ii) Mid Sussex constituency in each of the years from 1994–95 to 2000–01. [148353]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 2 February 2001]:* The Government have pledged to reduce the size of infant classes to a maximum of 30 by the end of this Parliament. We have already achieved this in the vast majority of schools.

The information requested is set out in the following table. This shows that the number of primary classes in

West Sussex with 31 or more has fallen by over 2,500 since 1998. By September 2,000, there were only 472 (2 per cent.) infant pupils in classes over 30 compared with over 4,000 (18 per cent.) in January 1998. This confirms that the Government are meeting the pledge in West Sussex.

West Sussex LEA

	Primary			Secondary		
Year	*Number of pupils in 1 teacher classes of size 1–29*	*Number of pupils in 1 teacher classes of size 30*	*Number of pupils in 1 teacher classes of size 31+*	*Number of pupils in 1 teacher classes of size 1–29*	*Number of pupils in 1 teacher classes of size 30*	*Number of pupils in 1 teacher classes of size 31+*
2000	35,341	10,680	13,158	32,228	3,390	3,506
1999	35,909	7,530	15,849	32,227	3,090	3,475
1998	35,346	7,560	15,791	31,031	3,210	3,410
1997	34,524	6,180	15,337	31,610	3,120	3,306
1996	34,151	5,550	14,447	32,003	2,820	3,119
1995	34,905	5,340	12,879	31,627	2,670	2,954

Mid Sussex parliamentary constituency

	Primary			Secondary		
Year	*Number of pupils in 1 teacher classes of size 1–29*	*Number of pupils in 1 teacher classes of size 30*	*Number of pupils in 1 teacher classes of size 31+*	*Number of pupils in 1 teacher classes of size 1–29*	*Number of pupils in 1 teacher classes of size 30*	*Number of pupils in 1 teacher classes of size 31+*
2000	5,007	1,260	1,385	5,848	500	540
1999	4,872	750	2,140	5,900	780	511
1998	4,516	930	2,146	5,727	720	441
1997	4,271	3,084	2,184	5,784	570	572
1996	—	[1]—	[1]—	—	[1]—	[1]—
1995	—	[1]—	[1]—	—	[1]—	[1]—

[1] Not available

Learning and Skills Councils

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those local learning and skills councils to which no elected local authority member has been appointed. [148625]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* To date, I am pleased to report that 62 candidates with experience as elected local authority members have been appointed to the local learning and skills councils (LSCs). With a number of vacancies still to be filled, those local LSCs where no elected local authority members have been appointed are:

Hampshire, Portsmouth, Southampton and the Isle of Wight;
Berkshire;
Northumberland;
Gloucestershire; and
London West.

In addition, 46 candidates who are currently local authority officials have been appointed across the 47 local LSCs. This combination of elected members and officials from local authorities will ensure that local LSCs are well placed to work closely in partnership with local authorities.

Degree Students

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the social class breakdown was in 2000 of students who *(a)* applied for and *(b)* were successful in obtaining places on degree courses at British universities in (i) law, (ii) medicine, (iii) engineering, (iv) nursing, (v) BEd teaching, (vi) accountancy, (vii) veterinary studies and (viii) psychology. [148702]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* The information is shown in the following table.

Applicants[1] and accepted applicants through UCAS to full-time and sandwich first-degree courses in the United Kingdom by social class and subject

	Social class							
Year of entry 2000	*Professional*	*Intermediate*	*Skilled manual*	*Skilled non-manual*	*Partly skilled*	*Unskilled*	*Not known*	*Grand total*
Applicants								
Pre-clinical medicine	2,823	2,979	699	702	360	79	915	8,557
Nursing	515	2,731	1,079	915	1,089	146	1,342	7,817
Psychology	2,877	9,582	3,853	3,254	2,064	486	2,663	24,779
Veterinary science	377	792	178	157	72	14	116	1,706
Engineering[2]	3,449	8,351	3,795	2,388	1,913	366	2,776	23,038
Law	2,532	7,483	2,866	2,527	1,472	427	2,518	19,825
Accountancy	1,002	3,535	1,840	1,528	898	265	1,317	10,385
Education[3]	1,381	6,625	3,575	2,628	2,026	404	2,141	18,780

Applicants[1] and accepted applicants through UCAS to full-time and sandwich first-degree courses in the United Kingdom by social class and subject

	Social class							
Year of entry 2000	*Professional*	*Intermediate*	*Skilled manual*	*Skilled non-manual*	*Partly skilled*	*Unskilled*	*Not known*	*Grand total*
Accepted applicants								
Pre-clinical medicine	1,970	1,843	363	423	200	44	386	5,229
Nursing	251	1,218	358	380	419	36	536	3,198
Psychology	1,095	3,519	1,188	1,131	689	140	949	8,711
Veterinary science	163	276	51	42	12	2	49	595
Engineering[2]	2,077	4,608	1,917	1,280	1,003	181	1,455	12,521
Law	1,614	4,350	1,522	1,384	741	229	1,332	11,172
Accountancy	411	1,382	719	662	348	104	572	4,198
Education[3]	569	2,639	1,278	997	779	125	765	7,152

[1] Each student can make up to six applications. In the table, applicants are counted once under each subject to which they applied.
[2] Includes general, civil, mechanical, aeronautical, electrical, electronic, production/manufacturing and chemical engineering courses.
[3] Includes courses with the Education Group that lead to Qualified Teacher Status.

Individual Learning Accounts

Mr. Mudie: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the target number for opening was and how many people have opened, individual learning accounts in *(a)* 1990 to 2000 and *(b)* 2000 to date. [148871]

Mr. Wicks: We have exceeded our interim target of opening 500,000 individual learning accounts by March 2001. From April 1999 to September 2000, prior to the launch of the national framework of individual learning accounts, training and enterprise councils (TECs) opened 202,654 accounts. From June 2000 until the end of January 2001, under the national framework, the individual learning account centre has opened a further 420,225 accounts. This means that 622,879 people in England have opened an individual learning account. We are on target to meet our commitment of 1 million people with an individual learning account by 2002.

Connexions Service

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what systems he will establish for reporting in respect of each Connexions partnership the respective level of funding in cash or kind *(a)* from partnership members, *(b)* derived from local non-partnership interests and *(c)* derived from other Government or European Union programmes. [148933]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* The Connexions service business planning guidance published on 23 October 2000 requires partnerships to detail, in their own plans, the resources that will be available locally to deliver the service. Connexions partnerships will also be required to provide management accounts on a quarterly basis which will include the details of the sources and level of all income received whether in cash or in kind.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to ensure that the delivery and funding of the Connexions service *(a)* respects the integrity of socially excluded young people, *(b)* reflects the interests of those young people who are not so excluded and *(c)* delivers a service which seeks to integrate all young people of qualifying age. [148934]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* The Connexions service will be a universal service that will provide advice, guidance and personal support to all young people according to their needs. This will be delivered principally through specially trained personal advisers equipped to deal with the broad range of issues and problems faced by young people as they progress through their teenage years. Planning guidance was issued in October 2000 that set out clearly how Connexions would address the needs of the entire range of young people. It asked partnerships to state how they would provide a universal and targeted service, with key dates for implementation and also how partnerships would work with voluntary organisations to reach the hard to help. The aim is to provide a service that meets the needs of all young people during their crucial transition from adolescence to adulthood and working life.

It will be important that future funding arrangements underpin this key aim and ensure that Connexions partnerships have the funding they need to deliver a universal service to all young people according to their needs. That is why we published "Connexions Service Funding—A Consultation Paper" on 15 January to obtain a wide range of views on these important arrangements. The consultation closes on 6 April 2001 and the findings will be published in due course. A copy of the consultation paper can be found in the House of Commons Library.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he plans to take to ensure that the Connexions funding formula approximates to the local needs of young people, and to verify and refine the accuracy of proxy measurements employed in making such calculations. [148935]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* The future funding arrangements for the Connexions service are currently the subject of public consultation. "Connexions Service Funding—A Consultation Paper" was published on 15 January and seeks views on a range of issues including the structure of a funding formula and the proxies that would best capture the needs of young people. In finally deciding which proxies should be used in the funding formula, we will be looking to ensure that the data are robust at local level and that they will be updated at least annually. The consultation ends on 6 April 2001 and a report of the findings will be published in due course. A copy of the consultation paper can be found in the House of Commons Library.

Student Visas

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what consultations he has held with the Home Office on the possible misuse of student visas as a means of obtaining entry to the United Kingdom; and what strategy he is taking to prevent this. [148937]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* The Department for Education and Employment has on-going discussions with the Home Office, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the British Council about how best to facilitate visa applications by genuine students. The requirements of the immigration rules for students have not been relaxed.

Education Funding (Doncaster)

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what the value was of Government financial support for education in Doncaster for each year from 1996–97 to 2000–01; [149072]

(2) if he will list the schools and organisations in the Don Valley constituency which have received financial support from the standards fund, in each year since the fund was created. [149073]

Ms Estelle Morris: The allocations for education in Doncaster local education authority for each year from 1996–97 to 2000–01 are set out in the following table:

	£000
Education SSA	
1996–97	119,700
1997–98	118,600
1998–99	130,300
1999–2000	136,100
2000–01	141,700
Funding allocations	
1996–97	7,413
1997–98	6,794
1998–99	3,792
1999–2000	9,667
2000–01	24,967

Outside the education SSA, the main elements of funding in 2000–01 are schools capital, standards fund and school standards grant. In addition, Doncaster local education authority will receive in 2000–01 special grant funding to support elements of the teachers pay reform packages. These are demand-led and will depend on the claims that Doncaster local education authority make for each grant.

Doncaster local education authority has received financial support from the standards fund each year since the fund was created in 1998–99. All maintained schools in Doncaster local education authority would receive a share of that support, including those in the Don Valley constituency.

Prior to 1999–2000, grant maintained schools did not receive financial support through the standards fund. They were funded for similar activities through a special grant paid by the Funding Agency for Schools.

Under this Government, funding per pupil has already increased by over £300 in real terms, and it will increase by a further £150 per pupil for 2001–02. Under the last Government, funding per pupil fell by £60 in real terms between 1994–95 and 1997–98. There will be further increases in funding following the year 2000 spending review: a further £370 per pupil over the three-year period, taking the total increase to nearly £700 between 1997–98 and 2003–04.

Higher Education

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which higher education institutions failed to meet their maximum allowable student number by more than 2 per cent., for the recruitment year 2000–01. [149474]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* For the academic year 2000–01, 51 higher education institutions under-recruited by more than 2 per cent. of their maximum student number allocation and 14 institutions over-recruited by more than 2 per cent. The institutions are listed as follows.

Institutions recruiting below minus 2 per cent. of allocated maximum student numbers

Anglia Polytechnic University
University of Bath
Bishop Grosseteste College
Bolton Institute of Higher Education
University of Bradford
Central School of Speech and Drama
Cheltenham and Gloucester College of HE
University College Chichester
City University
Cranfield University
Dartington College of Arts
University of Derby
University of East London
University of Essex
Falmouth College of Arts
Harper Adams University College
Homerton College, Cambridge
University of Hull
Imperial College
Keele University
King Alfred's College, Winchester
King's College London
Lancaster University
University of Leicester
University of Lincolnshire and Humberside
Liverpool John Moores University
University of London—Institutes
University of Luton
University of Manchester
UMIST
Manchester Metropolitan University
Middlesex University
Newman College
University College Northampton
University of North London
Nottingham Trent University
School of Oriental and African Studies

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Oxford Brookes University
University of Reading
Royal Academy of Music
Royal Holloway, University of London
St Martin's College
Southampton Institute
South Bank University
University of Sunderland
University of Surrey Roehampton
University of Teesside
Trinity and All Saints
Trinity College of Music
University College Worcester
University of York

Institutions recruiting above plus 2 per cent. of allocated Maximum Student Numbers

Bournemouth University
Bretton Hall
Chester College of Higher Education
Cumbria College of Art and Design
University of Huddersfield
Kent Institue of Art and Design
Kingston University
University of Liverpool
The London Institute
University of Northumbria at Newcastle
University of Nottingham
Queen Mary and Westfield College
Thames Valley University
University of West England, Bristol.

Teachers Pay Grant (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what criteria were used to determine the size of the grant given to Gloucestershire, as part of the package to fund teachers' pay awards; and if he will make a statement. [149680]

Ms Estelle Morris: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 7 February 2001, *Official Report*, columns 578–79W.

Free School Dinners

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will rank the constituencies in England by the number of children eligible for free school dinners as a percentage of the number of children attending day schools. [149771]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is contained in tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Salaried Defence Offices

Mr. Singh: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department which salaried defence offices will be open in April; what plans he has to monitor the relative quality and cost of the salaried defence offices; and if there will be independent research into the piloted schemes. [149291]

Mr. Lock: The first salaried defenders offices will open at the beginning of May. The recruitment process for the office heads has taken a little longer than we hoped. An independent research team headed by Professor Lee Bridges, the Legal Research Institute, University of Warwick has been appointed to monitor and assess, among other things, the relative cost and quality of salaried defence offices compared with private practitioners.

Community Legal Service

Mr. Singh: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to introduce assistance for representation from the Community Legal Service legal services fund for applicants to employment tribunals in England and Wales [149293]

Mr. Lock: Public funding is not generally available for representation before employment tribunals. However, under the legal help scheme, funding is available for applicants to get legal advice when preparing a case to be brought before an employment tribunal.

Sir Andrew Leggatt is conducting a review of tribunals which will assess the extent to which the administrative and practical arrangements, including representation, meet the needs of the user and the requirements of the ECHR for independence and impartiality. It would be premature to make any decisions on extending publicly funded representation in tribunal proceedings until Sir Andrew's review has been completed.

Mr. Singh: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how the money saved from removing personal injury cases from legal aid has been redeployed within the Community Legal Service; and if these savings will be allocated to legal aid for social welfare cases. [149300]

Mr. Lock: The moneys saved from removing personal injury cases from legal aid are available for other matters which fall within the scope of the Legal Services Commission's funding code. No specific amounts have been set aside for social welfare cases, although under the funding code such cases receive priority.

Mr. Singh: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will recruit sufficient lawyers for the community legal service to cover the subjects of *(a)* immigration, *(b)* education, *(c)* community care and *(d)* mental health. [149299]

Mr. Lock: These categories are among those which have been targeted as priority areas for funding in the community legal service. On 3 April 2000, the Lord Chancellor announced details of an additional £46 million legal help package intended to boost legal services in these areas. The number of contracts has increased significantly as a result.

The Lord Chancellor has recently announced a further 10 per cent. increase in the advice rates for work in these and other social welfare categories of law. The purpose of this advice is to help safeguard the established contracting base of quality assured firms throughout England and Wales. However, these services are provided

by firms contracted to the Legal Services Commission rather than through lawyers directly recruited by or employed by the Commission.

Narey Reforms

Mr. Singh: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department in what way the Narey reforms continue to create additional duty solicitor costs; and what reasons have been identified for this. [149282]

Mr. Lock: Additional costs have arisen as a result of the arrangements introduced to allow a defendant appearing at a Narey hearing to consult a solicitor of his or her own choice on the same basis as a court duty solicitor. These costs arose because of the way the scheme was structured; because higher rates were payable for some categories of work; and because solicitors have provided help in a wider range of cases than expected. The introduction of the general criminal contract on 2 April will provide greater control over payments for this work.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Singh: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the effectiveness of incentives to encourage firms to provide legal services to dispersed asylum seekers. [149294]

Mr. Lock: Following the introduction of incentives to encourage solicitors firms to provide legal services to asylum seekers, the number of firms with contracts to undertake immigration and asylum work has risen substantially from 400 in July 2000 to 479 in January 2001.

The Lord Chancellor has recently announced a further 10 per cent. increase in the advice rates for immigration work. The expansion packages for dispersal areas have also been received very positively. The increase in the supply of good-quality legal services is therefore expected to continue.

Judicial Office

Mr. Singh: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what further progress the Lord Chancellor has made in implementing the recommendations of the report by Sir Leonard Peach on procedures for appointments to judicial office; what progress has been made in setting up the pilot assessment centre; and when it will be operational. [149281]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor has made significant progress in implementing the 26 recommendations made in the report by Sir Leonard Peach. For example, changes have been made to the consultation process and application forms. Two major recommendations were for the creation of a Commission for Judicial Appointments and the development of a pilot assessment centre. It is anticipated that an announcement about the appointment of the First Commissioner for Judicial Appointments will be made in March. Following the appointment of the First Commissioner, work can begin to appoint Deputy Commissioners. Preparatory work for the pilot assessment centre has begun and will continue this year with a view to running the pilot next year.

Legal Services Commission

Mr. Singh: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the take up among solicitors' firms of the new general criminal contracts being issued for criminal legal work by the Legal Services Commission. [149295]

Mr. Lock: Solicitors firms will be invited by the Legal Services Commission to sign contracts in the second half of February 2001. The Lord Chancellor has just announced an overall increase in payments of 7.25 per cent. available to criminal practitioners in private practice who sign the criminal defence service contract, which will be introduced on 2 April 2001. There are some 3,300 solicitors offices which currently hold a crime franchise and provide criminal legal aid services throughout England and Wales which will be invited to sign contracts with the Commission.

Court Service

Mr. Singh: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what research is being undertaken on the impact of civil court fees on access to justice; what effect the reduction in the number of cases has had on the financing of the Court Service; and if further fee increases are planned for the current year. [149292]

Mr. Lock: It is impossible to assess the impact of civil court fees on access to justice without also looking at the effect and intention of the civil justice reforms, and other factors and trends that may influence behaviour. Two independent surveys on the impact of the reforms have already noted changes in litigation behaviour, with less litigation and faster case settlement. Our plans for evaluating the civil justice reforms will look at the effect of the reforms on access to justice. It would be difficult to scope a study that concentrated on fees alone.

Any litigant in person who is in financial hardship can apply to the court for exemption or remission of a fee. Exemption will be automatic if someone is in receipt of a means-tested benefit. In other cases, a court officer will consider remitting all or part of a fee if financial hardship is proven.

A public consultation paper on fee increases, issued in January 2000, explained that the fall in numbers of proceedings issued following implementation of the civil justice reforms had been partly responsible for a fee income shortfall against cost of £18 million (approximately 5 per cent.). The main reason for the shortfall was that costs could not decrease in line with the reduction in workload due to the new tasks undertaken by the courts in processing cases.

County court fees are currently recovering their associated costs but fees charged in the Supreme Court are not because the civil justice reforms increased the jurisdiction of county courts, leading to a fall of over 60 per cent. in proceedings issued in the Supreme Court.

There are no plans for fee increases during the current financial year.

Human Rights Act

Mr. Singh: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment has been made

of the accuracy of the Department's estimate of the legal aid costs of the implementation of the Human Rights Act 1998, based on the first three months. [149301]

Mr. Lock: No assessment has yet been made. It is too early to do so, but the initial indications are that the additional costs are less than the provision which has been made for them.

Family Visit Appeals

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will provide a monthly breakdown of the number of *(a)* oral and *(b)* paper-only family visit appeals received by the Immigration Appellate Authority since 2 October 2000. [149526]

Jane Kennedy: The monthly breakdown of family visit appeals received by the Immigration Appellate Authority since 2 October is as follows:

	Oral hearings	*Paper appeals*
October 2000	0	1
November 2000	12	47
December 2000	11	68
January 2001	38	80

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many family visit appeals the Immigration Appellate Authority plans to deal with *(a)* at an oral hearing and *(b)* on the papers only in the financial year 2001–02. [149540]

Jane Kennedy: The Immigration Appellate Authority expects to receive and process approximately 10,000 family visit visa appeals in 2001–02. Of this number, 6,000 cases are expected to be for an oral hearing and 4,000 for determination on the papers alone.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many *(a)* oral and *(b)* paper-only family visit appeals have been received by the Immigration Appellate Authority since 2 October 2000 in which the Immigration Advisory Service has been identified as representing the appellant. [149539]

Jane Kennedy: The Immigration Appellate Authority has identified 10 cases between 2 October 2000 and 31 January 2001 in which the Immigration Advisory Service represented the appellant. Of this number seven were for an oral hearing and three for paper alone.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will provide a monthly breakdown of the number of family visit appeals *(a)* determined, *(b)* allowed and *(c)* dismissed by the Immigration Appellate Authority (i) at an oral hearing and (ii) on the papers only since 2 October 2000. [149527]

Jane Kennedy: The monthly breakdown of family visit appeals determined, allowed and dismissed by the Immigration Appellate Authority since 2 October 2000 is as follows.

	Determined	*Allowed*	*Dismissed*
October 2000			
Oral cases	0	0	0
Paper cases	0	0	0
November 2000			
Oral cases	0	0	0
Paper cases	22	10	12
December 2000			
Oral cases	6	4	2
Paper cases	45	8	37
January 2001			
Oral cases	9	5	4
Paper cases	93	46	47

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many certificates confirming the grant of controlled legal representation have been lodged with the Immigration Appellate Authority since *(a)* 1 April and *(b)* October 2000; and how many certificates lodged since 2 October 2000 relate to a family visit appeal. [149528]

Jane Kennedy: The information requested is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Immigration Appellate Authority

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what average time is taken by the Immigration Appellate Authority to determine *(a)* an asylum appeal and *(b)* a non-asylum immigration appeal. [149525]

Jane Kennedy: The average time taken by the Immigration Appellate Authority, from receipt to determination in the period 1 April 2000 to 31 January 2001, is 15.4 weeks for an asylum appeal and 22.1 weeks for a non-asylum appeal.

Magistrates Courts

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what action he proposes to take where magistrates courts are closed before an appeal against closure is concluded. [R] [149693]

Jane Kennedy: Magistrates courts committees are responsible for the provision of an efficient and effective service to court users. It is for the local magistrates courts committee to make decisions on all accommodation matters, including where cases are listed.

Justices Chief Executive Unit (Liskeard)

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the cost was of the alterations carried out over the last two years to the Justices Chief Executives Unit at Liskeard, Cornwall; and what further costs are planned. [R] [149694]

Jane Kennedy: Cornwall county council, the lead authority for the Devon and Cornwall magistrates courts committee, advise that the capital cost of the alterations including professional fees is £127,093. No further capital costs are expected.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department on how many occasions during his tenure as Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) visited India; and how many of these visits were *(a)* on Government business and *(b)* at the expense of the Hindujas or one of their companies or foundations. [149830]

Jane Kennedy: None.

Entertainment Expenses

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to her answers of 1 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 299W, and 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 71W, on entertainment expenses, if the Lord Chancellor was the only Government Minister who spoke at the function; and if she will place a copy of the invitation to that function in the Library. [149831]

Jane Kennedy: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor and the Minister for Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), both spoke at the function. The Lord Chancellor does not recall any other speeches except the opening remarks by SP Hinduja. A copy of the Lord Chancellor's invitation to the function is not available. Invitation cards are routinely disposed of after one year.

TREASURY

Basic State Pension

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the cost would be to the Exchequer of increasing the basic state pension to £90 for a single person and £135 for a couple; and what consequent increases there would be in receipts of *(a)* direct and *(b)* indirect tax revenue. [149487]

Dawn Primarolo: The information is as follows:

Impact of increasing the basic state pension to £90 for a single person and £135 for a couple

	£ billion[1]
Gross cost	−7.5
Savings in income-related benefits	+1.7
Increased direct tax revenue	+0.8
Cost net of IRBs and tax	−5.0

[1] +ve is an Exchequer yield

Notes:

1. Costs are rounded to the nearest £100 million. They exclude expenditure on bereavement benefits.
2. Gross costs were supplied by the Government Actuary's Department. Cost net of income-related benefit savings were estimated by DSS using the Policy Simulation Model. Direct tax revenue was estimated by the Inland Revenue from a survey of personal incomes.
3. It is difficult to assess the impact of higher pensions on indirect taxes. This would require detailed behavioural assumptions about changes in consumption patterns and would be unlikely to capture the effects accurately.

Age Discrimination

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what would be the estimated effect on *(a)* GDP, *(b)* tax revenue and *(c)* savings in benefits if persons in the age groups (i) 45 to 49, (ii) 50 to 54, (iii) 55 to 59, (iv) 60 to 65, (v) 65 to 70 and (vi) over 70 years had the same employment rates as those in the age group 40 to 45 years. [149489]

Dawn Primarolo: The information is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent estimate he has commissioned on the effect on *(a)* GDP and *(b)* tax revenue of age discrimination in employment. [149488]

Dawn Primarolo: Age discrimination in employment has adverse economic consequences, but it is not possible to produce reliable quantitative estimates of its impact on GDP or tax revenue in the absence of hard measures of the extent of age discrimination and its impact on employment. The Government are opposed to age discrimination and have committed to introduce legislation to deal with it after careful discussion with the representatives of both business and employees.

Tax Credits

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the policy of the Inland Revenue is with respect to those claimants of tax credits who state that they are being paid less than the hourly minimum wage. [149798]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue enforces the national minimum wage on behalf of the Department of Trade and Industry, which has overall responsibility for enforcement policy.

Under the arrangements between the two Departments, the Inland Revenue investigates all complaints made to it by workers and third parties about non-payment of the minimum wage. The Department also conducts a programme of targeted investigations arising from information obtained from other internal and external sources, including Working Families Tax Credit claims.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many calls have been received by the Inland Revenue's Working Families Tax Credit helpline; and what his assessment is of its capacity to deal effectively with its work load. [149377]

Dawn Primarolo: In the last three months of 2000, the Working Families Tax Credit helpline answered around 135,000 calls per week on average.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to improve the service offered by the Inland Revenue's Working Families Tax Credit helpline, and if he will make a statement on its effectiveness. [149376]

Dawn Primarolo: The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) helpline gives advice to WFTC applicants and their representatives. As with any helpline, the aim is continuous improvement in the light of customer

feedback. Customer surveys regularly show that callers find WFTC helpline staff courteous, knowledgeable and helpful.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to streamline Inland Revenue paperwork involved in the administration of working families' tax credit. [149371]

Dawn Primarolo: WFTC/DPTC forms are reviewed on an on-going basis.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to ensure that advice given by staff on the Inland Revenue's working families' tax credit helpline is accurate and consistent. [149800]

Dawn Primarolo: All Working Families Tax Credit helpline operators are given comprehensive training, and are therefore in a good position to give clear and informed guidance to callers.

Death Certificates

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received from the Law Society about changes in practice with respect to the photocopying of death certificates; and if he will make a statement. [149749]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) on 6 February 2001, *Official Report*, columns 494–95W.

Departmental Policies (Tooting)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Tooting parliamentary constituency, the effect of his Department's policies and actions since 1 May 1997 on this constituency. [149868]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Tooting, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 2,298, or 55 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 85 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 77 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of November 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 1,029 young people in the Tooting constituency gain valuable skills and experience—413 (40 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle-income families. In August 2000, 900 families in the constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to developing policies which enable all pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. As a result of the recent pre-Budget report, all pensioners, including 10,000 in Tooting, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 6,600 in Tooting.

Ofgem

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will provide a detailed breakdown of the expenditure by Ofgem in 2000–01 on NETA. [149133]

Mr. Andrew Smith: This is an operational matter for the Chief Executive of Ofgem. I have forwarded the hon. Member's request to him and asked him to respond.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will provide a detailed breakdown of the expenditure by Ofgem in 2000–01 on the regions. [149134]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The regional offices of Ofgem were transferred to the Gas and Electricity Consumer Council (now known as energywatch) in November 2000 under the provisions of the Utilities Act 2000 and are now the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

Customs Officers (Salary)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the average salary is of a middle band uniformed customs officer *(a)* based outside London and *(b)* based inside London. [149593]

Dawn Primarolo: The information is as follows:

(a) National

Bands 4–7 (£13,240 to £19,700)

(b) London

Bands 4–7 (£14,398 to £20,728).

Because of the nature of their work, staff also receive additional payments that, typically, increase these levels of basic pay by around 30–35 per cent.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Press Releases

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many press releases were issued by his Department in the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000; how many have been issued in the current financial year; and what his estimate is of the total number for the current financial year. [149245]

Dr. Reid: The information requested is outline as follows:

1 April 1996 to 31 March 1997: 1,818

1 April 1997 to 31 March 1998: 1,471

1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999: 1,605

1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000: 1,219

1 April 2000 to 31 January 2001: 231.

Prior to devolution, the NIO issued press releases for all the Northern Ireland Departments, but under devolution these Departments are run by—and their press releases issued by—the Northern Ireland Executive. This accounts for the sharp drop over the past year.

Power was devolved to the Executive for the first time on 2 December 1999. It was suspended as of midnight on 11 February 2000, at which point the NIO resumed responsibility for the Department and their press releases once again.

Power was then restored to the Executive on 30 May 2000. Questions relating to the number of their press releases during the periods of devolved power should be referred to the Northern Ireland Executive press office.

It is difficult to estimate the number of press releases for the whole of the financial year 2000–01 as this depends on the political and security situation. However, an analysis of the year so far suggests a figure in the region of 255.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Medical Practitioners

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the methods of recourse benefit claimants have if they wish to challenge *(a)* factual material and *(b)* medical matters in a visiting practitioner's report. [149765]

Mr. Bayley: Any claimant who is unhappy with any aspect of a decision made on a claim for benefit can ask for the decision to be reconsidered. If they are still dissatisfied with the decision, for whatever reason, they can appeal. Their appeal would be dealt with by an independent appeal tribunal. At both stages, the claimant can submit further evidence in support of their claim or appeal, if they wish to do so.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the criteria used by decision makers at the Benefits Agency when their examining medical practitioner's report is at odds with reports submitted by a claimant's GP. [149768]

Mr. Bayley: The general principles which decision makers should follow when considering evidence are set out in the decision makers guide.

All evidence needs to be weighed carefully in the light of the circumstances of the case, in general medical evidence should be treated as any other evidence. If the evidence is contradictory the decision maker should try to resolve the discrepancy, decide the point on balance of probability, or follow case law guidance.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on how he establishes good practice among medical practitioners who assess benefit claims. [149767]

Mr. Bayley: Training and monitoring of doctors who assess benefit claims is carried out by Sema Medical Services.

All doctors who assess benefit claims receive training in disability assessment medicine. This includes benefit specific training, training in professional standards and customer care, and up to five days a year of update training on relevant clinical topics. The training programme and its content are agreed by the chief medical adviser to the Department of Social Security. All training reflects the consensus of informed medical opinion.

Doctors who have undergone training have a number of assessments supervised by experienced full time medical services doctors, and have to reach a satisfactory standard before being approved by the chief medical adviser, on behalf of the Secretary of State, to carry out unsupervised assessments. No doctor may carry out unsupervised assessments without formal approval.

All doctors have the quality standards of their reports audited by experienced medical services doctors, according to protocols and quality standards which have been agreed by the Department. Each individual doctor is informed of the outcome of audit, and advice is given, if appropriate, on ways of improving quality standards. Advice can be informal, or may include retraining if this is needed. The audit process and outcomes are validated by the chief medical adviser.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the training given to medical practitioners *(a)* before and *(b)* after they are employed to assess benefit claims. [149766]

Mr. Bayley: Doctors recruited by Sema Medical Services to assess benefit claims must have background clinical experience encompassing a wide range of disabling conditions.

Newly recruited doctors are trained by medical services in disability assessment medicine, including benefit specific training and training in professional standards and customer care. Doctors are tested on their assimilation of training by multiple choice examination, and, if the outcome is satisfactory, they carry out a number of assessments under the supervision of an experienced medical services doctor, and have to reach a satisfactory standard before being approved by the chief medical adviser to the Department of Social Security, on behalf of the Secretary of State, to carry out unsupervised assessments.

After initial training, all doctors receive up to five days a year of update training on specific aspects of customer care, on good practice, and on a wide range of clinical topics relevant to disability assessment medicine.

In addition, any doctor whose performance falls below an acceptable standard will receive feedback and remedial training as appropriate.

Prader-Willi Syndrome

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what directions he gives to benefits agencies about the provision of Disabled Living Allowance to people suffering from Prader-Willi syndrome; and if he will make a statement. [149682]

Mr. Bayley: Entitlement to Disability Living Allowance is based not on diagnosis of a specific condition but on the care and mobility needs a person has as a result of their disability.

Because of its rarity, no specific guidance has been issued within the Benefits Agency on the needs of children with Prader-Willi syndrome, but decision makers have access to advice from doctors, where needed, on specific medical conditions. In addition, decision makers are given advice on the likely impact of a range of disabling conditions and symptoms. This includes most of the symptoms of Prader-Willi syndrome, for example,

low IQ, poor muscle tone and metabolic and obsessive-compulsive disorders. Decision makers are required to take into account the whole picture of needs that arise from a person's disabilities.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received concerning the introduction of Housing Benefit Regulation 7(h) on 25 January 1999; and if he will give local authorities some discretion where the provisions of the regulation cause genuine hardship. [148643]

Angela Eagle: The intention of the provision was to halt the abuse where an owner-occupier transfers ownership of his or her home without money changing hands, or for less than the market price, and rents it back. Housing Benefit is still available to anyone who can prove that he or she was forced to transfer or sell because, for example, of impending repossession for mortgage arrears.

We are aware of some cases where people sold their properties on a commercial basis some time ago and are now renting them. There is no evidence to suggest that these transactions took place to enable the seller to take advantage of the Housing Benefit scheme. We have therefore decided to bring forward amending regulations which will enable an ex-owner to claim Housing Benefit provided five years have elapsed since he or she ceased to own the property. We have completed consultation on these regulations and they will come into force this spring.

Means-tested Benefits

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the policy of the Benefits Agency is with respect to claimants of means-tested benefits who state that they are being paid less than the hourly minimum wage. [149797]

Angela Eagle: As a general principle in the case of income-related benefits such as Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support, people doing work should receive the appropriate wage for the services they provide. When this does not happen and the burden of their financial support falls on the taxpayer it is reasonable to assume that an appropriate amount of earnings, called notional earnings, are being paid and to offset that against benefit entitlement.

The total amount of earnings taken into account would normally be at least equal to the rate of the national minimum wage applicable to the person concerned. To do otherwise would in many circumstances amount to subsidising the employer through public funds.

Benefit Claimants (Wales)

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* grants and *(b)* loans were (i) awarded and (ii) refused to benefit claimants in Wales in each of the last three years. [149788]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the tables.

Social Fund Grants—Wales

Year	*Number of awards*	*Number of refusals*
1997–98	16,500	63,200
1998–99	15,900	64,000
1999–2000	15,500	29,200

Social Fund Loans—Wales

Year	*Number of awards*	*Number of refusals*
1997–98	98,300	44,100
1998–99	103,200	44,200
1999–2000	111,700	65,400

Notes:

1. The numbers of awards made after review are not included in the table.
2. The fall in the number of Community Care Grant refusals and the increase in Budgeting Loan refusals in 1999–2000 reflects the changes in the numbers of applications following the introduction of the new Budgeting Loan scheme in April 1999.
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest 100.

Source:

Social Fund Policy, Budget and Management Information System.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 23 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 502W, on benefit fraud, when he expects to be able to provide estimates of housing benefit fraud detected, expressed as a proportion of housing benefit expenditure for each local authority for 1999–2000. [149651]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested for 1999–2000 should be available in spring 2001.

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* inquiries and *(b)* complaints have been received from people aged 60 years and over who have been incorrectly assessed as living with another person over 60 years for the purpose of assessing eligibility to the Winter Fuel Payment in each year since 1997. [146359]

Mr. Rooker: The administration of Winter Fuel Payments is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. David Willetts, dated 8 February 2001:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent parliamentary question about how many *(a)* inquiries and *(b)* complaints have been received from people aged 60 years and over who have been incorrectly assessed as living with another person over 60 years for the purpose of assessing eligibility to the Winter Fuel Payment (WFP) in each year since 1997.

Both the Winter Fuel Helpline and benefit offices have dealt with calls from customers about WFP. The exact nature of each call is not recorded, therefore, information on the number of inquiries and complaints received about an assessment as living with another person over 60 years is not available.

I hope this reply is helpful.